Factors affecting college students' brand loyalty toward fast fashion: A consumer-based brand equity approach

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Abstract:

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to empirically investigate the factors affecting consumer's fast fashion brand loyalty by examining US college students' perceptions and loyalty toward fast fashion.

Design/methodology/approach

Using consumer-based brand equity approach, a research model which examines the factors affecting consumer's brand loyalty in the fast fashion context was proposed. It was hypothesized that consumer's perceptions of fast fashion, including brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, brand personality, organizational associations, and brand uniqueness, affect consumer brand loyalty. Based on the valid data from 419 US college students, this study employed structural equation modeling to investigate the factors affecting US college students' brand loyalty toward fast fashion.

Findings

Results reveal that for the US college students, brand awareness, perceived value, organizational associations, and brand uniqueness are the contributing factors to generating consumer's loyalty toward fast fashion brands.

Originality/value

Due to the fact that fast fashion has become a key feature of the global fashion industry over the last decade, there is phenomenal growth in the availability of fast fashion brands in the US markets. This study provides valuable insights about young consumers' perceptions of fast fashion brands and the factors' contributions to their brand loyalty.

Keywords: Fashion industry | Brand loyalty | Brand equity | Fast fashion | College students

Article:

Introduction

Brand equity is regarded as a very important concept in business practice as well as in academic research because marketers can gain competitive advantages through strong brands (Aaker, 1996a; Anselmsson et al., 2017; Çifci et al., 2016; Keller, 1993, 2008). Previous research has focused on understanding how to build, measure, and manage brand equity (Farquhar, 1989; Jara and Cliquet, 2012; Keller, 2008; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Sasmita and Suki, 2015; Tong and Hawley, 2009; Washburn and Plank, 2002). Developing further insights into brand equity and its consequence is important in the face of the prominence of branding due to the fact that almost every marketing activity works, successfully or unsuccessfully, to build, manage, and exploit brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2008; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). If consumers perceive a particular brand favorably, the consumers may have higher tendency to be loyal, which is demonstrated by the intention to buy the brand as a primary choice; and then, the firm may have a competitive advantage in the market. Hence, it becomes vital for managers to have a better understanding of the concept of brand equity and their impacts on consumer's brand loyalty for an enriched practice of brand management.

Fast fashion has experienced a decade of blistering growth and is fast becoming the way of the retail world as more and more brands move to the model and the concept has now been adopted in one form or another by virtually all the key players in the global fashion industry and market (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2010, 2013; Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Choi, 2014). Business idea behind fast fashion brand is always based on fashion, quality and the right price (Ilonen et al., 2011). Fast fashion is defined as a business model which provides the latest fashion trends along with agile response to consumer demand with reasonable prices (Choi, 2014; Jin et al., 2012). Fast fashion business model brought fresh air into the global textile and apparel industries and the fact that most fast fashion companies outperform non-fast fashion firms highlights the success and attractiveness of this approach. Apparel brands like H&M from Sweden and Zara (the flagship brand of the Spanish retail group Inditex) are classic example of fast fashion (Fernie et al., 2010), have established themselves as recognized global brands (Interbrand, 2017) and have grown to become the largest apparel companies in the world (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Jin et al., 2012).

Studies have suggested that the phenomenon of fast fashion would not have exploded as it did unless it were in response to an important change in consumers' lifestyles requiring the fashion industry to adapt rapidly to trends and to offer more products to choose from (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Gabrielli et al., 2013). Literature indicates the fast fashion consumer-driven approach is still an under-researched area, and the full spectrum of consumer behavior toward fast fashion is still unexplored (Gabrielli et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Watson and Yan, 2013). In particular, previous research has identified the need to conduct empirical study that addresses consumer behavior toward fast fashion (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Choi et al., 2010; Gabrielli et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013). The variety of approaches to fast fashion among consumers is still unclear, as is the extent to which these factors induce differences in behavior in approaching the phenomenon (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Now that the rapid expansion of fast fashion retailers in global consumer market has been remarkable for some years (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Joung, 2014; Moreno and Carrasco, 2016), it is an appropriate time to more closely examine fast fashion consumers' attitudes and behaviors. Fast fashion's target market is large population of mobile young people – the target for fashionable fast fashion clothes; and fast fashion exploits the segment of young consumers, offering of-the-moment design and the immediate gratification of continually evolving temporary identities (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005; Jin et al., 2012; Joung, 2014; Joy et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Watson and Yan, 2013). Fast fashion products are easily and quickly adopted by college students because they have limited financial resources and wearing trendy and socially visible fast fashion apparel plays an important role in socializing at this stage in the life cycle (Joung, 2014; Park and Sullivan, 2009). College students represent a huge and viable fashion market segment; however, very limited information is available about this group of consumers (Park and Sullivan, 2009). The research contributes to the study of young consumers' attitude and behavior toward fast fashion, especially from a college student's perspective.

As an attempt to bridge such research gap, this study aims to understand young consumers' brand loyalty toward fast fashion brands. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to empirically investigate the factors affecting college students' brand loyalty toward fast fashion product brands from a consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) perspective. The conceptualization and measurement of brand equity are diverse and inconclusive (Liu et al., 2017; Veloutsou et al., 2013). Despite diverging perspectives, the definition of brand equity and the dimensions of CBBE in the present study are unique to fast fashion product brands in a marketing communications context.

