



## Exploring a functional approach to attitudinal brand loyalty

Rebekah Russell-Bennett<sup>a,\*</sup>, Charmine E.J. Härtel<sup>b</sup>, Steve Worthington<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

<sup>b</sup> UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Australia

<sup>c</sup> Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

What psychological function does brand loyalty serve? Drawing on Katz's (1960) Functional Theory of Attitudes, we propose that there are four functions (or motivational antecedents) of loyalty: utilitarian, knowledge, value-expressive and ego-defensive. We discuss how each function relates to the three dimensions of loyalty (i.e. emotional, cognitive, and behavioural loyalty). Then this conceptualisation of brand loyalty is explored using four consumer focus groups. These exploratory results demonstrate that the application of a functional approach to brand loyalty yields insights which have not been apparent in previous research. More specifically, this paper notes insights in relation to brand loyalty from a consumer's perspective, including the notion that the ego-defensive function is an orientation around what others think and feel. This creates the possibilities for future research into brand loyalty via social network analysis, in order to better understand how the thoughts of others affect consumers' loyalty attributes.

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### 1. Introduction

Brand loyalty is a concept that has garnered much interest over recent decades, with numerous companies seeking to establish brand loyalty from their consumers. While we know that brand loyalty is important to organisations, the attitudinal function that brand loyalty serves, from a consumer perspective, is less clear. Why do consumers commit to buying a brand time after time? In this article, we propose that the commitment and intention to repurchase a brand is a manifestation of the functions driving consumers to repurchase. Specifically we use Katz's (1960) framework of the Functional Approach to Attitudes to explore the relationships between four functions of loyalty and the three dimensions of brand loyalty.

The question of what motivates consumers to be attitudinally loyal involves identifying the psychological function/s that is/are served by brand loyalty. There is evidence that consumers can be irrational and impulsive about their decisions in some instances, but thoughtful about their decision-making in others, with context being the strongest determining factor of the chosen approach (Chaudhuri, 2006; Katz, 1960). One key psychological theory that accounts for the existence of both irrational and rational attitudes and behaviour is Katz's (1960) Functional Theory of Attitudes. The underlying premise of this theory is that an understanding of

motives (functions) is required before attitude change can be undertaken (Schlosser, 1998).

The Functional Theory of Attitudes (Katz, 1960) identifies four generic functions of attitudes that explain the purpose of attitudes towards an object and ultimately explain behaviour. This theory has been developed and tested in a number of different behavioural situations; for example, Groves et al. (1977), recreation; Locander and Spivey (1978), tennis; Korgaonkar et al. (1985), shopping; Allen et al. (2002), cars and sunglasses purchase behaviour; and Hullet (2006), HIV testing. Allen et al. (2002), whilst providing 'cautious support for the functional approach to the value-attribute-behaviour system' (p. 129), does suggest however, that, 'one construct neglected was behaviour' (p. 130). In this study, we draw on Katz's (1960) framework to define four functions for loyalty (utilitarian, value-expressive, ego-defensive and knowledge) and explore how each function relates to the three dimensions of loyalty (emotional, cognitive and behavioural). The resulting approach is referred to as the *functional approach to attitudinal brand*.

Building based on previous research that investigated attitudinal loyalty (emotional and cognitive) only, we propose that the functions or motivations of brand loyalty should not only be related to the level of emotional and cognitive brand loyalty associated with a given brand, but also to the level of behavioural loyalty observed. As East et al., 2005 noted, where the brand has low consumer involvement, attitudinal loyalty is not an important driver of behavioural loyalty and so the functions may directly impact the latter, bypassing the dimensions of emotional and

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 7 3138 2894; fax: +61 7 3138 1811.

E-mail addresses: [rebekah.bennett@qut.edu.au](mailto:rebekah.bennett@qut.edu.au), [rebekah.russell-bennett@strath.ac.uk](mailto:rebekah.russell-bennett@strath.ac.uk) (R. Russell-Bennett).

cognitive loyalty altogether. Conversely, where the brand has high involvement, attitudinal loyalty is an important driver of behavioural loyalty (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007) and thus, the functions are expected to affect behaviour through their impact on emotional and cognitive brand loyalty. For these reasons, we examined the effect of the functions of attitudinal brand loyalty on the three dimensions of brand loyalty: emotional, cognitive, and behavioural brand loyalty. These three dimensions are explored and demonstrated in the research reported in Worthington et al. (2010).

This article explores the functions of consumer brand loyalty through two research questions:

1. *What is the relationship between the functions of brand loyalty and the three dimensions of loyalty?*
2. *What factors influence each function-dimension relationship?*

To address these research questions, exploratory research in the form of four focus groups, with a total of 24 participants, was undertaken. This yielded rich in-depth information about the features and complexities of attitudinal brand loyalty and its motivational antecedents with a proposed model arising from the data. The results of the research indicate that the functional approach to attitudinal brand loyalty offers a useful explanation for why some consumers are loyal to particular brands.

