Building Brand Image and Loyalty: The Role of Customer Satisfaction and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to elucidate the link between brand image and customer loyalty, recognizing that customers are pivotal in securing a competitive advantage. It hypothesizes that a firm can foster customer loyalty by establishing and maintaining a favorable and positive brand image. Furthermore, this study investigates the mediating role of satisfaction and engagement in the link between brand image and loyalty. Data were gathered from patrons of Pakistan's fast-food business. Data was analyzed using SPSS. Our model is supported by the findings. Analyses of cross-sectional data from 317 customers shows that satisfaction and engagement mediate between brand image and consumer loyalty. Implications for managers are discussed, and future recommendations for research are provided.

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1. Introduction

Customer loyalty, defined as a customer’s enduring dedication to repurchase company’s products despite contextual influences that might encourage them to switch (Oliver, 1999; Song, Wang, & Han, 2019), is critical for surviving and thriving in today’s competitive market (Namin, 2017). Establishing and maintaining relationships with customers is essential (Hsieh & Li, 2008). Although the value of customer loyalty is well-documented—leading to new customers, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and the ability to command premium prices (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Chen, Wang, Gong, & Liu, 2023)—research examining the antecedents of customer loyalty remains limited. The current research seeks to investigate the influence of brand image (BI hereafter) on enhancing loyalty. BI, as defined by (Keller, 1993), is a customer's impression of a brand, shaped by their associations with it. Strong BI enables customers to differentiate a brand from its competitors, provides reasons for repeat purchases, generates positive feelings, and fosters a basis for a long-term relationship (Aaker, 1997; Parris & Guzman, 2023). Creating a unique and favorable image strengthens a brand's position in the minds of its customers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Qian, Law, Wei, Shen, & Sun, 2020; Wisker, Kadirov, & Nizar, 2023), thereby increasing brand loyalty.

Furthermore, this study will examine how customer satisfaction and engagement serve as mediators in the relationship between BI and loyalty. Satisfaction is defined as customers' judgment on whether a good or service provides pleasurable fulfillment (Maqableh, Hmoud, & Jaradat, 2021; Oliver, 1999). A strong image is closely linked to customer perceptions and expectations of quality, which ultimately affects satisfaction (Sengupta, Balaji, & Krishnan, 2015). A favorable image is likely to reflect consumer habits and understanding of consumer attitudes (Nilashi, Abumaliloh, Samad, Alrizq, Alyami, & Alghamdi, 2023), leading to customer satisfaction. A delightful customer is more likely to endorse the brand, make repeat purchases, and is less likely to switch to competitor's offerings (Keiningham, Cool, Aksoy, Andreassen, & Weiner, 2007). While engagement refers to the process by which a customer contributes value
to a firm either directly or indirectly (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Customers are more inclined to engage with brands that possess an appealing image and have the potential to enhance their self-image and identity (Schlesinger, Cervera-Taulet, & Wymer, 2023). Therefore, we hypothesize that BI plays a critical factor in fostering customer engagement, consequently, positively influences customer loyalty. The primary aim of this research is to examine both direct and indirect connections between BI and customer loyalty. By drawing on past studies, we explore these relationships and intend to make three primary contributions. First, the current research substantiates the value of BI in developing customer loyalty. Secondly, conducted in a non-western context—Pakistan—it provides insights into how BIs influence customer loyalty specifically in the restaurant industry. Considering emerging markets is crucial, as they comprise a significant portion of the world's population (Khan, Ferguson, & Pérez, 2015). This paper also contributes to the BI literature by identifying two important mechanisms that lead to customer loyalty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Image

BI has been a central marketing concept since the 1950s, though definitions and measurements vary among scholars (Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001; Keller, 1993; Park & Rabolt, 2009; Wijaya, 2013). Several factors make BI such as uniqueness, brand associations, and favorability (Nilashi et al., 2023). (Aaker, 1997) views BI as a distinctive firm element that aids in differentiating it from competitors. Overall, BI is crucial for maintaining a competitive advantage and influencing consumer buying patterns (Gong, Xiao, Tang, & Li, 2023; Kang & James, 2004).

