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Customer Engagement: A Framework for Assessing Brand Loyalty Behaviour in Hotels Industry

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Abstract: Engagement plays a critical role in strategic marketing models development. However, marketing experts seem implicitly to accept that marketing efforts contribute in some way to brand loyalty. Using new marketing activity, this article explores the link between marketing actions and brand loyalty behavior. In particular, the author develop a conceptual model arguing that customer engagement has an effect on brand loyalty. The results from empirical study show strong support for the effect of customer interactivity, customer involvement and customer support on brand loyalty behavior within the hotel service sector.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Customer engagement, Customer interactivity, Customer involvement, Customer support.

Introduction

Several scholars have renewed interest in brand loyalty behavior (So, Andrew & Yap, 2013; Meinyk & Bijmolt, 2015; Boris, 1999). Brand loyalty in marketing consist of a customer's devotion, bond and commitment to repurchase and continue to use a brand product or service overtime, regardless of changes with competitors pricing or changes in external environment (So, Andrew and Yap, 2013). A critical factor of building brand loyalty is developing a connection

or relationship between the consumer and the brand. However, loyalty consists ofattitudinal and behavioural perspectives. Attitudinal loyalty relates to the customers willingness to purchase product or service from the brand at any reasonable cost. Behavioural loyalty is the re-purchasing (Melnyk and Bijmolt, 2013). Brand loyalty exists when customers have a relative attitude toward the brand which is then exhibited through repurchase behavior (Dick, Allan & Basu, 1994). Bunny and

Jackson (2014) argue that loyalty includes some degree of predispositional commitment toward a brand. It is a multidimensional construct with measures such as customers' perceived value, brand trust, customers' satisfaction, repeat purchase behavior and commitments.

Given these analysis, marketing strategy has become a fundamental issue that will enhance brand loyalty. Indeed, both the application of other marketing strategies and the understanding of loyalty behaviours have been discussed for more than many decades. Marketing practitioners have aggressively pursued strategies such as customer empowerment, customer involvement and customer connections (Shiri et al, 2014; Bowden, 2014; Maslowska et al 2016). Although these strategic issues are important to marketing researchers and practitioners, much of the research in brand loyalty has focused on the attitudinal components (Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015).

We contend that customer engagement is a useful platform to leverage loyalty behavior. Our examination of customer engagement in loyalty behaviour aim to extend prior research on both customer engagement and loyalty behavior. Of key interest to our study is the examination of whether and how customer engagement manifests in loyalty behavior in the hotel services sector. Thus, we expects to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do loyalty behavior emanate from customer engagement?
- 2) What type of customer engagement result to loyalty behavior?
- 3) Do customer engagement related to loyalty behavior?
- 4) How can customer engagement assist brand loyalty behavior?

We posit that resource dependency theory play an important role in consumers' decisions to patronized product or service from a particular brand. Thus, in this context, customer engagement and its dimensions may not be consistent with previous study on customer engagement. The purpose of study is to examine the applicability, measurement and validation of customer engagement in loyalty behavior. Thus, the objectives are: 1) To investigate customer involvement in loyalty behavior, 2) To refine and develop a measure of customer engagement, 3) To evaluate the predictive validity of customer engagement on loyalty behavior and to discuss the implications of the findings for theory and practices.

Literature Review Brand Loyalty: The Behavioural Perspectives

In marketing, research in brand loyalty has focused on factors that influenced brand loyalty (e.g. Micale et al, 2005; Symtex, 2007. Celerises and Bekam 2010). As a matter of fact, several scholars (e.g. Patterkg, 2010) have developed models of brand loyalty behavior that incorporate the impact of attitudinal and behavioural components on brands; however, of particular interest to this study is the power of the brand to engage consumers and make them feel emotionally attached (TV Choice, 2010).