The paper is organized as follows. We first review the literature on brand equity conceptualizations and offer our rational for the research model and hypotheses. Then the methodology employed is explained followed by the analysis of empirical results. Finally, a discussion of the findings is presented and the managerial implications are drawn.

Literature review and research hypotheses

CBBE

There is no consensus on brand equity definition in literature (Veloutsou et al., 2013). Brand equity was defined as the "added value" with which a given brand endows a product (Farquhar, 1989). Brand equity from an individual consumer's perspective is referred to as CBBE and is reflected by the increase in attitude strength for a product using the brand (Farquhar, 1989). Researchers have argued in favor of a consumer-based measurement of brand equity. Since only if there is value for consumers, there is value to the business firm (e.g. manufacturer and retailer) (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). Keller (1993) viewed CBBE as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand." Keller's (1993) conceptualization focuses on brand knowledge and involves two components: brand awareness and brand image. By contrast, Aaker (1991) viewed CBBE as a set of assets (liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product/service to the customer. Previous literature agrees that the difference in consumer response may be attributed to the brand name and demonstrates the effects of the long-term marketing invested into the brand (Keller, 2008; Nam et al., 2011; Netemeyer et al., 2004).

CBBE dimensions

Besides the lack of consensus with regard to a definition of CBBE, there is little agreement in the literature on its constituent dimensions (Liu et al., 2017; Veloutsou et al., 2013). CBBE research is often about understanding concrete marketing actions or assets like the brand name and symbol, and how these relate to rational dimensions such as consumers' quality perceptions, symbolic dimensions like brand image, and outcomes such as purchase intentions and loyalty (Anselmsson et al., 2017). Within the mainstream academic literature on CBBE, Aaker (1991) provided the most generally accepted core CBBE dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Yoo and Donthu (2001) treated CBBE as a three-dimensional construct, combining brand awareness and brand associations into one dimension. Yoo and Donthu's (2001) CBBE scale was later validated by Washburn and Plank (2002). Netemeyer et al. (2004) suggested that brand equity should be measured by three core elements including perceived quality/perceived value, uniqueness, and willingness to pay a price premium. Recently, Pappu et al. (2005), Buil et al. (2008, 2013) provided empirical evidence of the multidimensionality of CBBE, supporting Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) conceptualization of brand equity. All these CBBE research studies focus on marketing, describing CBBE as the differential effect of consumers' knowledge of a specific brand on responses to marketing activities and programs of that brand.

The strategic importance of brand equity for retailers has been highlighted in retail management research (Anselmsson et al., 2017). Recently, there is an emerging view of the retail brand equity (Anselmsson et al., 2017; Çifci et al., 2016; Swoboda et al., 2016). Studies on retail brand equity maintain that retailer specific dimensions (e.g. physical store atmosphere, assortment, layout, customer service) should be reflected in retail brand equity and the image of the retailer held by consumers is the basis of retail brand equity (Anselmsson et al., 2017; Burt and Davies, 2010; Jara and Cliquet, 2012). However, literature also pointed out the fragmented nature of retailer brand equity research and the need for future research in this area. Considering the complexity in retail brand equity concept and the divergence in retailer brand equity research itself, in this study, we apply CBBE measures to fast fashion brands, not including fast fashion retail store attributes or service dimensions. We focus on fast fashion CBBE from marketing perspective and include CBBE dimensions which represent consumer perceptions and reactions to fast fashion product brands.

There is a growing recognition that branding should be explored from a holistic perspective (Burt and Davies, 2010). Considering the nature of the fast fashion industry and incorporating previous literature on CBBE, we conceptualize fast fashion brand equity and provide a description of the dimensions of fast fashion CBBE in the following sections.

Brand awareness

Brand knowledge consists of brand awareness and brand image. The extant literature shows that the effect of awareness occurs in building brand equity and serving as guidelines for a strategy formulation for enhancing customer mind-set brand equity. Brand awareness refers to “the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991, p. 61). This construct is related to the strength of a brand’s presence in consumers’ minds and is usually measured through brand recognition and recall under different circumstances (Aaker, 1996b; Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) conceptualized brand awareness as consisting of both brand recognition and brand recall. According to Keller, brand recognition is the basic and first step in brand communication; and brand recall refers to consumer’s ability to retrieve the brand from memory, for example, when the product category or the needs fulfilled by the category are mentioned. Keller (1993, p. 3) argued that “brand recognition may be more important to the extent that product decisions are made in the store.”

Perceived quality

Perceived quality is defined as “the consumer’s judgment about a product’s overall excellence or superiority” (Zeithaml, 1988). It is not the objective quality of the product but consumers’ subjective evaluations which depend on their perceptions (Buil et al., 2008; Zeithaml, 1988). Perceived quality is at a higher level of abstraction than any specific attribute, and differs from objective quality as perceived quality is more akin to an attitudinal assessment of a brand – a global affective assessment of a brand’s performance relative to other brands (Aaker, 1996b; Keller, 1993; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Zeithaml, 1988). Perceived quality is a primary dimension in brand equity models because it has a strategic effect on brand equity by reducing the perceived risk (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2008). There is a general consensus that perceived quality is among the fundamental constructs of brand equity. Information relevant to product quality can be obtained via promotion where the general quality of the brand is stressed or where quality is inferred from intrinsic or extrinsic brand attributes (Kirmani and Zeithaml, 1993; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Perceived quality may also be inferred via direct experience with a brand, and judgments from direct experience are stronger and are more easily “accessed” from memory (Netemeyer et al., 2004).

