Exploring Consumer Loyalty and Resistance to Brand Switching: A Social Identity Theory Approach to the Introduction of Disruptive New Brands

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Abstract
Building on what is one of the key concepts in the marketing literature, this conceptual paper investigates how consumer identity, as rooted in social identity theory (SIT), is not only correlated with emotional brand loyalty, but also with the resistance to switching to a new disruptive brand, arguing that: brand loyalty is dependent, to a substantial degree, on the alignment of an established brand with the consumer identity; brand switching is not only a function of price or value, but also of a threatening identity; the branding strategy of a new, disruptive brand faces the challenge of overcoming not only marketplace inertia and strengthening allegiance to existing brands, but also strong cultural roots; as competition for consumer's social identity against strong, culturally entrenched brand loyalties will be fierce, a consumer will highly resistant to switching brands as doing so incurs not only a loss of monetary value, but emotional and social value as well, providing practical implications, while also calling future empirical studies validate this model and examine how brand loyalty and switching resistance manifest from various industries and cultural context when it comes to true disruptive innovation, thus contributing to the ever-growing understanding of human behavior in the modern marketplace.

Keywords: Consumer Loyalty, Brand Switching Resistance, Social Identity Theory, Disruptive Innovation, Brand Identity, Social Influence

Introduction and Background related to the study

Consumer loyalty is a well-known concept in marketing and consumer behaviour, as it represents the strong emotional bond and commitment that a consumer builds on a particular brand over a period of time, with loyalty forming through the repetitiveness of positive experiences, brand satisfaction and brand identity (Oliver, 1999), as brand loyalty not only generates repeat purchases but also increases customer lifetime value and creates a sustainable competitive advantage for firms that often helps in sustaining market share over a long period of time despite of competition but loyal consumers also provide an economic stability while brand switching resistance becomes significant when new disruptor brands enter to the market and established brands are to keep their loyal customers despite of intense competition from new comers branding better products and services which usually an innovative and in shape of more attractive offers with lower prices (Heskett & Sasser, 2014), as brand switching resistance which is the desire of consumers to not change their current brand despite alternatives being present, a phenomenon driven by both emotional affectations and social identity that keeps consumers attached to the brand on attitudes and behaviors despite having more good or cheap options, and when disruptive new brands challenges these loyalties among established brands they face a wall to overcome when it comes to switch consumers because of the social ties and group founded on their current brand that consumers have built, which is evident that sector boundaries as in consumer electronics, Apple fans create such a great identity that even when the most innovative competitors are brought, the switching seems impossible (Teece, 2014), while Social Identity Theory (SIT) is significant for elucidating brand consumption, as SIT asserts that individuals define themselves through their group memberships and that in consumer behaviour perspective this means that consumers' brand intentions and loyalty can be seen as an extension of their social identity, as in-group with a particular brand creates emotional effects that lead to resistance to switch to out-group brands that may offend consumer self-image or honor the social standings (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), making Social Identity Theory a relevant explanatory tool for understanding why consumers resist disruptive brands when group identities grounded on their own brand, genuine shifts the way consumers see and interact with the new entrants of the market, X setting the research problem of this paper: What is the effect of social identity on consumer loyalty and brand switching resistance towards brand disruptor newly entering to the market? Aim of this research This research aims at examining this complex relationship focusing on brand loyalty as a function of group identity and social affiliation where the consumers' perceptions of newly introduced brands are deeply rooted in their belongingness to the existing brand group where the objectives of this study hence are twofold: First, this study examines the interplay of social identity, brand loyalty, and brand switching resistance when a disruptive brand is introduced and based on findings shows how well Social Identity Theory can be integrated as a part of consumer decision-making literature by demonstrating the cultural, social, and emotional factors that consumers use to make informed conclusions about adopting new brands and the mechanisms through which brand loyalty and brand switching resistance is shaped when consumers face proposals for a new brand they deem to be a disruption or new from their existing brand individual and social affiliations with consumers that can have crucial implications on the marketing of new brands attempting to enter the market spaces entirely controlled by established ones, as the significance of understanding the role social identity plays in the processes of brand loyalty and brand switching resistance directly awards marketers insights for strategical positioning, engagement, and communication of a brand, ultimately determining whether an emerging brand can successfully penetrate a market saturated with existing brands or be blocked the new wave of marketing paradigms by deeper forces — this makes the significance of this study lie in at least two facets; the first, be its attempt to bridge the gaps that existing bridges regarding psychological and social barriers blocking brand switching when disruptive innovation arrives and second, its ability over wider marketing knowledge and assess consumer behavior in relation to the social dimensions on where consumer may stuck (Heskett & Sasser, 2014).