Brand loyalty begins from brand experience. Brand experience occurs when consumers shop for or search for, and consume products (Kim & Ah Yu, 2016). Holistic experiences such as (e.g sense, relation, acting and feeling) occur when one comes into contact with brands. The greater and more relational these senses are to the individual, the

greater the repeat purchase behavior will occur. After contact has been made, psychological reasoning will occur followed by a buy or not-buy decision. This can result in repeat purchase behaviour, thus marking the beginning of brand loyalty. Repeat purchase behavior necessitates brand loyalty behavior. Brand loyalty is not limited to repurchase behavior, as there is a deeper psychological reasoning as to why consumer of product will continuously repurchase products from one brand.

Aaker, as cited by Kim & Ab Yu (2016) posit that brand loyalty is the behavioural willingness to consistently maintain relations with a particular brand.

In this study, we focus on brand loyalty from the behavioural perspectives which states that it is a behavioural willingness to consistently maintain relationships with a particular brand. Research on brand loyalty in many marketing literature has dwelt extensively on the attitudinal perspectives, (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015), which relates to the willingness to purchase customers product from the brand reasonable cost. Attitudinal component of loyalty is psychological and lead to behavioural component (Meinyk & Bijmolt, 2015). In addition, the focus on individual customers to be consistent with prior research that measures engagement customer in loyalty behavior, in which my sampling will be based on individual customer level.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is somewhat related to co-creation. Indeed, many researchers have used customer engagement to define co-creation. For example Batorse (2011) define co-creation as the involvement and participation of customer in co-creation

activities of an organization. Thus, we argue that research in customer focused engagement that has on involvement and participation ofcustomers provides an important starting understanding for customer engagement in service organizations. Slater and Kohli (2013) cited in the work of WiseGEEK, defined customer engagement as a concept in marketing, which is used to refer to the type of connections consumers make with other consumers, companies and specific brands. Achieving a high level of customer engagement is viewed as desirable because it tends to enhanced brand loyalty. Companies with following of highly engaged customers have a dedicated fan base of people who not only buy their products, but also encourage others to do the same, thus creating a ripple effect (WiseGEEK,).

Customer can engage with companies and each other in several ways through media. In those days customer engagement was a one way traffic (Companies marketing to customers). However, the advent of internet has redirect the organization of customer engagement from company-to-customer, to customer-to-customer, customer-toand company-to-customer. company Activities which could be considered facets of customer engagement include (e.g. visiting a company website, sharing it with others, creating a content about a company or product, engaging in social networks of people with shared interests, writing or calling companies and viewing Print).

Shiri, Sharom and Morgan (2014) define customer engagement as an intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organisation's offering and/ or organizational activities, which either the customer or

the organization initiate. Previous works in the area of customer engagement for Hollebeek (2011), example immersion, passion and activation as dimensions of customer engagement, this was purely one sided as it dwelt on the psychological aspect of engagement. Again Brodie (2011) measure customer engagement using interactive, creation, customer experience which was also one sided as its look at customer engagement from perspective. These studies has not being able to look at customer engagement from a holistic perspectives where psychographic. social. behavioural perspective will be combine in the study of customer engagement. Hence, we conceptualize a framework to guide study in customer engagement.

To our knowledge, previous study has not examined customer engagement with all the above dimensions in a single study. Thus, we seek to integrate the above dimensions in existing knowledge of customer engagement in the hotel industry.

Again, considering the degree of information and connections on consumers, the only way to develop penetrable customer engagement is to proactively connect with customers by listening to information (Trefler, 2014). Information sharing will empower the customer, give control and endorse customer a customer centric two-way dialogue (Dholakia & Firat, 2006; eMarketer, 2015). The sharing of information with regard the product, service and brand will redefine the role of the customer as they will no longer be seen as an end user in the process (Dholakia & Firat. 2006). information sharing, customers are seen as in partnership with the organizations. development. This afford them

knowledge and understanding with high expectations. Thompson (2013) argued that information sharing between the organizations and the customers impact on business profitability. Sashi (2012) posit that for consumers to immerse in the consumption experience. organization and consumers must involve in sharing and exchanging information which generate increased awareness, interest, desire to purchase, and lovalty acquistition, retention amongst evolving consumers relationship. Customer information sharing will result in trust, engagement and word-of-mouth through endless social circles (Trefler, 2014).