Brand associations

Both Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991, 1996b) stated that the core role of brand associations is to create meanings for consumers. Keller (1993) discussed this construct under brand image and classified these associations into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. According to Keller (1993), “customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is aware of the brand and holds some favourable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory” (p. 17). Aaker (1991) argued that a brand association has a level of strength, and that the link to a brand (from the association) will be stronger when it is based on many experiences or exposures to communications, and when a network of other links supports it. Further, Aaker (1991) suggested that brand associations could provide value to consumers by providing a reason for consumers to buy the brand, and by creating positive attitudes/feelings among consumers. Together, both of these researchers focused on measuring brand equity in terms of consumer perceptions of the brand, and emphasized the importance of consumer knowledge and brand associations as fundamental building blocks of brand image (Till et al., 2011).

While a brand may derive associations from a range of sources, perceived value, brand personality and organizational associations are the three most important types of brand associations, which influence the brand's equity (Aaker, 1996b; Buil et al., 2008; Pappu et al., 2005). Perceived value is defined as the customer's overall assessment of the utility of the brand based on perceptions of what is received (e.g. quality, satisfaction) and what is given (e.g. price and nonmonetary costs) relative to other brands (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Perceived value involves the trade-off of "what I get" (i.e. functional and emotional benefits) for "what I give" (i.e. time, money, and effort) (Kirmani and Zeithaml, 1993; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Brand personality is defined in terms of the various traits or characteristics that brands can assume from the perception of consumers (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). In this study brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997). Another dimension of brand associations is the brand-as-organization perspective, which considers the organization that lie behind the brand (Aaker, 1996b). Organizational associations that are often important bases of differentiation and choice include having a concern for customers, being innovative, striving for high quality, being successful, having visibility, being oriented toward the community, and being a global player (Aaker, 1996b; Burt and Davies, 2010). In the present study, we adopt previous literature on brand association, and include perceived value, brand personality, and organizational associations as the three important dimensions of fast fashion brand equity.

Brand uniqueness

Uniqueness is defined as the degree to which customers feel the brand is different from competing brands – how distinct it is relative to competitors (Netemeyer et al., 2004). If the brand is not perceived as unique from competitors, it will have a difficult time in attracting consumers' attention and creating consumer preferences and commitment. As such, brand uniqueness is considered a core CBBE facet (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Choice theory offers an explanation as to the effectiveness of uniqueness as a core CBBE facet (Netemeyer et al., 2004). When faced with a choice among brands, features common to alternative brands may cancel each other out because they offer little diagnostic information toward preference. In contrast, unique features do offer diagnostic information by differentiating the brand from other brands. Fast fashion consumption is driven by the desire for newness which is related to creative choice counter-conformity (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2010; Shen et al., 2014). Tokatli (2008) and Shen et al. (2014) maintained that the need for newness and uniqueness of fast fashion drives the current seminal change in the culture of global fashion industry. Tokatli (2008) reported that the increased variety and fashionability associated with fast fashion enhances fashion firm's competitive advantage.

Consumer brand loyalty

The focus of business activities is no longer solely on competing for new customers, but also on securing the loyalty of existing ones. The underlying view behind this is that the costs of attracting new customers are several times higher than those of securing the loyalty of a company's existing clientele (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Previous studies reported that the net present value increase in profit that results from a 5 percent increase in customer retention varies between 25 and 95 percent (Oliver, 1999). Organizations can increase their market share with the help of their loyal customers because those customers frequently purchase their brands and resist situational factors and competitors' marketing efforts (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

There are two different aspects of brand loyalty – behavioral and attitudinal. Behavioral, or purchase, loyalty consists of repeated purchases of the brand, whereas attitudinal loyalty refers to the psychological commitment that a consumer makes in the purchase act, such as intentions to purchase and intentions to recommend without necessarily taking the actual repeat purchase behavior into account (Nam et al., 2011). Aaker (1991) defined brand loyalty as: "the attachment that a customer has to a brand." Oliver (1999) defined brand loyalty as: "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having potential to cause switching behaviour." Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) argued that "attitudinal brand loyalty includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand." From an attitudinal perspective, Yoo and Donthu (2001) maintained that brand loyalty was "the tendency to be loyal to a focal brand, which is demonstrated by the intention to buy the brand as a primary choice." Previous studies suggested that brand loyalty is more prominent under conditions of more positive emotional mood and affect, therefore brands that make consumers "happy" or "joyful" or "affectionate" elicit more purchase and attitudinal loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Park and Sullivan, 2009). In the present study, we conceptualize brand loyalty based on an attitudinal perspective and consumer perceptions.

Some scholars mentioned that brand loyalty could be excluded from the conceptualization of brand equity and is one of the consequences of brand equity (Brady et al., 2008; Chen, 2001; Nam et al., 2011); while others maintained that brand loyalty is a major component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Buil et al., 2008; Pappu et al., 2005; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Recent studies argued that brand loyalty is an outcome of brand equity and confirmed that other brand equity dimensions influence brand loyalty (Buil et al., 2013; Çifci et al., 2016). Thus, in this study, we argue that it is appropriate to view brand loyalty as the consequence of other brand equity dimensions. We turn to existing literature to substantiate our argument.

Development of research hypotheses

Based on the CBBE perspective, this study examines the effects of brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, brand personality, organizational associations, and brand uniqueness on brand loyalty.