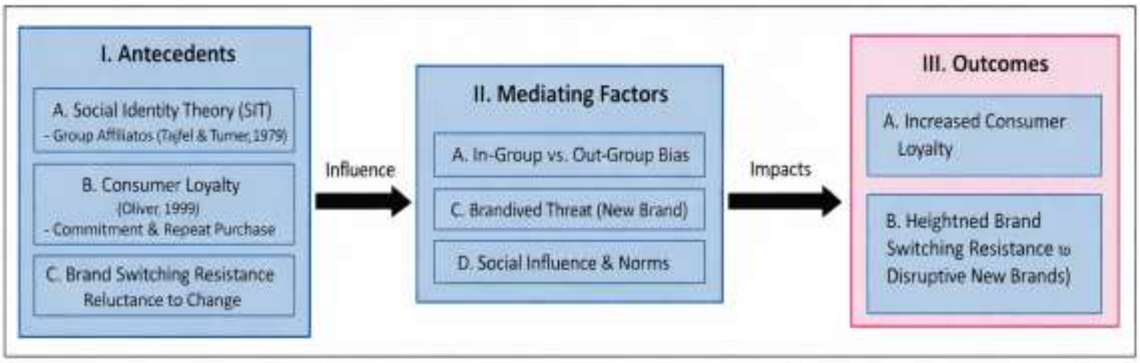
Statement of the research problem

As consumer loyalty has proven to be a principal driver of brand success and market share in today's fast-changing consumer markets, with a cavalcade of previous research correlating loyalty with profitability and growth of a brand (Oliver, 1999), the issue remains that, when it is presented with a dislocating new brand, an establishment is often faced with an imposing wall of brand loyalties that reside in its consumer-base, who are all too often resistant to switch, not only out of an emotional commitment, but also due to a so-developed social ledger of sorts that appears as a direct result of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); since the entrepreneur is by far no stranger to seeing that big crash-landed brand loyalties can build a disintegrating coalition that, at worst, may radically thwart a new brand from entering any given market in which it wishes to compete, due to many a consumer seeing a new disruptor as an out-group, and thus bracing up against the anticipated intrusion of a new brand on their established community in the compelling purchase part of their lives against the ingroup, against their long-held and emotional investments in their brand[s], their communities, and their identity (Heskett & Sasser, 2014; Teece, 2014). The question therefore arises as to how consumer loyalty influences the resistance to brand switching when a new, potentially disruptive brand enters the marketplace, to potentially probe into how the attachment the consumer holds to an established brand may be unwinding or weaving them and hardening up against another brand, and whether endeavors, either by new marketers or new marketing strategies, may just fail to reach the required positions in markets.