As a matter of fact, consumer have a fair idea of what they want and how they want it, hence it is left for organizations to meet up the high expectations of their customers and facilitate good customer experiences on mutuality (Ryan & Jones, 2011). We argued that, the more successful the customer engagement in terms of customer information sharing and exchanges, the more sustainable the relationship will be thus enhancing brand loyalty behavior (Sashi, 2012). On the basis of these arguments, we suggest the following hypothesis of customer information sharing on loyalty behavior in the hotel industry.

Hypothesis 1: Brand loyalty behavior in hotel industry is a function of customer information sharing and exchange.

A main point in multidimensional model such as the customer engagement is that consumers' involvement in the business and product development process. Such as design, marketing, sales, customer service (Dagens media, 2009). The degree of involving the customer can be to make the customer a part of the product experience, and delivery

process. We argued that, in a situation where customers are involved in product development, the product is considered a subset in what meets the customer's need of identification, problem solving and consumption. When customers has the possibility to influence the design and the consumption of the product itself is assumed to be of great importance for the customers buying decision and loyalty behavior. One good example of involving customer in production is Nike. With the concept of customer involvement, the company allow customers design their own sport shoes. In the recent past, companies have started to build web portals that involve customers in the idea generation, selection, development and commercialization (Rohrbeck, Steinhoff & Pender, 2010).

Involvement has to do with how customers interact with the business (e.g. customers attending company's events, are they willing to be a reference, will they share a case study, engaging on social media and involving in co-creation). When customers participate in organization's activities, then customers are involved. Customer involvement is critical for the survival of firms in today's technologically connected world (Treffer, 2014). To adapt to this progressive customer environment will mean communicating directly with customers so that they are involved in the process. The higher the customer involvement, the greater is the influence on customer acquisition, retention, increase brand awareness and loyalty behavior. Thus, customer involvement in the business and product development process in terms of design, marketing, sales and customer service should positively influence loyalty behavior toward using the hotel

services. Therefore, we propose that involving customer in the business and product development process have positive effect on loyalty behavior. We hypothesized as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Brand loyalty behavior on continuously using hotel services is a function of customer involvement in business and product development process.

Customer interactivity is dimension of customer engagement in our study. Sashi (2012) posit that interactive culture is becoming the order of the day and that it is significantly influenced by technology, Hence, being connected has become fundamental to our existence (Build for change, 2014). Dholakia et al (2012) argue that connection is bringing consumers and organizations together and that it is critical for companies to take advantage and focus on capturing the attention of and interacting with well informed. business savvy consumers in order to serve and satisfy. Connecting with consumers established exclusivity in their experience, which potentially will increase brand loyalty, positive word of mouth and provides businesses with valuable consumer analytics, insight and retention (eMarketer, 2013, 2016). Customer engagement can come in the form of a view, an impression, reach, a click, comment, user generated content. or a share and these are measures of customer interactivity. Therefore, the way to develop penetrable customer engagement is to proactively connect with customers and this will empower above practice The metamorphose a process of partnering between organizations and consumers (Dholakia & FIrat. 2006). especially when internet has provided consumers with the accumulation of

diverse knowledge much and understanding, consumers now have increasingly high expectations become to experiential value (Treffer, 2014; Dholakia & Firat, 2006). To give the consumers these privileges, they must involve in connectivity which will lead to increased brand awareness. interest, purchase desire, customer and acquisition, retention lovalty amongst consumers. The above will earn trust, commitment and word of mouth advocacy through customer interactivity. We argue that when customers are connected they get acquainted and are knowledgeable to their needs and cannot be cheated by any means. Thus, consumer interactivity interms of a user generated content, share, comment, click, reach should positively influence loyalty behavior. On the basis of this arguments, we suggest the hypothesis of customer interactivity on loyalty behavior.