Effect of brand awareness on consumer brand loyalty

In today's competitive business environment, the first step for marketers is to concentrate on brand management and niche strategies to improve brand awareness by strengthening consumer-brand/product connection. When consumers are uncertain about product attributes, brands can be used to inform them about product positions and to ensure them that product claims are credible. The reduced uncertainty can lower information costs and perceived risk by consumers but increase consumers' expected utility (Wang et al., 2008). Globally, the phenomenal growth in the availability of various media (internet, TV, cell phone, music video, and magazine) and their coverage of fashion has contributed to the increase in global fashion consciousness among young consumers (Sasmita and Suki, 2015). Brand awareness impacts consumer's perception of the fast fashion products and their preferences, attachment and brand loyalty toward a fast fashion brand. Therefore, this research proposes the following hypothesis to examine the effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty:

Hypotheses

H1. Brand awareness has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.

Effect of perceived quality on consumer brand loyalty

Consumer views perceived quality as the customer's judgment of the overall excellence, esteem, or superiority of a brand (with respect to its intended purposes) relative to alternative brand(s). There is a general agreement in literature that perceived quality creates a basis for brand differentiation and extension (Pappu et al., 2005) and offers a price premium advantage for firms (Keller, 1993; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Perceived quality provides consumers with a reason to buy, so it influences consumer preference and purchase intention; therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

Hypotheses

H2. Perceived quality has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.

Effect of perceived value, brand personality, and organizational associations on consumer brand loyalty

Perceived value, brand personality and organizational associations are three core assets for building strong associations between consumers and a brand. Brand associations represent the basis for purchase decisions and for brand loyalty (Chen, 2001). The stronger brand associations are in a product, the more the product will be remembered by consumers (Sasmita and Suki, 2015). Perceived value is at a higher level of abstraction than any attribute or benefit of a brand. Consumer's perceived value involves consumer's overall assessment of the brand functional, experiential, or symbolic attributes and benefits in relation to the cost and effort made by the consumer (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Previous research maintained that brand personality affects how consumers feel about the brand, which can impact the level of brand loyalty (Sung and Kim, 2010). Brand personality, especially a distinctive, powerful, and favorable one, is beneficial for both marketers and consumers and can create a bond between them (Sung and Kim, 2010), which will lead to consumer brand loyalty. Organizational associations refer to those beliefs held by consumers that the company which markets the brand is honest, trustworthy, and cares about its customers (Netemeyer et al., 2004). What consumers know about a company can influence their beliefs and attitudes toward their products/brands, which will in turn impact consumer commitment and purchasing behavior (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Chen, 2001). Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are formulated to examine the effects of fast fashion's perceived value, brand personality, organizational associations on brand loyalty:

Hypotheses

H3. Perceived value has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.*H4.* Brand personality has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.

H5.
Organizational associations have a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.

Effect of brand uniqueness on consumer brand loyalty

Given that consumers tend to be more likely influenced by distinctive features, the unique features offer a simplifying "heuristic" for choosing among alternatives (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Keller (2010) states that consumers' brand perceptions are driven by their knowledge and the need for uniqueness toward brand, which are derived from personal experience. Fast fashion retailers such as Zara, Mango, and H&M offer unique capabilities with strong brand asset (Park and Sternquist, 2008). Unique fast fashion apparel satisfies consumers' need for uniqueness, which is defined as the trait of pursuing differences relative to others so that it can develop and enhance one's self-image as well as social image (Shen et al., 2014). Fast fashion brands have been increasing its share in the fashion market and have become more capable of gaining loyal consumers. Consumers seek unique latest fast fashion products due to the fact that they provide the trendiest items and create uniqueness in the fashion market by producing scarcity with small quantities (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Shen et al., 2014). Regardless of how it is formed, if a brand is considered unique, it can increase consumers' brand consciousness and purchase intention and can command a price premium in the marketplace. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated to examine the relationship between consumer perception of fast fashion brand uniqueness and consumer brand loyalty:

Hypotheses

H6. Brand uniqueness has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty.

Research model and hypotheses

In order to understand the nature of the relationships between the various dimensions of fast fashion CBBE and consumer brand loyalty, we followed previous researchers' suggestions. In the present study, we included both brand awareness and the three kinds of brand associations that are widely recognized in the literature: perceived value, brand personality, and organizational associations. Perceived quality, which is generally agreed as a core facet of CBBE, is included in the fast fashion brand equity. In addition, brand uniqueness is also included in the fast fashion brand equity due to the fact that unique aspects of a brand affected both preferences and the brand purchase intention (Netemeyer et al., 2004; Shen et al., 2014).

Figure 1 shows the research conceptual model proposed in this study. We propose that fast fashion CBBE, including six dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, brand personality, organizational associations, and brand uniqueness all contribute to consumer brand loyalty. Therefore, the research model encompasses the six hypotheses that are stated above.

Research methodology

A survey instrument in the form of a structured questionnaire in English was designed based on a review of pertinent literature, interviews, discussions and our own judgment. The instrument incorporates seven constructs: brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, brand personality, organizational associations, brand uniqueness, and brand loyalty.

Measures of fast fashion brand personality scale

Brand personality construct is measured by personality components of fast fashion brands. This research aims to identify the personalities that are specifically associated with fast fashion brands from the customer's perspective. Motivated by recent studies that argue for creating an appropriate scale and specific personality traits in particular sectors (Valette-Florence and De Barnier, 2013), we seek to define brand personality measurement scale adapted to fast fashion brands.

