

QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF THE “TRUE” BRAND LOYALTY DISTINCTION

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Many authors regard attitudinal loyalty to be ‘true’ brand loyalty, or at very least that composite measures of attitudinal and behavioural loyalty are required to gain insight into loyal behaviour. However, this position is at odds with basic epistemological principles, empirical evidence regarding attitudinal stability, and the scope of existing causal explanations in a variety of fields, including marketing. We demonstrate these points with reference to the existing literature, and call for a greater focus on behavioural approaches to brand loyalty.

Introduction

It is not uncommon for authors in the area of brand loyalty to continue with the old and tired argument that, for consumers to be considered loyal, they must not only show loyal behaviour, ie repeatedly favouring a particular brand in their purchasing, but they must also have a strong, enduring, positive attitude towards the brand (eg. Amine, 1998, Dick and Basu, 1994, Samuelson and Sandvik, 1997).

Value laden terms such as ‘true loyals’ are used to describe those buyers who exhibit both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, and ‘spurious loyals’, to describe those buyers who show behavioural loyalty without attitudinal loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994). The reasons for incorporating buyers’ attitudes into a definition of loyalty have been put forward by various authors over the past twenty years or so:

- 1) Distinguishing between attitudinally loyalty and non-attitudinally loyal customers is useful because it indicates who and how many customers are vulnerable to a change in the ‘spurious’ environmental causes of their loyal behaviour. Hence it gives an indication of how long customers are likely to stay loyal.
- 2) A purely behavioural definition of loyalty fails to explain the causes of loyal behaviour.

These assertions are not based on empirical data. While they may state that attitudinal liking makes buying more probable than if just inertia is at work, there is no empirical evidence to support this. Indeed, current work on attitudes and their stability suggests their inclusion in the concept of brand loyalty adds another factor of uncertainty, rather than contributing to explanatory and predictive ability.

In this commentary we present a counter view to those advocating the use of composite definitions and

- explain why essentialist arguments about ‘true’ loyalty, as put forward by authors such as Amine, are pointless and of no scientific or managerial value;

- disagree with the special status that has been accorded to attitudes above all other potential causes of loyalty;
- point out that attitudinal explanations of loyalty can, at best, only give shallow accounts for why customers are or are not loyal; and
- point out that a purely behavioural definition of loyalty does nothing to impede investigation into explanatory causes of loyalty, whether they be cognitive or environmental.

Unlike many of the advocates of composite loyalty measures, we base our conclusions on well-founded empirical generalisations concerning buyer behaviour and attitudinal responses. We draw on an outstanding history of predominantly British research into loyal behaviour. We also present very recent empirical evidence showing that attitudinal loyalty is only weakly related to purchase loyalty and customer vulnerability (ie respectively, buying more and buying longer) and is more correlated to current/past behaviour than to future behaviour.

Essentialist arguments are pointless

First, we point out that arguments over the true definition of loyalty are a waste of time.

Amine (1998) and Dick and Basu (1994) argue that the true essence of loyalty is attitudinal commitment to the brand. In doing so, they make a major methodological error. They make an argument that can never be resolved by reference to the facts. It is one simply of definitions, of the essence of things, of the true meaning of an abstract noun. This approach is doomed to failure, as there is no 'true' definition of an abstract noun.

Essentialist approaches arise from a confusion between abstract nouns and observable behaviours or objects. Brand features, purchase loyalty, even the elicited response from an attitude question (attitudinal loyalty), are all empirical. That is, when we coin a term to describe them, that term has an empirical referent. Abstract nouns do not have an empirical referent. Their meaning is determined by agreement within the community which uses the term. This agreement may change from time to time. The meanings of abstract nouns ('truth', 'justice', 'the American way', loyalty) are fundamentally relative to the language games of the culture and sub-cultures in which the abstract nouns are used. As such, they are not only variable between sub-cultures, but are also unstable within sub-cultures: the shared understanding of the meaning of an abstract noun may change from time to time. There is no fixed empirical referent to provide a fixed 'meaning' for the term.

Sir Karl Popper, one of the leading philosophers of this century, and the developer of the falsificationist approach which has had a tremendous impact on scientific research, also condemned such essentialist approaches. His ideas in this area are well conveyed by his 'anti-essentialist exhortation': "Never let yourself be goaded into taking seriously problems about words and their meanings. What must be taken seriously are questions of fact, and assertions about facts; theories and hypotheses; the problems they solve; and the problems they raise." (Popper, 1976, p. 19).

So we can legitimately examine the relationships between observable phenomena, such as attitudinal statements, observed purchase behaviours, brand share, brand contribution, etc. This is an empirical matter. We can even choose to refer to one of these phenomena as 'brand loyalty', so long as we are clear exactly what empirical referent we are describing by this term. However, to suggest that one approach captures the 'true' meaning of brand loyalty, while another (by implication) does not, is bad philosophy, and bad science. There is no place for essentialism in marketing science. The only real questions that should be asked are empirical ones (Esslemont and Wright, 1994).