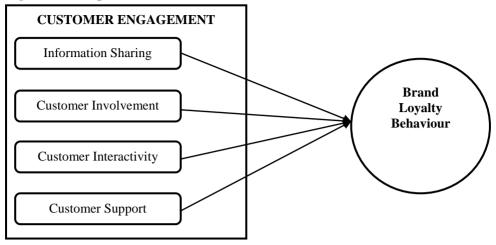
Hypothesis 3: Behavioural loyalty is a function of customer interactivity in terms of User generated content, share, comment, click, reach.

Nirpaz et al (2016) defined customer support as a range of customer services to assist customers in making cost affective and correct use of a product, it includes assistance in planning, installation, training, troubleshooting, maintenance, upgrading, and disposal of product. Customer support is considered as one of the main data channels for customer satisfaction research and a way of increasing services customer retention in organizations. Customer supports are like experiential services which are characterized by benefits orientation. Customers can be engaged with an organization when it help the customer in making cost effective and correct use of a product of the company. Robbner (2012) argue that the greater the customer are given supports in areas like planning. training, upgrading. product disposal, the higher is the customer engagement, which in turn will lead to increase in brand awareness. customer retention. customer satisfaction and loyalty behavior.

Thus, customer support stands out as an important dimension in customer engagement marketing. This indicates that customer support such as helping customers in making cost effectiveness, and correct use of product, has a on brand lovalty stronger effect behaviours. Thus. argue the we following:

Hypothesis 4: Brand loyalty behavior is a function of customer support in areas of cost effectiveness and correct use of the product.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Source: Adapted from the work of Brodie (2011) but conceptualized to suit the researchers opinion (2017).

Method

We conducted a survey study to investigate customer engagement and brand loyalty behavior in the 3-star hotels in Rivers State using the proposed conceptual model. We applied the quasiexperimental design. The population of this study were 3-stars hotels in Rivers State which was twenty-one (21) in number as at the time of conducting this research. We applied the convenience sampling technique by assigning ten (10) copies of questionnaire to each of the 3-stars hotels in Port Harcourt metropolis. We have a total response of two hundred and ten respondents of the 210 only 180 completed and returned their questionnaire, 160 were usable, for a response rate of 76%.

Our unit of analysis for this study are the senior managers of the 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt, while my level of analysis is the hotels. We used the senior managers because they were knowledgeable about customer engagement implementation. Thus, we identified marketing managers, customer services managers. To qualify

for this study, the manager must stay more than 5 years in that hotel, must also be in the management team of the hotel who are involved in decision making. I interviewed senior managers from some hotels and also served questionnaire to solicit for information.

Measures

The conceptual model we put forward in figure 1 have five concepts, most of which are well founded in information research literature. Our choice customer support as one of the dimension of customer engagement makes our model very unique to other studies on customer engagement. Thus, we included two items that measure customer support. To address the elements of customer involvement, we developed a four item scale. The first addressed the "customer item orientation" concept, the second item the "customer expectations", thirdly, customer are part of the product, experience and delivery, the fourth item was on customer possibility to influence product design (Treffer, 2014).

Customer interactivity was measured using four items in the work of Yin (2010). We measured information sharing with three items. The items were identical to those used by Amue and Ozuru (2014). Finally, we measured brand loyalty behavior using a two-item scale that we adapted from the study of Karma (2013). All the above mentioned items are represented on table 1 below.

Our respondents indicated their agreement with a set of statements using a 5-point likert-type scale ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The means, standard deviations and reliabilities of the variables are showed in table 1. The reliability of customer support was lower than the acceptable.