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction arises from how well product features meet customer needs and expectations (Bagram & Khan, 2012). It is a subjective evaluation (Hallencreutz & Parmler, 2021) that varies based on individual expectations and product performance (Cengiz, 2010). (Oliver, 1999) defines satisfaction as a “post-consumption assessment” reflecting the fulfillment of desire. Customer satisfaction is critical as it affects repeat purchase decisions and loyalty, making it essential for maintaining profitability and market share (Jones & Sasser, 1995).

2.3. Customer engagement

Customer engagement, as introduced by Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) encompasses array of physical, emotional, and cognitive investments that consumer make during interactions with a brand. Patterson, Yu, and De Ruyter (2006) emphasizes that engagement includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investments that enhance customer experiences. (L. Hollebeek, 2011) suggests engagement is driven by motivational drivers that make interactions rewarding, thus fostering a sustainable and beneficial relationship between customers and brands. This concept, central to relationship marketing, involves customers as co-producers in value creation that plays a pivotal role in company’s success (Saha, Goyal, & Jebarajakirthy, 2022).

2.4. Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty, referred as the customer's willingness to continue purchasing from the same brand over time (Hee-Su Kim & Yoon, 2004; Oliver, 1999). It involves both behavioral patterns, such as repeat purchasing, and attitudinal aspects, such as recommending the brand to others. Loyalty is driven by customer satisfaction and the emotional connections customers form with a brand, which can significantly enhance profitability and market presence (Dapena-Baron, Gruen, & Guo, 2020; Dick & Basu, 1994).

2.5. Hypotheses Development

2.5.1. BI and customer loyalty

BI significantly influences customers' perceptions about a brand, aiding them in selecting a specific brand from many competitors (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Furthermore, BI profoundly impacts customer loyalty by aligning the brand's identity with customer self-perceptions, thereby fostering loyalty (Aaker, 1997). Consequently, when organizations tailor their image to align with the desires of the target market, it facilitates the generation of loyal customers who are inclined to make repeated purchases (Ji & Wood, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize
H1: BI is positively associated with customer loyalty.

2.5.2. BI and customer satisfaction

Many factors such as salesforce, BI, name after-sales service influence customer satisfaction throughout customer life cycle (Jap, 2001). BI, among numerous factors affecting satisfaction level of customers, has proven to be an undoubted antecedent of customer satisfaction. When organizations create a favorable image, they are more likely to increase their base of satisfied customers, which is beneficial for the firm in the long term (Morgan, 1999). Moreover, a compelling BI directly impacts customer satisfaction by setting and often exceeding expectations (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). When a brand consistently delivers on its promises, customer satisfaction increases, which in turn enhances the overall brand perception (Amin, Isa, & Fontaine, 2013). Effective brand management that aligns image with customer expectations leads to higher satisfaction (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize

H2: BI is positively associated with consumer satisfaction.

2.5.3. Customer satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Customer satisfaction is widely recognized as a crucial factor influencing customers' willingness to purchase a brand in the future (Taylor & Baker, 1994). Even a minor change in satisfaction level can bring about significant changes in customer loyalty (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Customers become satisfied if the organization can provide products or services that meet their needs better than competitors; this helps firms maintain a competitive advantage. These satisfied customers are likely to become loyal, recommend the brand to others, and engage in repeat purchasing behaviors (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004). Indeed, prior research have highlighted that customer satisfaction creates customer loyalty (Bloemer, De Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1999; Ehigie, 2006; Oliver, 1999; Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Hence, we hypothesize

H3: Customer satisfaction is positively related to consumer loyalty.

Integrating H2 and H3, we predict that customer satisfaction serves as the mediator in the link between image and loyalty.

H4: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between BI and customer loyalty.

2.5.4. BI and customer engagement

Customer perception of a brand significantly influences their purchase decisions. Therefore, creating and maintaining a strong, positive image of brand is vital for organizations to gain customer preference. While, customer engagement is essentially the connection of customers with the firm, initiated either by the organization or the customers themselves. Studies have shown that BI positively influences engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010). According to (Keller, 2013), if a brand has a good reputation and favorable image, then customers will engage more with the brand and develop positive connections with it. Furthermore, when the BI is congruent with the customer's own image, it is more likely that customers will engage with the brand (Hansen & Jensen, 2009; Hye-Shin Kim & Ma, 2014). Hence, we hypothesize

H5: BI has a positively influence on customer engagement.