Guided by Aaker's (1997) brand personality study, our selection and identification of fast fashion brand personality attributes follows the following process. In the first step, we conducted interviews with 46 college students to describe their experiences with fast fashion and elicit the attributes and traits consumers associate with their preferred fast fashion brands. In this free-association task, participants were asked to write down the personality attributes that first came to mind when thinking about fast fashion brands. A total of 215 unique traits were generated in this process. In the second step, we incorporated the Aaker's (1997) 42 original personality traits into our inventory, because those attributes were compiled and developed from diverse sources. In the third step, from the set of personality attributes gathered in the previous two steps, attributes that are redundant, ambiguous, or irrelevant to the construct were eliminated, resulting in a final set of 58 traits for examining fast fashion brand personality. We used a principal component analysis with varimax rotation to determine what underlying brand personality structure exists for the data.

Measures of brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, organizational associations, brand uniqueness and consumer brand loyalty

The items tapping the constructs of brand awareness, perceived quality, perceived value, organizational associations, brand uniqueness and consumer brand loyalty were developed based on an extensive review of the scholarly literature to establish the content validity of each construct. Specifically, three items measuring brand awareness were obtained from Buil et al. (2008), Yoo and Donthu (2001), and Tong and Hawley (2009); three items measuring perceived quality were obtained from Buil et al. (2008), Yoo and Donthu (2001), and Netemeyer et al. (2004); while three measures of perceived value were from Netemeyer et al. (2004) and Aaker (1996b). Three measures of organizational associations were obtained from Buil et al. (2008) and Aaker (1996b). Three measure of brand uniqueness were from Netemeyer et al. (2004). Finally, three measures for consumer brand loyalty were adopted from Buil et al. (2008) and Yoo and Donthu (2001). These measures were empirically tested and used by previous researchers. The items are measured using a five-point Likert-type scale.

Data collection

Fast fashion's target market is large population of young people (Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005; Joung, 2014; Joy et al., 2012; Watson and Yan, 2013). The primary objective guiding the sample selection for this study involved finding a homogeneous group of consumers who regularly shop in the fast fashion retailers. In this study, we used convenience sampling – a sample of college students, which includes individuals whose demographic profiles are not distant from the target market. Prior to the actual survey, a pretest of the questionnaire was conducted among 45 undergraduates at a large university in the northeastern USA to enable the refinement of the measurement scales and the checking for any ambiguous or loaded questions. The final questionnaire was administered to students enrolled at the university. The brands included in the survey are six top fast fashion brands that are very well-known among global young consumers, including Zara, H&M, Mango, Topshop, Forever 21, and Uniqlo. The selection of these brands was based on the literature (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Divita and Yoo, 2014; Watson and Yan, 2013), and our discussion with students during the process of survey development. Respondents were first asked to select one fast fashion brand they were most familiar with; then the participants were asked to evaluate the survey items using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

A total of 468 surveys were returned and 419 responses were found usable for this study. Ninety-seven percent of the responses were in the 18-25 year age range. In all, 89 percent of the sample were female. The most prevalent ethnic group was Caucasian (72.6 percent), followed by African-American (11.5 percent), Asian (7.4 percent), and Hispanic (5.0 percent).

Analysis and results

We first analyzed the fast fashion brand personality scale, and then used the components of brand personality as the measures for brand personality construct in the testing of the research conceptual model. The two-step structural equation modeling approach was used. First, the measurement model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis to demonstrate adequate model fit and to ensure a satisfactory level of measure reliability and validity for the underlying variables and their respective factors in the model. Second, the structural model was tested to examine the research hypotheses. Analysis based on the maximum likelihood estimation method was carried out using LISREL 9.1.

Fast fashion brand personality

We used a principal component analysis with varimax rotation to determine what underlying brand personality structure exists for the data. The analysis solution was determined by using the following criteria: eigenvalue (>1), variance explained by each component, scree plot, loading score for each factor (⩾0.40), elimination of cross-loading higher than 0.40, and meaningfulness and interpretability of each dimension.

As a result, four components were extracted (Excitement, Attractiveness, Up-to-dateness, and Sophistication), which explain approximately 59.6 percent of the total variance. Moreover, the analysis of reliability of each component was satisfactory (Cronbach's α of 0.900, 0.842, 0.825, and 0.812 for excitement, attractiveness, up-to-dateness, and sophistication, respectively). For each component, traits with the highest item-to-total correlations were also identified. The figure below (Figure 2) represents the fast fashion brand personality framework. In the following analysis, the brand personality construct is operationalized by including its four components as the measures of brand personality. A composite score for each brand personality component was determined by calculating the average of respondent's ratings for the three traits with the highest item-to-total correlations (Aaker, 1997; Hair et al., 2010). The four components with their corresponding composite sores were used as the four measures of brand personality construct in the following analysis of the measurement model and the structural model.

The measurement model

Evaluation of the measurement model was conducted using confirmatory factor analysis to examine the relationships between the indicator variables and their respective underlying factors. Multiple fit indexes were used to examine the model fit: Chi-square/df <3; the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), non-normed fit index (NNFI), comparative fit index (CFI), etc. The fit indexes in Table I show that a satisfactory fit is achieved for the measurement model: the χ^2/(df)=1.91, less than 3.00; RMSEA=0.047; GFI=0.94; NNFI=0.99; CFI=0.99. Table I also reports a summary of the factor loadings (standardized), *t*-values, and reliability and validity analyses in the measurement model. As shown in Table I, all the path parameter estimates are statistically significant with $p<0.01$; all the composite reliability coefficients vary from 0.65 to 0.90 and are above the acceptable guideline 0.60 which DeVellis (2003) suggested, indicating reasonably strong support for the construct reliability. The AVEs (average variance extracted) are greater than the criteria of 0.50, suggesting adequate convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was established by the fact that none of the confidence intervals of two standard errors around the correlation for each respective pair of factors include 1.0. The results from evaluation of the measurement model indicate that the measurement model is adequate for testing the proposed structural model.