Table 1: Components Analysis of All Measurement Items

	Variable / Communities (c) and loadings	.C	1	2	3	4	5			
4	Customer Support									
	We support our customers in cost effectiveness	.62	.25	.15	.23	.54	.41			
	We help customers in the correct use of our product	.70	.26	.11	.26	.72	.20			
2.	Customer Involvement									
	Customer have a fair idea of what they want	.82	.84	.20	.13	.15	.16			
	We meet up customer expectations	.80	.81	.21	.21	.13	.16			
	Customers are part of the product, experience and delivery	.90	.86	.10	.14	.18	.06			
	Customers has the possibility to influence product design	.85	.85	.15	.16	.21	.12			
3	Customer Interactivity									
	We capture and interact with well informed customers	.75	.16	.75	.18	.18	.11			
	Provide customer valuable analysis	.87	.20	.73	.20	.16	.01			
	We proactively connect with our customers	.80	.17	.70	.22	.18	.10			
	We empower our customers	.82	.16	.25	.24	.21	.13			
1	Information Sharing									
	Customers listen to our information	.86	.26	.15	.18	.27	.14			
	Customers are given control to choose	.84	.13	.27	.19	.25	.14			
	We give customers centric two-way dialogue	.87	.31	.18	.20	.21	.11			
5	Brand Loyalty Behaviour									
	Customers continuously buys from our product	.89	.24	.25	.21	.23	.25			
	Customer consistently maintain relation with brand	.90	.26	.21	.25	.21	.22			
	Eigen –Values		10.61	2.50	1.74	1.55	1.30			
	Variance explained		20.12	10.01	6.71	3.40	2.10			
	Mean		5.25	3.15	4.21	5.22	4.50			
	Standard deviation		1.81	1.60	1.52	1.38	2.12			
	Cronbach's alpha		0.90	0.92	0.85	0.81	0.77			

75 limit (Nummally, 1978). For the rest variables of the study, the reliability was acceptable.

the discriminate convergence validity of the variables of our study. All the items were explained using factor analysis, with principal extraction that resulted in five principal components factors. principal The analysis showed that the factors explained 71 percent of the variance in the material (see table 1). Again, I discuss that the convergence validity of customer support scale was somewhat low, with a factor loading of .54 for the first item. This item also has low discriminant validity, with a factor loading of .41 on brand loyalty behavior factor. For further finding of the reliability and validity of our study variables, we make use of intervariable correlations, shared variances and composite reliability as in table 2.

	Customer support	Customer involvement	Interactivity	Information sharing	Brand loyalty			
Composite Reliability	.81	.90	.86	.92	.92			
Customer support	.76	*						
Customer involvement	.61	.90	*					
Customer interactivity	.52	.54	.83	*				
Information sharing	.50	.48	.50	.81	*			
Brand loyalty behavior	.62	.70	.75	.60	.88			

From the table above, the composite reliability for each variable is above the recommended level of .50 that Hair et al (1998) as cited in the work of Mapharson (2015) suggested. Here, all variables share more variance with their indicators than with other variables. In our study we find that all variables share more variance with their indicators than with the other variables in our study. Another development I did was to estimate the measurement model fit for the study, the results are as follows: $x^2/df = 2.51$, Normal Fit Index (NFI) =

.96, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .98 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05; Thus, this fit of the measurement model is acceptable.

Results

As we indicate in figure 1, brand loyalty behavior is significantly influenced by consumer support, customer involvement, customer interactivity. These findings support the three hypotheses above, but not hypothesis one.

Table 3: Brand Loyalty Behaviour and Dimensions of Customer Engagement

			X ²		
Hypothesis	Variable	Constrained	Difference (df=1)		
H1 ⁺	Information sharing	.18*	0.74		
H2 ⁺	Customer involvement	.05	5.54*		
H3 ⁺	Customer interactivity	.29*	6.76*		
H4 ⁺	Customer support	.22*	5.09*		

Note: + shows support in respect of the stated hypothesis

From table 3 above, we find partial support for the interaction between information sharing and brand loyalty behavior such that information gathering and sharing is not a useful strategy for empowering customer (Hypothesis 1: b= .74, P< .05), this interaction is not significant for brand loyalty behavior. For the interaction between customer involvement and brand loyalty behavior, we find support. Such that customer

involvement enhance brand loyalty (Hypothesis 2: b=5.54, $P \le .05$).

We hypothesized that behavioural loyalty is a function of customer interactivity in terms of user generated content (UGC), share, comment, click, reach. Our results indicate significant effects (Hypothesis 3), infact the highest of all leading to better brand loyalty behavior. The final hypothesis pertaining to brand loyalty behavior and

customer support, we also find support for the stated hypothesis (Hypothesis 4: b = 5.09, P < .05).