2.5.5. Customer engagement and Customer Loyalty

Customer engagement is a key driver of loyalty. Engagement fosters a feeling of belonging and connection to the brand, encouraging loyalty through emotional and behavioral connections (L. D. Hollebeek & Brodie, 2009). Continuous engagement strategies, including digital and social interactions, significantly influence customer loyalty (Roy, Singh, Sadeque, Harrigan, & Coussement, 2023).

H6: Customer engagement is positively associated with loyalty.
Incorporating H5 and H6, we predict that customer engagement plays a mediating role in the link between image and loyalty.

H7: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between BI and customer loyalty.

3. Methods
3.1. Sample and Procedures
Data were collected from patrons of the fast-food industry in Lahore, Pakistan. The fast-food chains selected for the research are KFC, McDonalds, Hardee's, Burger King, Subway, and Fatburger. The primary reason for choosing these restaurants is that they are all Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) and are internationally recognized. Customers were assured that their anonymity and confidentiality would be strictly maintained and that their information would be utilized solely for research objectives. Questionnaires were administered to 450 customers. The questionnaire used in this research was close-ended, which simplifies coding, standardized responses, and reduced ambiguity for respondents. Data collected was analyzed using SPSS 20.0 (Gull, Parveen, & Abbas, 2023). Univariate analysis was conducted to determine the frequency and percentages of demographic variables. The analysis was performed to uncover trends in the data. Descriptive statistics cannot be used to make inferences about the entire population. Therefore, inferential statistics were utilized. Linear regression was employed to analyze the specific impact of predictors on loyalty, while multivariate analysis was conducted to explore how mediators influence the BI-customer loyalty relationship. The questionnaire has been segmented into two parts. The initial section obtained demographic information about participants (age, gender, and frequency of fast-food visits, to better understand the sample's characteristics. The second section included questions about the study variables. From the 450 questionnaires, 317 were found suitable for the analysis, yielding a response rate of 70%. Among the participants, 68% were female and 46% had recently visited McDonald’s. Furthermore, 73% of the respondents were aged between 21-30 years.

3.2. Measures
3.2.1. Brand Image
Ten-item scale developed by (Hee-Su Kim & Yoon, 2004) was used to measure BI. An example item is “It tastes good compared with price”. Cronbach α was 0.81.

3.2.2. Customer Satisfaction
The two-item scale used to measure customer satisfaction was adapted from (Oliver, 1999). An example item is “I am pleased to have visited this restaurant”. Cronbach α was 0.89.

3.2.3. Customer Engagement
The six-item scale developed by (Keller, 2001) was used to measure customer engagement. An example item in the customer engagement scale was “I am always interested in learning more about this brand”. Cronbach α was 0.91.

3.2.4. Customer loyalty
Nine-item scale developed by (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996) was used to measure customer loyalty. An example item is “I would like to come back to this restaurant in the future”. Cronbach α was 0.90.

4. Results
4.1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Estimates and Bivariate Correlations
The results presented in Table 1 highlight item intercorrelations, reliabilities, and descriptive statistics between variables examined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Brand Image</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Customer Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>(.89)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Customer Engagement</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Customer Loyalty</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 317. Alphas values are reported along the diagonal. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01
4.2. Hypotheses Testing

Correlation is effective for assessing the relationships between variables, yet it does not reveal any causal relationships. Hence, we utilized regression analysis to explore the structural relationships among the variables.

Hypothesis 1: BI is positively associated with customer loyalty.