Conceptual Framework

Consumer loyalty is often defined as a long-lasting commitment to particular brand due to both positive attitude and frequent purchase behaviors which is fundamental for brand survival and profitability becoming a concept explained by Oliver (1999) as mere consequence of satisfaction but an attachment towards the brand; ultimately leading to brand switching resistance, in which consumers are reluctant to change brands even to superior ones Heskett & Sasser (2014), where resistance manifests in many behaviors´ attracting too much investment of consumer loyalty such as reluctance to trial, negative attitudes towards competition and in general reaction to the perceived inconvenience associated with shifting to new set and unfamiliar choices, especially when a disruptive brand enters the market Wirtz et al. (2016) whose expectation challenges established preferences and identity associations; in this context, Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a robust framework for understanding consumer behavior as it asserts that individuals partly develop their self-concept from their affiliations with social groups in which brand choices represent a partial group identity, where a strong loyal consumer group represents an ingroup and new, disruptive brands represent out-group and therefore present emotional barriers in adoption where the new brand opposes the sense of belonging towards their established brand community according to SIT the ingroup is viewed in high regard while out-groups (e.g., disruptive brands) are viewed negatively leading to ingroup favoritism and out-group bias, in turn generating brand switching resistance by linking switching with losses of social standing and its integrated group identity and brand stewardship. Several variables and factors within this framework mediate the effect of social identity upon consumer behavior, including (a) ingroup vs. out-group bias: consumers' identification with an established brand and its community enhances their commitment and willingness to resist (attack) out-group brands (i.e., yes, these brands may convince the target market [the out-group] to utilize their products, but in doing so they may very well be challenging the shared norms and values that are essential to ingroup as a whole and per definition, cannot be supported); (b) brand image and identity: the existing brand's image reinforces resistance, when consumers adopt the brand in question as an identity themselves, such that attachment is not only reinforced, but also an emotional tie formed as "switching" is not only unnecessary but perceived as a threat (to self-concept); (c) perceived threat: when a new/unknown brand emerges, it is perceived as a threat to the individual's identity and ingroup affiliation, and in order to protect one's social and emotional ties, an active resistance to the disruptive brand is initiated, and (d) social influence (family, friends, social networks, etc.) further helps sustain the resistance to switching or changing their brand, as peer pressure, social norms, and group influence take hold, resulting in a reluctance to adopt a new brand (especially when not widely accepted or condoned by the other members of their social circles; (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Teece, 2014) demonstrate how social identity influences the durability of brand loyalty brand switching resistance; the shared identity creates an emotional and social barrier where the ingroup/out-group dynamics drive loyalty and resistance, and new (e.g. disruptive) brands may be perceived as a direct threat to that identity, wherein the introduction of a disruptive brand activates identity protection mechanisms which translates into brand preference fortification, the social context that surrounds individuals and has created an environment whereby social norms and preferences often dictate conformity to group preferences and norms (thus undermining consumer search intended to evaluate brand choice alternatives; when the existing brand strongly embedded in the individual's identity.

Figure 1: Social Identity Theory of Brand Loyalty & Switching Resistance



Proposed Model based on: Tajfel & Turner (1979), Oliver (1999)

Above image showing Social Identity Theory Loyalty and Switching Resistance

Literature Review

While brand loyalty is well established in marketing and consumer behavior literature as an enduring psychological commitment built over time through favorable repeat experiences leading to positive emotional and cognitive attachment, trust and perceived value (Oliver, 1999) and consumers have been found to be less likely to switch to a competing brand even when the competing one is truly superior from a functional standpoint (Aaker, 1996; Christensen, 1997) because loyal consumers tend to exhibit greater indifference to competitors (Keller, 2003), emerging disruptive new brands whole new types of brand offering new value propositions based on either radical technological innovations or totally different business models present huge strategic challenges to established brands endeavoring to break the incumbent loyalty moats because despite continuous investments in marketing show that strong customer relationship with existing brands typically leads to increased market share, many examples provide evidence of failure and reveal that both persistence in switching behavior, and reluctance to adopt the novelty, cannot be explained by anything other than deeply rooted psychological mechanisms that underpin the multi-faceted resistance to brand switching based on status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), emotional attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) which become more pronounced when brand choices carry symbolic meaning, the impact of which is well known to be effectively explained through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), according to which individuals cannot isolate or view, their identity from among the social groups to which they belong, and that presence of any new brand widely perceived by social groups as an out-group brand is likely a major factor creating fear and ambiguity among consumers who consider engaging with that out-group brand because it concerns their self-identity too (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) particularly when consumers tend to favor the in-group brand and often favor the in-group brands while derogating out-group alternatives in an effort to protect their identity and social status (Tajfel, 1982; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) as illustrated in literature analyzing brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) where existing norms, rituals and social reinforcement creates higher brand loyalty from consumers to the extant brand actions than engagement with the new brand despite switching to the new innovation which likely means technically superior brand offering (Rogers, 2003; Holt, 2004), suggesting that brand switching resistance is a factor not only between brand image, but also driven by other consumer social metrics like ingroup–outgroup bias, perceived identity threat and social influence through peer showed norms and reference group enforcing existing preferences but also amplifying the effect of switching resistance demonstrating that consumer choice is not a rational outcome, but rather a social construct shaped through identity processes, emotional attachment, and group-based evaluations, highlighting a strong need to develop Social Identity Theory into a newer context of brand loyalty and disruptive innovation.