Conclusion

From the results above, we can conclude that customer involvement, customer interactivity, and customer support has a positive effect on brand loyalty behavior where as information sharing has a negative effect on brand lovalty behavior. However, the most promising and notable effects revealed in this study are those of customer involvement and customer interactivity. These effects emphasize the relevance of involvement and interactivity in engaging customers in the hotel industry. Our introduction of customer involvement and customer interactivity in the model explained variance that these concepts entail. Three of the four variables we proposed as influencing brand loyalty behavior are significant. We conclude that there are support for hypotheses 2, 3, and 4.

The customer involvement variable explain 55.4 percent brand loyalty behavior. This indicates that customer involvement influences consumers' engagement for reasons of involving in co-creation and product development process (Dagens media, 2009). The results provide support for customer involvement influences that we proposed in Hypothesis 2.

Our results strongly support Hypothesis 3. However, our dimensions which we included in the model have direct effects on brand loyalty behavior in hotel industry. This supports other research (Treffer, 2014). Customer support contributed 50.9 percent to brand loyalty behavior.

Implications

Our results has several implications for marketing managers with regard to engaging customer to increase brand loyalty behavior. In the first place, the results of the study show a relatively strong impact of customer interactivity, customer involvement and customer support on brand loyalty behavior. Customer interactivity has a significant and positive impact on brand loyalty behavior, although interactivity appears to be particularly important as a driver for consumer engagement, such as user generated content, share, comment, click and reach. The effects of customer interaction on brand loyalty behavior has a direct relationships. This finding implies that hotel industry players should pay close attention to aspects of interactivity, such as user generated content, share, comment and click-when people especially contacting experience service purposes. According Dholakia and Firat to (2006)technology-based interaction is a key factor that connect consumers and organizations together and that it is critical for companies to take advantage and focus on capturing the attention of and interacting with well-informed technology savvy consumers.

We observed that customer involvement has significant direct effect on brand loyalty behavior. This particularly pertains to how customers interact with the business, engaging on social media and involving in co-creation. This finding implies that industry players should consider customer involvement as a very useful strategy for brand loyalty behavior.

We also found the impact of customer support on brand loyalty behavior to be fairly significant. This emphasizes the relevance of marketers to consider customer support in which customers are assisted in planning, installation, training, maintenance, upgrading and disposal of products. Customer support

is revealed to have a moderate influence on brand loyalty behavior. A possible marketing strategy for increasing brand loyalty behavior through effects of customer support could be to assist customers in making cost effectiveness and helping the customers in the correct use of the product. This would enable potential customers to understand the usage of the product, thus increasing patronage.

The author also argue that, engaging customer to participate in and connection with an organization's offering and/or organizational activities will have the potential to create sustainable competitive advantage for companies that put-in-place the above marketing efforts. Thus, understanding the mechanisms that drive brand loyalty behavior in the hotel industry is very vital to the operators of the industry.

The results from the study show that captains of the hotel industry should be aware of involvement, interactivity, customer support and information sharing when looking at our model.

Limitations and Future Study

Our results and conclusions are subject to some limitations. First, the sample frame consists of 3-star hotels in Rivers State. Therefore, the extent to which

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other classes of hotels are involve has the potential to influence the findings. Second, our respondents were basically senior managers of the various hotels in the study. This limitation affect the results further because other informants not used would have provided other useful information. Third, the consideration of only 3-star hotels should not be seen as accurate indicators of the best hotel in the area This inherent limitation stems from the theoretical orientation of classification of hotels.

Again, further study should periodically update our study to provide a longitudinal assessment of what would take place in the environment. This study domicile in the behavioural component of brand loyalty. Further research should be carried out to explore the attitudinal perspectives of brand loyalty. Our study collect data only from the 3-star hotels, future study should collect data from 5-star hotels, 4-star and even 2-star hotels to represent the split of the industry. Our study relied on key informant data, the results are constrained by issue of hindsight bias. Further studies should look at quoted hotels in the stock markets.

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