Table 2 indicates that BI exhibits a notable positive impact on customer loyalty (p-value, $\beta = 0.450$). The value of R square indicates that 37% of variations in customer’s loyalty is due to BI.

| Table 2: BI as an independent variable and loyalty as dependent variable |
|----------------|----------|-------------|---|------|
|               | $\beta$  | Sig.        | R Square | $F$  | Sig. |
| (constant)    | 3.989    | 0.000       | 0.370    | 185.03 | 0.000 |
| BI            | 0.450    | 0.000       |          |       |      |

Hypothesis 2: BI is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

Table 3 indicates that BI exhibits a notable positive impact on customer satisfaction (p-value, $\beta = 0.391$). The value of R square indicates that 49% variability in customer’s satisfaction is due to BI.

| Table 3: BI as an independent variable and satisfaction as dependent variable: |
|----------------|----------|-------------|---|------|
|               | $\beta$  | Sig.        | R Square | $F$  | Sig. |
| (constant)    | 2.294    | 0.000       | 0.486    | 297.53 | 0.000 |
| BI            | 0.391    | 0.000       |          |       |      |

Hypothesis 3: Customer satisfaction related to consumer loyalty.

As shown in Table 4, customer satisfaction has a substantial positive impact on customer loyalty (p-value, $\beta = 1.046$). The value of R square indicates that 62% of variations in customer’s loyalty is due to customer satisfaction.

| Table 4: Customer Satisfaction as independent variable and loyalty as dependent variable |
|----------------|----------|-------------|---|------|
|               | $\beta$  | Sig.        | R Square | $F$  | Sig. |
| (constant)    | 2.939    | 0.000       | 0.629    | 534.9 | 0.000 |
| Satisfaction  | 1.046    | 0.000       |          |       |      |

Hypothesis 4: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between BI and customer loyalty.

The mediating hypothesis will be investigated using the (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The mediation exists if three conditions are met: a) First equation - the predictor must influence the mediator. b) Second equation - the predictor must influence the dependent variable. c) Third equation - the mediator must influence the dependent variable. If these criteria are met, the influence of the predictor on the dependent variable will be reduced in the third equation as compared to second equation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). As shown in Table 5, first condition has been fulfilled i.e. BI has a significant influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta= 0.391$; p value= 0.000) having the correlation coefficient 0.697. The second condition has also been met with liner regression ($\beta=0.450$; p value= 0.000) having the correlation coefficient 0.608. The third condition has been fulfilled as satisfaction significantly influences loyalty when controlling the BI through multiple regression analysis. Moreover, the impact of image on loyalty of customers is greatly reduced in third equation as compared with the effect of BI on loyalty in the first equation (from 0.391 to 0.080). So, customer satisfaction serves as a significant mediator in the BI-customer loyalty relationship.

| Table 5: Analysis of proposed mediating variable i.e. customer satisfaction |
|----------------|----------|-------------|---|------|---|------|
|               | IV | DV | R  | R-square | Regression equation | P-value |
| First         | BI | CS | 0.697 | 0.486 | 2.294+0.391 (BI) | 0.000 |
| Second        | BI | CL | 0.608 | 0.370 | 3.989+ 0.450 (BI) | 0.000 |
| Third         | BI&CS | CL | 0.797 | 0.635 | 1.815+0.080 (BI)+ 0.947(CS) | 0.00 |
Hypothesis 5: BI has a positive influence on customer engagement.

As shown in Table 6, BI has a significant positive influence on customer engagement (p-value, $\beta = .046$). The value of R square indicates that 23% of variations in customer’s engagement is caused by BI.

Table 6: BI as independent variable and engagement as dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>3.213</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>97.36</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BI</td>
<td>0.406</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 6: Customer engagement is positively associated with customer loyalty.

As shown in Table 7, customer engagement has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty (p-value, $\beta = .647$). The value of R square indicates that 54% variations in customer’s loyalty is caused by customer engagement.

Table 7: Customer engagement as independent and loyalty as dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(constant)</td>
<td>8.074</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.535</td>
<td>362.74</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer engagement</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 7: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between BI and customer loyalty.

As shown in Table 8, the three conditions for mediation stated by (Baron & Kenny, 1986) has been met successfully. Moreover, the effect of BI on loyalty of customers is greatly reduced in third equation when compared with the effect of BI on loyalty in the first equation (from 0.406 to 0.245). So, customer engagement has a mediating impact on the relationship between BI and customer loyalty.