Conceptual Discussion

When combined, social identity theory (SIT) with consumer behavior theory provides a robust framework that helps explain why brand loyalty persists, and why it heightens resistance to brand switching when disruptive new brands are introduced to the market, as SIT suggests that people draw a lot of their self-concept from group memberships and their need to maintain positive distinctiveness for the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and when brands function as social symbols, consumers often perceive their preferred brands as extensions of their identity, which turns brand choice into a socially and emotionally-loaded act rather than a purely instrumental one, thereby making the in-group versus out-group dynamics central to resistance to switching (i.e., existing brands are perceived as in-group, often associated with a community, a set of values, and a lifestyle; a disruptive new brand is an out-group brand that the consumer reacts to defensively, e.g., with skepticism, devaluation, outright rejection, but at the core to protect their identity coherence and belonging to the social group (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003)), particularly in the market segments where strong brand communities or niche identities exist (e.g., technology ecosystems, luxury fashion, or lifestyle brands), as brand identification further strengthens loyalty by increasing emotional attachments, perceived self–brand congruence, and symbolic meaning, making switching psychologically costly, since it challenges the consumer´s sense of who they are (and where they belong -; Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003), and this identity-based loyalty is reinforced as social influence and group norms are at play, such as peer, reference group, or online community/social media networks actively shape consumer attitudes by validating existing brand choices, discouraging deviation, and reward conformity with social approval, likes, and shares, as empirical research suggests that these normative influences amplify brand loyalty and resistance as consumption choices become subnetted into collective norms rather than individual evaluations (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Berger & Heath, 2007), while the introduction of a disruptive new brand often activates identity threat perceptions, as consumers may see the disruptor not just as a market alternative, but as a symbolic threat to their identity, status, or membership group, and this threat further drives emotional responses such as anxiety, defensiveness, or loss aversion, that play out in resistance to trial or switching, consistent with findings from prospect theory that individuals weigh perceived losses heavier than what they would gain, especially when those losses threaten their identity or social status (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and when in fact the identification of the brand itself along with its associated values will position the future consumer in the out-group, that is, the perceived threat is intensified as the disruptive brand externally positions itself in opposition to incumbent values or communities, thus pushing the consumer towards the out-group making them defensive toward switching unless the disruptive brand succeeds in reframing its identity aligned with the consumers´ aspirational self, leveraging social proof, influencer marketing, and community-building tactics to construct a new in-group that the consumer can join without threatening identity continuity (Holt, 2004; Rogers, 2003) that also illustrates that the resistance to brand switching is not given but rather dependent on how well the new brands manage identity signaling, social influence, and perceived threat, and thus this conceptual discussion puts forward a system in which consumer loyalty, brand switching resistance, social identity, in-group/out-group bias, brand identification, perceived threat, social influence, and marketing communications interact with one another in a way that identity-based processes fundamentally shape consumer behavior towards disruptive innovation, and that understanding and managing identity processes becomes key for both incumbent brands defending against loss of loyalty and new brands differentiation gain against consumer loyalty in a socially-networked market landscape.