The structural model

The results from evaluation of the structural model are shown in Figure 1. The structural equation model supports the relationships stated in the H1 (brand awareness – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient=0.37, t=6.73, $p<0.01$), H3 (perceived value – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient=0.30, t=5.46, $p<0.01$), H5 (organizational associations – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient=0.22, t=3.48, $p<0.01$), and H6 (brand uniqueness – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient=0.18, t=4.20, $p<0.01$), demonstrating that brand awareness, perceived value, organizational associations, and brand uniqueness positively and strongly affect the consumer brand loyalty. However, significant support is not found for the H2 (perceived quality – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient =0.06, t=1.45, non-significant at the 0.05 level), nor for the H4 (brand personality – brand loyalty, standardized path coefficient=−0.03, t=−0.56, non-significant at the 0.05 level).

Discussion

Effects of brand awareness, perceived value, organizational associations and brand uniqueness on consumer brand loyalty

The confirmation of the hypotheses H1 (brand awareness – brand loyalty), H3 (perceived value – brand loyalty), H5 (organizational associations – brand loyalty) and H6 (brand uniqueness – brand loyalty) shows that brand awareness, perceived value, organizational associations and brand uniqueness positively and strongly affect consumer brand loyalty. This means that, consistent with previous studies, strong associations that support a competitively attractive and distinct brand position could create favorable feelings and behaviors toward a brand and lead to consumer brand loyalty. Enhanced brand recognition and brand recall will positively influence consumer-brand relationships and can affect consumer loyalty toward a brand. For Zara, the number of the stores in Americas in 2014 is 614, compared with 548 in 2013, and 252 in 2006 (Inditex, 2015). For H&M, the number of the stores in the USA in 2014 is 356, including the net addition of 51 new stores (H&M, 2015). With the rapid growth in fast fashion retailers in the USA and the increased availability of fast fashion brands in today's multichannel, multimedia retail marketing environment, US young consumers are familiar with fast fashion brands and their enhanced awareness positively impacts their purchasing behavior.

When consumers perceive a brand having a good value to them, they are more likely to keep purchasing the brand. The trendy items allow them to update their wardrobe more regularly than before. In a nutshell, fast fashion offers affordable pricing and acceptable quality. It may not be premium quality, but it is a trendy piece and very affordable. For college students, considering what they get (functional, emotional, and symbolic benefits) and what they give (time, money, and effort in purchasing), fast fashion apparel provides them the best value. Updated looks, greater variety, and limited editions, along with the speed of their availability and affordable price, make this industry very attractive to many young consumers (Joy et al., 2012). The choice of fast fashion item is more than satisfactory, so the perceived value of fast fashion contributes to college students' loyalty toward fast fashion brands.

Brand uniqueness offers diagnostic information by differentiating the brand from other brands, provides a simplifying "heuristic" that positively affects consumer brand preference and their willingness to pay a higher price for a brand (Netemeyer et al., 2004). College students are very fashion conscious; thus they fervidly follow trends and are perennially in pursuit of specific pieces that are both unique and stylish. Therefore, fast fashion, which is the low-cost clothing collections based on current, high-cost luxury fashion trends, is perceived trendy and unique and socially visible, and therefore attracts more and more college students.

This study shows organization associations significantly impact brand loyalty. Organizational associations are a brand-as-organization perspective, which considers the organization that lies behind the brand (Aaker, 1996b). Consumers' liking and trust toward the organization that makes a brand can also provide value to consumers, enhance positive feelings and attitudes, and provide reasons for them to buy the brand. With the phenomenal growth in media, internet and magazine coverage of trends and fast fashion businesses, with the collaboration between celebrities and fast fashion brands, and with the increasing availability of fast fashion products in different retail channels, young consumers are aware of fast fashion organizations and their associations with fast fashion organizations may contribute to their purchasing of the fast fashion products.

Effect of perceived quality on consumer brand loyalty

It turns out that the relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty is not strongly supported by the data (significant support is not found for the hypothesis H2). For the US young consumers, perceived quality affects brand loyalty to some extent but the impact is not that strong at the 0.05 level. This result is in line with the study results of Tong and Hawley (2009) and Buil, de Chernatony and Martínez (2013), indicating that having high quality alone is not a guarantee of a successful brand. This is particularly true for fast fashion business, since perceived quality is not an influential factor in young consumer's purchase decision because college students are more interested in fashionable styles and price than the quality.