Table 8: Analysis of proposed mediating variable i.e. Customer Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R-square</th>
<th>Regression equation</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>BI</td>
<td>CE</td>
<td>0.486</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>3.213+ 0.406 (BI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>BI</td>
<td>CL</td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>3.989+ 0.450 (BI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>BI&amp;CE</td>
<td>CL</td>
<td>0.787</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td>2.367+ 0.245(BI)+0.505(CE)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: BI= BI; CL= customer loyalty; CE= customer engagement

5. Discussion

The major objective of the study was to determine the link between BI and customer loyalty, particularly in the fast-food sector of Pakistan. Furthermore, it identified the roles of mediating variables, namely customer engagement and satisfaction, in affecting the relationship between BI and loyalty. Data were gathered from customers of selected fast-food chains using a cross-sectional approach (Gull, Parveen, & Abbas, 2023). Based on a comprehensive literature review, this study formulated and tested seven hypotheses. All hypotheses were supported, though the strength of the relationships varied. The findings underscore that a positive BI significantly enhances customer loyalty. Specifically, customer satisfaction serves as a critical mediator in this relationship, suggesting that when a brand successfully meets customer needs, it not only enhances satisfaction but also fortifies loyalty (Davies & Chun, 2002; Selnes, 1993). Moreover, customer engagement was found to mediate the BI-loyalty relationship. Brands that value customer opinions and engage with them through various platforms, including social media and product improvement discussions, are likely to cultivate a loyal customer base (L. Hollebeek, 2011). This engagement fosters a perception of mutual value creation, enhancing customer loyalty and providing a competitive barrier to market entry (Keller, 1998). Organizations should, therefore, prioritize the continuous improvement of their BI to align with customer perceptions, thereby increasing satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty. This strategic focus is expected to yield long-term profitability by solidifying a loyal customer base that not only prefers the brand but also advocates for it, thereby minimizing customer turnover.
5.1. Managerial Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for managers aiming to bolster their organization’s market position through strengthened customer relationships. In today’s complex market environment, sustaining and expanding a loyal customer base is crucial. Understanding customers’ perceptions and mental images of a brand significantly influences their purchasing decisions and preferences (Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001). Managers must, therefore, nurture the brand’s image—the quintessence of its products and services (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990)—to enhance customer loyalty. Customer behavior and attitudes are predictive of future interactions between the customer and the firm, making them essential considerations for managers. This study suggests that loyalty is significantly shaped by customers' perceptions. Thus, managers should focus on understanding customer psychology (Oklevik, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2024), addressing complaints promptly, and rewarding loyalty through discounts, memberships, and personalized engagements. Such strategies not only maintain customer loyalty but also spur word-of-mouth, thereby attracting new customers.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

While elucidating the relationship between BI and customer loyalty within the fast-food sector, specifically quick-service restaurants in Lahore, this study acknowledges several limitations. Focusing only on a single geographic area and industry sector may sometimes represent customer behavior. Additionally, skewed towards a younger demographic prevalent in fast food consumption, the data may not capture broader age-related consumer trends. The cross-sectional nature of the data collection also limits the understanding of these dynamics over time, suggesting that future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach to capture the evolving nature of customer loyalty better. Future research should explore these dynamics across regions and other service sectors, such as full-service restaurants and hotels. Future research scholars should conduct a systematic review to examine more factors that affect customer loyalty, as in the prior research study of (Gull, Ahmed, & Warraich, 2022). Investigating additional mediators like brand identification, brand personality, and brand love could provide deeper insights into the complex interplay of factors influencing customer loyalty. Moreover, expanding the scope to include the impact of BI on organizational metrics such as switching costs, sales, revenue, and advertising efficacy could further delineate the strategic value of a strong BI.

6. Conclusion

The study conclusively highlights that a favorable BI is instrumental in fostering customer loyalty. By aligning marketing strategies with customer expectations and actively engaging them, organizations can enhance their competitive stance and ensure long-term profitability. The dual mediating roles of customer satisfaction and engagement are pivotal, strongly influencing purchasing behaviors and loyalty. Thus, in a fiercely competitive market, a well-crafted and maintained BI is not just an asset but a necessity for survival and growth.

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