Implications for Marketing and Brand Strategy

But that needs to change; in the face of an onslaught of disruptive new brands, treating identity, community, and social proof as primary competitive arenas instead of soft add-ons (social identity theory) can make all the difference for effective marketing and brand strategy such that for new brands aiming to achieve switching resistance, market entry should be explicitly designed around (a) emotional branding that resonates with self-concept and identity motives among consumers (e.g., positioning the new brand as a "better version of who you already are" rather than as a rejection of the old brand), (b) activation of peer influence relying on reference groups, creators and early adopter communities to normalize trial and diminish perceived social risk, and (c) identity redefinition strategies that offer consumers an in-group bridge (e.g., community narratives like sustainability, performance, or creator-culture belonging) so adoption signals not identity loss but identity continuity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Holt, 2004; Rogers, 2003) because by framing a disruptor as an out-group, consumers become more likely to protect existing brand identity and avoid switching, while disruptors who build trusted symbolic meaning and community belonging can re-categorize themselves into a desirable in-group, thus reducing perceived identity threat and accelerating diffusion (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and in the current market arenas this implies tactical actions such as (i) community-first pilots at launch (e.g., invite-only programs, campus or creator collectives, or purpose-based micro-communities) that generate identity signaling and signals of acceptance and (ii) the use of story-based emotional cues (empathy, authenticity, shared values) that reinforce perceived similarity and trust, and (iii) the promotion of safe-to-try pathways (risk-free trials, modular switching, dual-use compatibility) that combat loss aversion and status quo bias (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) while for brand leaders aiming to better lock in loyalty and restrict switching, the imperative is to treat culture-building as customer strategy by deepening consumer brand identification via (a) community building (brand communities, rituals, events, and shared language) that aggrandize in-group attachment, (b) brand identity reinforcement (clear symbolic meaning, consistency, and distinctive associations that support self-expression) and (c) emotion-driven relational investments (recognition, empathy, personalized experiences) that convert behavioral repetition into durable attachment (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)—especially since recent practitioner evidence suggests loyalty expectations are reflecting an increasing preference for more personalized, experience-led value propositions compared to purely points-based systems, suggesting therefore that incumbents should redesign loyalty as identity-enhancing participation (tier status, exclusivity, member-only access, community contribution) and not transactional discounts (BCG, 2024; Deloitte, 2024) and likewise, companies can more purposefully leverage social identity by inducing new subcultures (e.g., "insiders," "creators," "founders," "club members") and facilitating identity expression through social platforms, loyalty ecosystems, and exclusive experiences that reward participation and advocacy which echoes the social-first findings of increasing relevance for community-led engagement, content ecosystems (Deloitte Digital, 2025) and broader consumer trend observations suggesting how behaviors and expectations are still growing and getting integrated post-disruption, and how a sameness in consumer trust building and loyalty expectations seems to persist (McKinsey, 2025) moving thereby to the strategy recommendation that both disruptors and incumbents should be mapping and managing the very same identity-linked variables namely, brand identification, perceived identity threat, in-group/out-group categorization, social influence norms, brand image symbolism, and communication credibility because switching and loyalty are jointly produced by what the brand enables consumers to be socially and not exclusively by what the product enables them to do functionally, inferring that marketing communication should be evaluated for its ability to (1) affirm identity, (2) reduce threat, (3) create belonging, and (4) generate socially reinforced meaning at scale.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides rich theoretical understanding by integrating the consumer loyalty, brand switching resistance, and Social Identity Theory (SIT) literature in the context of disruptive new brands, it is important to acknowledge several significant limitations, the first and foremost is its conceptual nature, as there is no empirical study, the relationships between key constructs such as brand identification, in-group versus out-group bias, perceived identity threat and resistance to brand switching are only (theoretically) suggested instead of (statistically) validated, which significantly constrains validity and generalizability of the proposed framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Oliver, 1999) 126, furthermore, despite the extensive research about brand loyalty and switching behavior, a clear gap in the literature persists in how social identity processes interact with disruptive innovation, as most studies focus on rational switching drivers such as those connected to price, quality, or satisfaction, or identity effects in relatively stable brand environments and do not examine whether and how the processes underlying identity-based resistance evolve when consumers are faced with brands that threaten not only functional preferences but also symbolic meaning and group membership 127, in addition, much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional designs and self-reported measures, limiting insight into how consumer loyalty and resistance can change over time, particularly as consumers may experience prolonged exposure to disruptive brands, new technologies or cultural narratives and this suggests that the temporal component of identity-based loyalty has not yet been sufficiently investigated (Rogers, 2003). These limitations present opportunities for future research, which should test the conceptual model expounded on in this study using quantitative methods such as structural equation modeling or experimental designs to establish how social identity, brand identification, and perceived threat influence switching intentions and consumer loyalty across product categories and market disruptions by comparing identity driven resistance in high identity industries such as, smartphones, auto brands or luxury fashion to more utilitarian categories such as, FMCG or financial services, while longitudinal studies would offer unique insights into how consumer identity alignment and loyalty develop as disruptive brands mature, achieving legitimacy or forming new communities allowing scholars to witness the continuities where initial resistance is a precursor to later adoption or re-identification over time; and, further, cross-cultural research is strongly recommended as social identity is culturally grounded (Hofstede, 1980), with the formation of identity and salience of groups both varying in context; hence within collectivist cultures it is expected that consumers will demonstrate more duty-based loyalty and switching resistance than those in more individualistic cultures suggesting an alternate strength and nature of identity based resistance across markets; and finally, future studies could expand this framework by introducing new contexts including digital brand communities, platform based ecosystems and personalization via AI which are slowly and repeatedly reshaping identity and social influence in contemporary consumption adding to both theory and practice by replacing identity-based explanations for brand loyalty and switching resistance with suitable empirical data from modern, disruptive market environments.