Effect of brand personality on consumer brand loyalty

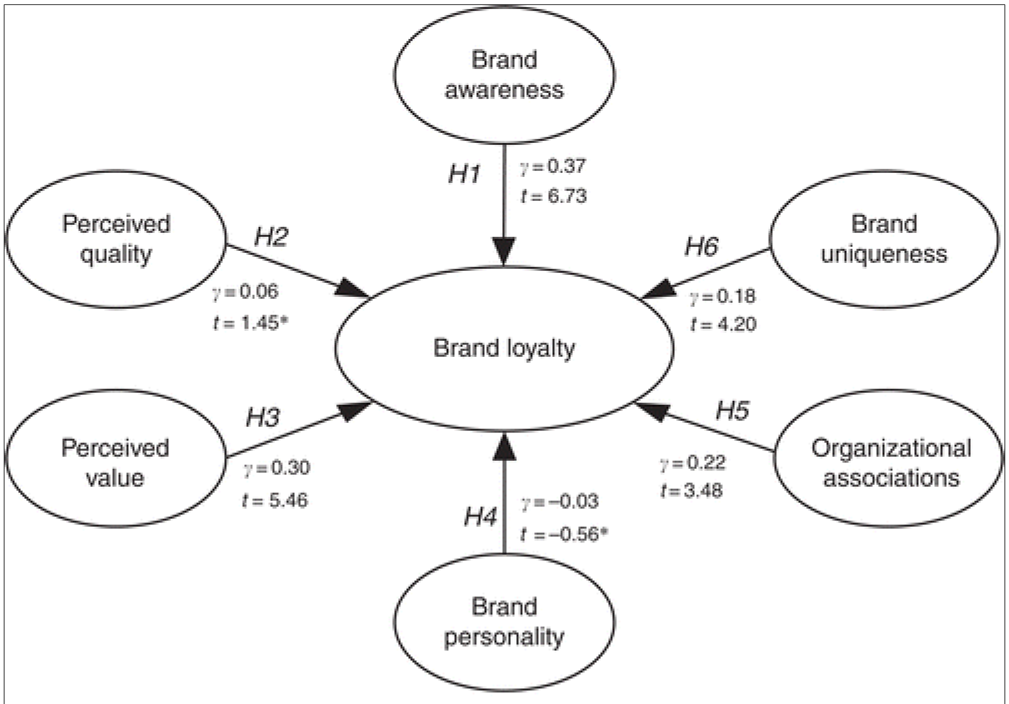
The surprising but interesting result of the effect of brand personality on brand loyalty, as shown by the non-significant relationship stated in H4, indicates that fast fashion brand personality identified in this study does not significantly affect consumer brand loyalty. Fast fashion's exciting, attractive and fashionable personality may not contribute to brand loyalty of US young consumers. One possible reason may be related to the fierce competition in the fashion industry. All types of fashion companies are trying to adopt fast response system to pick up the latest designer trends, to interpret and translate them to their stores at affordable pricing, and to attract consumers' attention. The impact of fast fashion's brand personality may not be strong enough to have a positive and significant effect on young consumer brand loyalty. Another explanation may be due to the fact that consumers in the USA are more diverse and the culture in the USA is more individualistic nature. In the USA, people tend to emphasize emotional independence and individual needs. The Western cultures' self-view gives rise to an emphasis on the expression of one's unique configuration of needs, rights, and capacities. The fast fashion brand personality alone may not be able to build brand loyalty. Moreover, another possible explanation could be that brand personality might affect consumer brand loyalty through influencing other variables, such as brand satisfaction (Brakus et al., 2009), brand affect (Sung and Kim, 2010) and brand trust (Sung and Kim, 2010; Tong et al., 2017, Advance online publication), and customer satisfaction (Su and Tong, 2016).

Conclusions

Inspired by Burt and Davies (2010)'s work which justified a holistic approach to retail branding, in this study, we examined the relationships between young consumers' attitudes toward fast fashion brands and their brand loyalty using a CBBE approach. The successful global fast fashion retailers have developed a strategic proposition not only with unique concepts and brand power but also unique capabilities to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Park and Sternquist, 2008). Fast fashion was able to create an extremely powerful brand based on its business model of fashion and quality at the best possible price (Ilonen et al., 2011). Findings from the study show that different brand equity dimensions contribute to consumer brand loyalty in different ways. More specifically, this study shows that for the US college students, not all brand equity dimensions have the same influence in generating consumer loyalty toward a brand. Brand awareness, perceived value, brand uniqueness, and organizational associations are the contributing dimensions of brand equity to building consumer brand loyalty. The results obtained in this research point out the interesting implications for managers. Some brand equity dimensions are more efficient than others; therefore, it is important that managers understand the differences of the effects of brand equity dimensions and implement appropriate retail marketing mix strategies accordingly. Since brand managers and marketing practitioners often have limited resources to implement marketing/branding strategies, these findings can help them prioritize and allocate their resources across the dimensions accordingly. Fast fashion marketing and branding managers should consider the relative importance of different brand equity dimensions and should concentrate their effort on building brand loyalty and enhancing the consumer perceptions that lead to consumer loyalty.

This present study has several limitations to be addressed. First, the study was conducted in the USA and was limited to the fast fashion brands. Future research needs to be done to examine the effects of brand equity dimensions on brand loyalty from international consumers and for other products and services. Second, this study examined one specific consumer demographic group – college students, who are from relatively narrow age and socio-economic ranges. We used college students under the assumption that the college student population is a relatively homogeneous segment with similar social-economic status, thus all college students have the same budget constraint. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalizable to other age and socio-economic ranges. We also need to realize that college students are not necessarily representative of young consumers. Future study is needed for investigating the general young consumers or even including consumers from other age groups. Third, the study was carried out on a convenience sample of college students, we should be aware of the limitation of using convenience sample and a relatively biased ratio of genders among the respondents.

