

# The Psychology and Physiology of Brand Loyalty; an emerging perspective

The challenge for brand managers today is not just to create loyalty but to also sustain loyalty in a digital world...

By [S Ramesh Kumar](#)

[Brand loyalty](#) is the ultimate dream of marketers. Is brand switching, a habit of consumers? The challenge for brand managers today is not just to create loyalty but to also sustain loyalty in a digital world that is replete with a variety of consumer dialog, mind shattering discounts and constant chatter on social media. Towards an understanding of brand loyalty in today's context, it is essential to understand the physiology based psychological process, that is associated with brand loyalty.

While it is easy to term brand loyalty as a repeat purchase, behavioral literature offers several explanations (there are articles that question the very concept of brand loyalty). In simple terms brand loyalty is born out of the commitment of the consumer and that results in repeat purchases. In the recent times, there are studies in the consumer behavior literature, that indicate that brand loyalty is habitual and the mind's automaticity takes over the repeat function. Automaticity ensures that the consumer is able to decide without processing information and decisions are based more on spontaneity than thought out thinking. The commitment to the brand, therefore, may be more at a subconscious level than at a conscious level. Hence the commitment in brand loyalty with respect to a consumer can range from conscious commitment to automaticity based commitment. In fact what the literature on consumer behavior termed a kind of loyalty as "inertia loyalty", that happens due to lack of involvement of the consumer, suggesting that brand loyalty can involve a continuum from no involvement to the highest involvement reflected by the consumer.

How many times have we changed the detergent brand, over the past two decades? Is it because of availability of well- known brands or do we like a brand due to the associations or is it due to habit to such an extent that we do not search for new information? How is Marie biscuit associated with tea- time? Even before Marie biscuits started the advertising associations with tea- time, consumers were having biscuits with tea. Does the occasion have an impact on brand loyalty? Mothers in India have long been using detergent powders to remove stains and the very context of dirty clothes of children may have triggered a brand that they had become associated over a period of time: the advertising of a brand associating a smart kid (to the delight of mothers who may identify their kids with the one in the ad) who gets dirty just reinforces, the familiarity of the context that had been associated with the brand over a period of time.

**It is the Physiology and Psychology that makes or breaks Brand loyalty**

Research often quoted on neuromarketing, explains how brain scans that involved Coke and [Pepsi](#), with pre-frontal cortex associated with pleasure, self and decision making (unknown to the consumer) may play a significant role in the loyalty of millions who adore Coke. Dopamine, an enzyme associated with pleasure, also influences our sensory pleasure. And these mechanisms, may act, even without a consumer being conscious about it, during sensual consumption of brands!

Automaticity (explained in consumer behavior literature) that drives context based habitual behavior may be effective as it has a physiological origin. While the mind and the habit adapt, to familiarity (due the built-in mechanism of automaticity) the mind is also attracted to new behaviors and novel sensory inputs in a specific context. This is reason why brand loyalty is difficult to sustain. Neale Martin in his book “Habit” and Norman in his book “Emotional Design” provide insightful information to understand the interaction of psychology and physiology in terms of creating brand loyalty. Norman speaks of three layers of interaction with the incoming information/sensory inputs- visceral state, reflexive state and reflective state. The visceral state is almost involuntary and fast with no processing, the reflexive state is the habitual state of recalling the learning and the reflective state is the conscious state of thinking but the one that does not directly influence behavior.

Duke researchers report that 45% of the time, we do the same thing at the same time thinking about something else! The cerebellum, an important part associated with the mind is associated with habits. The reflective state may influence the mind of a married lady to use the detergent brand used by her mother for several years due to the nostalgia involved. Of course as the environment changes over time , new lifestyles/technology set in and consumers may adapt new behaviors (iPod sold millions of downloads of songs displacing CDs and other musical delivery systems).

### **Implications to Marketers**

- Is price the basic weapon to break the loyalty – the success of online retailers like Amazon and [Flipkart](#) with its Big Billion Days or private labels offered in modern retail outlets may provide an impression that the price may make consumers think about breaking loyalty. The target segment matters, as thrifty consumers may form a significant proportion in most categories. Also all brands do not have the business model of large online retailers who may always have a strong acquisition base. And it may become worthwhile for online shops to specialize in special needs of consumers (there are several, for traditional delicacies) . Private label apparel online shops may open up specialized personalization.

- Does consistent “feel” of the brand (includes the brand proposition too) promote automaticity?

Lifebuoy, Santoor, Lux and Surf with consistent brand propositions have been able to sustain themselves for a long period of time. Apple (ipod, ipad and [iPhone](#)) with its user friendly interface (besides the symbolic appeal) has been able to sustain its success. It is interesting to note that Blackberry that popularized the “mail on the move” had not posed a challenge to several other follower brands. This does not mean that brand extension by itself would be sufficient to garner loyalty but a consistent feel of the brand is important. Brand revitalization and reinforcement that is required in a changing environment is important in striking a balance between adapting to the environment and projecting the consistent feel.

- Wherever appropriate making the brand a part of the context can nurture loyalty ([Red Bull](#) became a part of the partying context and history was created).

Emerging interdisciplinary fields are likely to synergize with the historical knowledge on consumer behavior: that must herald new vistas, in the world of branding.

*The author is a professor of marketing at IIM-Bangalore. Views expressed are personal.*