Attitudes Do Not Deserve Special Status As Predictors

Now we show that there is nothing special about attitudes as potential predictors of loyal behaviour.

Attitude is most frequently conceptualised in ways that are consistent with latent process conceptions, that attitudes are enduring intervening mental or hypothetical concepts which mediate behaviour regardless of situational context (Foxall, 1996, Solomon, 1992, Cacioppo et al., 1981). This quality of endurance is important because if attitudes are not long lasting then we are limited in our ability to use them predict and explain behaviour. Indeed, this is one of the advantages that attitudes are being touted to have over straight measures of current behaviour.

Attitudes are argued to be important because a consumers' situation may change, in which case they will be free to buy in line with their attitudes (Amine, 1998). But this argument rests on the notion that attitudes are less likely to change than environmental reinforcers whereas the recent empirical evidence is that attitudes, especially those held towards brands, are extremely variable. Research into the consistency of attitudinal responses of the same consumers at different points in time has shown two contrasting results: very steady aggregate attitudinal responses but highly variable ones for individual consumers between time periods. Studies examining individuals' attitudinal response-rates towards brands have recorded average repeat-response rates of only 50% (Barnard et al., 1986). This result has been shown to be independent of whether the questions are free-choice or forced-choice, as well as the length of time between interviews (Dall'Olmo Riley et al., 1997).

This is an extremely important finding. The typical patterns of aggregate stability seen in attitudinal questions over time would lead one to think that most individuals had given the same response in the different time periods. However, the research findings on individuals' repeat-rates show that this is not so. There is an inherent "fickleness" in individual responses. Which challenges their special status as stable, enduring and situation independent. Attitudes are no more stable than situational variables, indeed they appear to be considerably less stable. Which brings into question their inherent usefulness in the context of brand loyalty measures. On one interview a customer might be classed as 'truly loyalty' and yet on a second interview (even conducted shortly after) they might no longer be classed as loyal. Given this empirical finding it is not surprising that studies using attitudes to predict future behaviour show very poor results. Averages across studies show attitudes typically explain less than 10% of the variance in behaviour and even here this figure is inflated by studies

where the behaviour was highly regular (ie future behaviour was the same as past behaviour) (see Kraus, 1995, Wright and Klÿn, 1998).

Cognitive explanations are not superior they are often quite shallow

It is very common for marketing and consumer researchers to see cognitive variables as somehow highly explanatory, or even the only explanatory variables. Statements such as “if you do not know about buyers’ attitudes then you do not know **why** they bought” typify this approach. Yet, for a long while many social scientists have been unhappy with the degree of explanatory depth that belief and desire based cognitive constructs can provide. How ‘deep’ is an explanation that says customers bought the brand because they like it, and that those who did not buy do not like it? While attitudinal explanations come in much more complex forms that this they are still fundamentally the same. To ‘explain’ why an individual acted in a given way by reference to his having a desire or need or being motivated to act in the manner in question actually explains nothing; at best it redescribes the behaviour (Foxall, 1996 p.119).

A behavioural definition of loyalty does not impede research into explanatory (causal) variables

Attitudinal brand loyalty writers often argue that if you consider only behaviour and not latent cognitive constructs, then you are ignoring explanatory variables for the observed brand loyalty. This is surprisingly common myth and yet there is a vast array of non-cognitive explanatory variables available for incorporation into theory. Variables such as advertising, price, store layout, and distribution, to name just a few, are all available for behaviourist/environmentalist explanations. Such causal variables are of great interest to managers and they have the added advantage of being more measurable and controllable than cognitive or hypothetical constructs such as attitudes.

Physicists, biologists, animal behaviourist, demographers, geographers and even psychologists regularly build explanatory theories without references to latent mental constructs. There is no reason why marketing scientists can not do likewise.

A behavioural definition or measure of loyalty does not impede research into cognitive ‘causes’ of loyalty

Rejection of a composite definition of loyalty does not mean that attitudinal correlates or antecedents of loyalty cannot be explored. Composite definitions inhibit rather than encourage research into the cognitive antecedents of loyalty (through subsuming the antecedents into their consequence). East and colleagues note that composite measures of attitude (where attitude was conceived as both affect and behaviour) held up research into the attitude and behaviour relationship until Azjen and Fishbein (eg 1975) defined attitude entirely as an evaluative affective construct (East et al., 1995). A separate conception of attitudinal loyalty allows for the investigation of the relationship between attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (eg Rundle-Thiele et al., 1998).

Conclusion

Claims that attitudinal loyalty are 'true' loyalty are just bad science. There also appears no reasonable defensible reason for a composite definition of loyalty. Not including attitudes in a definition of loyalty does not lead to shallow explanation or lower predictive ability; indeed the opposite appears to be the case. Attitudes can still be studied in their own right as potential causes or consequences of loyal behaviour. It is behaviour that determines sales and profitability. This is the dependent variable that consumer researchers should focus on. From a practical perspective, it is loyal behaviour and only behaviour that we should be concerned with. From a scientific perspective it is difficult to defend any other approach.

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