

Mediating Role Of Brand Preference On The Relationships Between Brand Cues And Brand Loyalty In Electronic Products

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the mediating role of brand preference in explaining the relationships between brand cues such as brand name, country of origin and brand communication with brand loyalty in the context of electronic brands in the emerging markets. This paper strives to improve a model that extends the understanding of how brand cues identify consumers' preference towards brand loyalty. Accordingly, the study conducted a survey through quota sampling technique on laptop users in Saudi Arabia. A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed. The study provides insights into the multi dimension of brand cues in developing brand preference which would affect consumer brand loyalty. Also, the results confirm the significant effect of brand preference as mediator on the relationship between brand cues and brand loyalty. Hence, the study model contributes a new perspective for building reputable brands by obtaining consumers preference towards brand to increase brand loyalty. In addition, this study distinguishes the mediating role of brand preference in different contexts and offers evidence for marketing success.

Index Terms: Brand Loyalty, Brand Preference, Brand Name, Brand Communication, Country of Origin (COO), Mediating Role

1. INTRODUCTION

Brand preference has been a topic of interest to many social scientists and business practitioners during the last decade especially, consumer preference towards certain brand of technological products. This means brand preference can mirror cognitive judgement and positive emotional feeling, which may be stored in the consumers' memory [1]. McFadden (1996) argued that preference serves to be the comparative assessment of consumers among alternatives in the decision making [2]. There have been many studies in consumer behaviour literature [3] ; [4], stating that brand preference is the main determinant of buying decisions and the key influences on consumers' brand selection and purchase. So, previous studies have confirmed that brand preference stands as an antecedent of brand loyalty and the relative preference for choosing and utilizing a specific brand [5]. Therefore, this study helps improve the insights on brand preference. In brand management literature, brand preference may also be regarded as an attitude that affects buyers' decisions, which in turn perform a behavioural tendency towards a particular brand choice [6] ; [7]. Moslehpour & Huyen stated that buyers have a willingness to choose their preferable brand without hesitation if the brand is widely well-known [8], but some consumers have very little information to assess complicated products such as technology products in the developing countries context [9]. Cue Utilization Theory (CUT) and prior research have mentioned that extrinsic brand cues may remedy this significant issue of a lack of information [10]. Consumers are

often employing multi dimension of cues as criteria to select their goods or services, which are indicators for perceived brand quality such as brand name, quality, country of origin, promotion and other criteria of product attributes [11]. Brand cues can influence consumers' perception pattern of brand assessments and behavioural intention [12]. In this regard, brand preference can be an important factor in understanding buyer behaviour and determining brand loyalty [13]. Despite consumers from developing countries preferring a brand from developed countries [14], there are lack of research that deeply addressed the influence of different factors of brand cues on brand preference in the emerging markets context [14]; [11]. The main purpose of this work is to investigate the effect of brand name, country of origin (COO) and brand communication on consumer' preferences and loyalty towards laptop brand in the context of emerging markets. Additionally, the study will test the mediation role of brand preference between brand cues and brand loyalty. This research is organized as follows. First, a summarized literature review will highlight the multi dimension of extrinsic brand cues, brand preference and brand loyalty in order to develop the study hypotheses. Second, researchers describe the approach employed in this study. Third, the present study highlights the results and discussion. Finally, researchers offer the contributions of the study followed by limitations and future study directions.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

From Cue Utilisation Theory (CUT) perspective, consumers use multiple cues to evaluate product quality when they have limited information about product [15]. According to Sharma and Garg (2016), consumers tend to use cues concurrently when making judgements about brand quality and choosing preferred brands [16]. Many research on consumer behaviour employed cues in evaluating product quality in the literature (e.g. COO, brand name, price, advertising, personal selling, or

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warranties). However, these have been applied in isolation. Previous studies on consumer behaviour have confirmed that the effects of extrinsic cues on consumer preference, attitude, loyalty and purchase intention [17]; [18]. Therefore, brand cues play an important role in consumers' choice decisions and risk reduction. This paper employed CUT to scout customers' cognitive output resulted from product or brand quality indicators and to understand the brand familiarity impact, which focus on customers' experience whether direct or indirect with the brand. In a scenario of multi-cues, the present study provides the theoretical and practical evidences with regard to the structural relations of consumers' perceptions of extrinsic brand cues such as COO, brand name, advertising with consumer' preference and loyalty towards certain brand of laptop devices as well as the intervening role of brand preference on the relationships between extrinsic brand cues and brand loyalty.