Conclusion

This conceptual study therefore confirms that social identity is a fundamental and potent mechanism through which both consumer loyalty and consumer resistance to brand switching occur, for when new brands disrupt a stable category, consumers do not simply compare its offerings along functional dimensions such as price or quality; they interpret brands as symbolic extensions of their self-concept and group membership and strongly identify in-group with incumbent brands while resisting new entrants perceived to be out-group as all-out brand switching is identity switching (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003); a dynamic that can be observed in modern markets, especially prominent in categories such as technology, fashion and lifestyle, where brand communities and digital networks have greatly increased emotional attachment and social reinforcement, as brand platforms like Apple, Nike, or Tesla cultivate strong identity-based loyalty through community, ritual and myth (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Keller, 2003); stressing that brand switching is not only consumer inertia, but an identity-protecting response further compounded by social force, perceived threat, and loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979); In conclusion, the study hereby urge marketing practitioners and brand strategists—both incumbents and disruptors—to explicitly integrate social identity into the brand positioning, communication and engagement strategies; because for established brands, strengthening loyalty requires reinforcing meaningful identity cues, fostering the sense of community belonging, and creating emotional feelings; for new brands then, overcoming consumer resistance can require judicious reframing of identity objectives to minimize perceived threat, skilfully implementing peer influence and social proof, and generating alternative in-groups that enable consumers to adopt the new brand without identity loss (Holt, 2004; Rogers, 2003); Lastly, the study encourages researcher to expand the theoretical boundaries by empirically validating the proposed framework to various industries and cultures, in longitudinal and experimental settings to study how identity-based loyalty and resistance to switching develop over time and alongside emerging variables, including digital identity, online brand communities, social media influence and platform-based consumption that are vital in the understanding of categorically distorted identity and the formative factor for switching decisions in digitally networked market, ultimately assimilating a more encompassing and empirically-founded comprehension of brand loyalty and brand switching resistance in the era of disruption.

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