## 2. Three dimensions of loyalty

There are two core components of loyalty<sup>1</sup>; behavioural<sup>2</sup> and attitudinal<sup>3</sup>, with attitudinal further broken down into two dimensions; emotional and cognitive (Härtel and Russell-Bennett, 2010). This leads to three dimensions of the overall concept of loyalty; behavioural, emotional and cognitive. The relationship of these dimensions have created strong debate in the marketing literature for the past forty years, however there seems to be general consensus amongst scholars that behavioural loyalty is most relevant for low-involvement, routinised purchases and attitudinal loyalty is more relevant to high-involvement, hedonic, high-risk purchases (Rundle-Thiele and Bennett, 2001; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). In the latter situation, attitudinal brand loyalty is an important driver of behavioural loyalty for many types of products: including, business-to-business (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007), services (Chiou and Droge, 2006) and high-involvement consumer goods (Bandyopadhyay and Martell, 2007; Mellens et al., 1996).

Thus for brand managers seeking to manage attitudinal loyalty levels, breaking attitudinal loyalty into a 'feeling' component and a 'thinking' component (Ajzen, 2001; Worthington et al., 2010) can give greater direction for strategic interventions.

## 3. Functions of attitudinal loyalty

The Functional Theory of Attitudes (Katz, 1960) identifies four generic functions of attitudes: a *utilitarian function*, which focuses on the attributes of the object; a *value-expressive function*, where the attitude serves as an expression of one's central values or self-concept; an *ego-defensive function*, where the attitude serves

to protect one either from external threats or internal feelings; and a *knowledge function*, where the attitude serves as a mental structure or attributes means attributing meaning. Given brand managers seek to influence attitudinal loyalty levels, having an understanding of why consumers hold such levels can identify mental levers that campaigns can trigger. This is supported by Hullet (2006), who uses functional theory as a basis for designing messages that would motivate people to get tested for HIV, and suggests that a knowledge of attitudinal loyalty functions can assist marketing campaigns to be more effective.

### 3.1. The utilitarian function of loyalty

The utilitarian function of brand loyalty is based on evaluating alternatives on performance criteria and then selecting a brand that meets those requirements. Decision rules are used to evaluate and preclude particular brands from the final choice set. The utilitarian function is roused through experience rather than verbal information (Katz, 1960); thus, consumers that repurchase brands on the basis of their utilitarian function are likely to be satisfied with their experiences using the brand, rather than hearing about the performance of the brand. The utilitarian function leads to brand loyalty when a brand is proven to be value for money, or the best 'deal', owing to the consumer comparison of its attributes with competitive brands. An example of this might be a person continuing to repurchase a mobile phone service (i.e. behavioural brand loyalty) because she/he perceives the service provider's prices to be the cheapest for her/his needs.

### 3.2. Value-expressive function of loyalty

Following on from Katz's (1960) generic functions of attitudes, the second function of brand loyalty is defined as the value-expressive function. The underlying motivation represented by this function is the need to buy a brand that is consistent with, or that expresses, one's values (Kardes, 2002). In his research on attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, Herek (1987) outlined two categories of attitude functions: evaluative and expressive, and identified three sub-types of expressive attitudes. These three sub-types of expressive attitudes serve an expressive function, and are derived not from the tangible aspects of the object, but rather from the increase in self-esteem when expressing the attitude. Here, the object is used as a symbol for self-expression, and as such, the three sub-groups of expressive attitudes can be categorised as 'social expressive', 'defensive' and 'value-expressive' (Herek, 1987). Allen et al.'s (2002) research into value-expression of both cars and sunglasses, culminated in their suggestions as to how advertisements could be developed. This includes the fact that promotional strategies should match to each customer's way of relating to a given product, hence helping to generate repeat purchase behaviour.

### 3.3. Ego-defensive function of loyalty

Based on Katz's (1960) generic functions of attitudes, the third function of brand loyalty is defined as the ego-defensive function. This function is predicated on Freudian defence mechanisms that help people deal with emotional conflict and feel better about themselves (Kardes, 2002), and thus, relates to personal identity (Hogg and Abrahams, 1988). Hence as a function of attitudinal loyalty, the ego-defensive function is being served when the consumer perceives buying the brand as contributing to their esteem or boosting their ego. Previous research on the ego-defensive function of loyalty has found that when messages about high-ego related issues (or products) threaten a consumer's ego, these messages will be discounted (Lapinski and Boster, 2001). Korgaonkar et al.

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the tri-dimensional perspective of brand loyalty, we adopt Härtel and Russell-Bennett, (2009, p. 2) definition of emotional loyalty as 'the psychological preference for buying a brand which consists of positive feelings about and affective attachment to continually purchasing a brand.'

<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the tri-dimensional perspective of brand loyalty, we adopt Härtel and Russell-Bennett, (2009, p. 2) definition of cognitive loyalty as 'the psychological preference for buying a brand which consists of positive beliefs and thoughts about continually purchasing a brand.'

<sup>3</sup> Behavioural brand loyalty is defined as 'the brand on which the purchaser spends a high proportion of their category expenditure (brand preference)' as presented by East et al. (2005).

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