Extrinsic Brand Cues and Brand Loyalty

A brand is defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, that is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" [19]. Consumers utilize brand name to aid them to remedy and regain product information from their minds [20]. Furthermore, consumers employed brand name to shape beliefs and assessments about the complicated products such as electronic brand, which in turn leads to their loyalty intentions [11]. Many studies have found that brand origin as significant cue in determining brand loyalty [21]; [22]. According to Krupka Z, Ozretic-Dosen, D. & Previsic (2014), reputable brand enables consumers to differentiate or select their brand among similar brands of technology products existing in emerging markets context [19]. Also, practical evidences research confirmed that brand name has direct positive impact on consumer attitudes towards brand and their behavioural intention to repurchase the brand [23]. Many researchers indicated that symbolic brand benefits influence consumer preferences, buying intentions and brand loyalty [24]; [25]. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1. Brand name has direct positive impact on brand preference (H1a) and brand loyalty (H1b).

Customers and marketers utilize country of origin (COO) and brand as process of product evaluation [26]. COO image has a favorable impact on consumer perceptions for products from a certain country. For example, empirical evidence confirmed that consumers prefer to buy the products from developed countries such as Japan and USA because they perceive these products are high quality [27]; [28]. Many researchers confirmed COO is an important factor in influencing consumer purchase decision [29]. Furthermore, previous studies have confirmed that COO affects brand equity [30]; [31]. Even though COO is considered as one primary cue in consumer intention to buy the brand, the influence of COO still is not examined deeply in the technological product marketing [11]. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2. COO has direct positive impact on brand preference (H2a) and brand loyalty (H2b).

Brand communication is considered the essential component in brand management attachment with consumers, organization staff, channel activities, providers, the media,

government, and society. The objective of brand communication is to boost consumers' loyalty to the firm's brand, which helps them to be more related to the brand in order to establish good relationship between consumer and brand over time [32]. Studies have indicated two types of brand communication namely, controlled communication such as advertising and promotion, whereas the uncontrolled communication includes word of mouth and media. Brand communication can affect positively consumer perceptions and attitudes. For instance, Kronrod and Huber (2019) indicated that advertising can influence consumer choice to certain brand [7]. In addition, brand communication influences consumer reactions and its effect can enhance brand loyalty [33]; [34]. However, some researchers found that brand communication does not directly affect brand loyalty [35]. Based on literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3. Brand communication has direct positive impact on brand preference (H3a) and brand loyalty (H3b).

Mediating Role of Brand Preference

Brand loyalty is a critical issue for developing and maintaining customers' relationship with companies. It is clear that consumer perceptions of extrinsic brand cues would ultimately drive to higher level of brand loyalty during a mediating role of brand preference. Empirical evidences have often noted that brand cues trigger consumers' preference to certain brands [36] as consequence of comparative assessment among alternatives in the decision making. Moreover, previous studies have indicated that consumer preference can be affected by several factors such as COO [11]; [37], brand design [38], product attributes [39], price and advertising [40]. On the other hand, previous research found that product information cues do not directly affect brand loyalty [41]. Therefore, many researchers proposed that brand preferences may be used as a mediator function in explaining the relationships between the antecedents and the outcomes [36]; [42]. Based on literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: Brand preference significantly mediates the relationship between brand name and brand loyalty.

H5: Brand preference significantly mediates the relationship between COO and brand loyalty.

H6: Brand preference significantly mediates the relationship between brand communication and brand loyalty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to examine the direct and indirect relationships between independent and dependent constructs as illustrated in the proposed model (Figure 1). The study model is consisted of five variables namely; brand name, COO and brand communication as extrinsic brand cues as well as brand preference and brand loyalty.

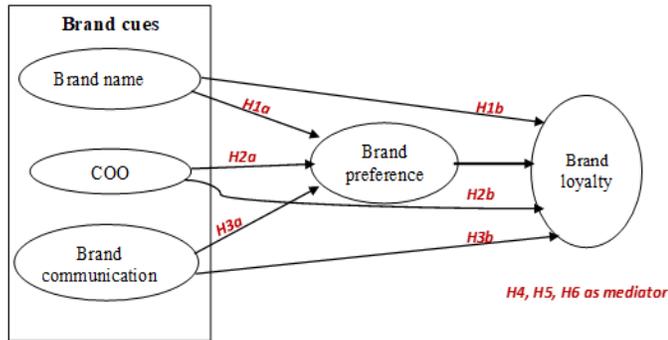


Fig. 1. Proposed Research Model

The prime population of this study were users of laptop brands in Saudi Arabia universities, located in three large areas in Saudi Arabia. Using quota sampling technique is more adequate, especially in the marketing-linked studies [43]. A pilot study was employed before data gathering in order to check the comprehensible and visibility of each item of questions to finalize the questionnaire content. A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Only 415 participants were used in data analyses after conducting data screening. Among survey respondents, 68 per cent were female and a vast majority of them was between 25 and 35 years old (42.7%). The highest percentage of participants (26.3%) gained monthly income of between 10000 and 15000 SAR, followed by 22.7% (94) of them obtained more than 15000 SAR per month. In terms of education, high percentage of them have postgraduate degree (61.2%). The participants used several brands such as Apple (32.3%), HP (21.2%), Dell (12.8%) and Toshiba (9.4%) as their preferred brand of laptops.