Fast fashion, with the onus on consumer-driven trends, is the ultimate marketing concept (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006, 2010). Future study could explore the development and application of traditional branding theory to retailer branding, specifically including store image dimensions. Exploring corporate branding in retailing could be another future research direction. Focusing on the very nature of retailing, presenting consumers with a combination of products, services and experiences, arising from business processes, interactions and relationships with a myriad of channel and associated stakeholders (Burt and Davies, 2010, p. 872), we suggest that future work could include other approaches such as fast fashion case study to embed corporate branding perspective in retailing. In addition, future studies could investigate retail brand equity by including retail store physical environment and service quality dimensions in the luxury fashion retail context. Retail brand equity concept will be very applicable in luxury fashion retail branding (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Jara and Cliquet, 2012).



Notes: The path coefficients in the figure are standardized parameter estimates. *indicates the *t*-value for the standardized path coefficient is not statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Figure 1. Research model and hypotheses

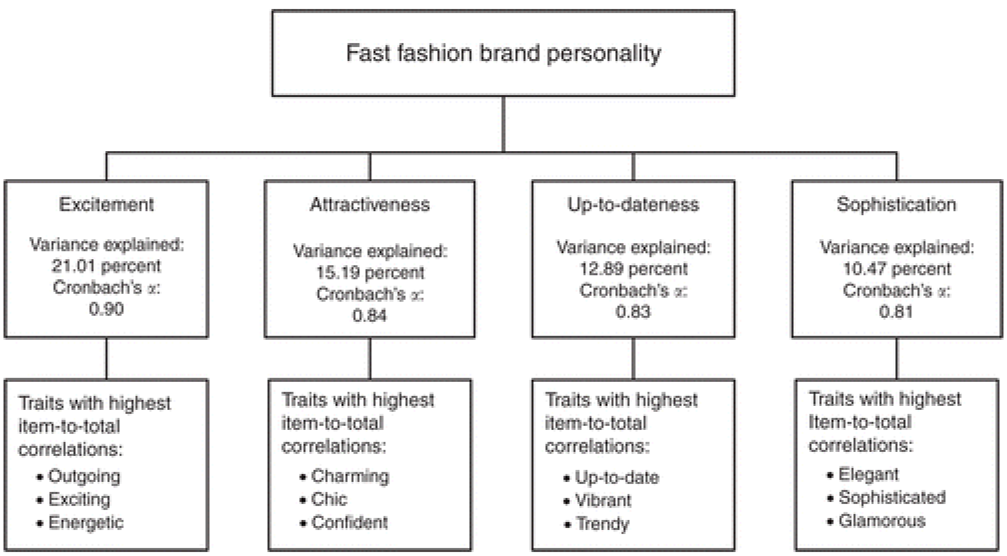


Figure 2. Structure of fast fashion brand personality

Table 1. Measurement model results

Indicator variables and their underlying factors	Standardized factor loading	*t*-value	Composite reliability	AVE

Brand awareness (BA) (Cronbach's α=0.82)			0.84	0.63
BA1 – I am aware of X	0.67	14.88		
BA2 – When I think of fast fashion, X is one of the brands that comes to mind	0.82	19.34		
BA3 – X is a brand of fast fashion I am very familiar with	0.88	21.60		
Perceived quality (PQ) (Cronbach's α=0.89)			0.89	0.74
PQ1 – X offers very good quality products	0.88	21.87		
PQ2 – X offers products of consistent quality	0.82	19.79		
PQ3 – X offers very reliable products.	0.87	21.60		
Perceived value (PV) (Cronbach's α=0.88)			0.88	0.72
PV1 – X is good value for money	0.82	19.71		
PV2 – All things considered (price, time, and effort), X is a good buy	0.86	21.14		
PV3 – Considering what I pay for X, I feel I get my money's worth	0.86	21.30		
Brand personality (BP) (Cronbach's α=0.80)			0.72	0.57
BP1 – excitement	0.70	15.39		
BP2 – attractiveness	0.80	18.45		
BP3 – up-to-dateness	0.74	16.50		
BP4 – sophistication	0.63	13.47		
Organization associations (OA) (Cronbach's α=0.90)			0.90	0.75
OA1 – I trust the company which makes brand X	0.88	22.21		
OA2 – I like the company which makes brand X	0.90	23.33		
OA3 – The company which makes brand X has credibility	0.82	20.15		

Brand uniqueness (BU) (Cronbach's α=0.88)			0.89	0.72
BU1 – X is distinct from other brands	0.88	21.77		
BU2 – X really stands out from other brands	0.90	22.71		
BU3 – X is unique from other brands	0.76	17.81		
Brand loyalty (BL) (Cronbach's α=0.88)			0.89	0.72
BL1 – I consider myself to be loyal to X	0.88	22.33		
BL2 – X would be my first choice when considering fast fashion	0.88	21.18		
BL3 – I intend to keep purchasing X	0.81	19.61		
Fit Indices	Value	Recommended value		
χ^2/df	2.06	$\leqslant$3.0		
Root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.05	$\leqslant$0.10		
Normed fit index (NFI)	0.98	$\geqslant$0.90		
Nonnormed fit index (NNFI)	0.99	$\geqslant$0.90		
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.99	$\geqslant$0.90		
Goodness of fit index (GFI)	0.92	$\geqslant$0.90		

Notes: *N*=419. X means the specific fast fashion brand; AVE=average variance extracted; all *t*-values are statistically significant at $p<0.01$

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