Measurement Tools

As shown in Table 1, all items were developed based on previous studies. The measurement of the five variables was based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Table 1: Constructs and Codes in Each Variable

Constructs	Code of Each Construct	No. of items
Independent Variable (Multi dimension of extrinsic brand cues)	Ccountry of origin (COO)	7
	Brand name (BN)	7
	Brand communication (BC)	6
Dependent Variable	Brand loyalty (BL)	5
Mediating Variable	Brand preference (BPR)	7

Data Analysis

This study used SPSS (V. 23) to create descriptive and inferential statistics as well as AMOS (V. 23) to conduct structural equation modelling (SEM) process. Upon using SPSS, reliability of Cronbach's Alpha for all the five constructs was above the threshold of 0.70 as suggested by Hair and colleagues [44]. Adequacy of sampling by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin

(KMO) measurement indicated good adequacy as well as all five extracted factors showed eigenvalues more than 1.0 and 68% of the total variance was explained by the five factors model. Factor loading for each construct was more than 0.50 as recommended by Hair and colleagues [45].

Measurement Model Assessment

A two-step approach was done as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to assess measurement model prior to the structural model to evaluate construct validity [46]. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) examines the measurement model and to assess the validity of latent variables. To establish overall model fit, measurement model composed of five latent constructs namely, COO, brand name and brand communication as extrinsic brand cues as well as brand preference and brand loyalty. The measurement items consisted of 32 items. According to Hair and colleagues (2010), goodness-of-fit indices were assessed through a significant (χ^2), the values of CFI and TLI, which is above that 0.9 [44]. They recommended that RMSEA value and SRMR should not surpass 0.08. The result of model modification revealed that $\chi^2/df=2.437$, GFI=0.863, IFI=0.933, TLI=0.926, CFI=0.933, NFI=0.892, RMSEA=0.059 and SRMR=0.052. To establish convergent and discriminant validity as a part of the model fit indices, validity and reliability have to be sufficient to display that the measurement model is fit the actual data. Table 2 shows that the value of composite reliability (CR), ranged from .86 to .93, which exceeded the recommended 0.70 threshold value [47] and average variance extracted (AVE) value was greater than the acceptable value of 0.50 in support convergent validity [45] ranging from 0.58 to 0.85. All the CR values were greater than the AVE values. The measured values for MSV and ASV were lower than the AVE values, that way fulfilling the discriminant validity measure. Evidently, these findings of measurement model evaluation satisfied the primer requirements for testing the hypotheses.

Table 2: Convergent and Discriminant Validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	COO.	BN.	BC	BPR	BL
COO	0.877	0.507	0.103	0.712				
BN	0.869	0.533	0.219	0.320	0.730			
BC	0.924	0.669	0.153	0.246	0.343	0.818		
BPR	0.930	0.689	0.469	0.468	0.391	0.212	0.830	
BL	0.905	0.658	0.469	0.432	0.685	0.279	0.164	0.811

Structural Model Assessment

After confirming the validity of latent constructs, the next step of full model is to test the explanation of the variance in all dependent variables and the hypothesised structural model. The particular structural model was confirmed to explain 29% of the variance in brand preference (BPR) and 51% of the total variance in customer loyalty towards brand (BL). These results propose that the constructs and the given paths consider as a significant part of the total variance in the endogenous constructs postulated. A summary of the findings of the hypothesized path coefficients are shown in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 3: Hypotheses Testing of Direct Effects

Hypothesized path	Expected	Std. estimate	p-value	Result
R ² (BPR) = 0.29				
H1a: BN→BPR	+	.399	***	Supported
H2a: COO→BPR	+	.128	.017	Supported
H3a: BC→BPR	+	.173	***	Supported
R ² (BL) = 0.51				
H1b: BN→BL	+	.143	.010*	Supported
H2b: COO→BL	+	-.018	.718	Not supported
H3b: BC→BL	+	.129	***	Supported

Note:

COO-country of origin, BN-brand name, BC-brand communication, BPR- brand preference, BL-brand loyalty

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research fills the gap by using the mediating role of brand preference on the relationships between brand cues and consumer loyalty towards certain brand of technology products in the context of emerging markets. The present work provides evidence that consumers' perception of extrinsic brand cues positively affected evaluations of brand quality in in their preferences towards certain brand, which in turn to develop their intention to loyalty. The findings are consistent with Cue Utilization Theory (CUT), which may be helpful in evaluating a quality brand laptop and its preference by consumers [9]; [10]. Therefore, these results support multi dimension of brand cues as an important predictor for selecting and preferring a certain brand of electronic goods. The results confirmed that brand preference acts as a strong influencer in explaining the relations between the antecedents of brand loyalty. Brand preference is regarded as a significant construct that can mirror the judgment of customers' cognition and favourable emotional feelings, which can be saved in their mind [1]. In addition, the findings of hypothesized path confirmed that brand preference partially and fully mediates the link between three dimensions of brand cues with brand loyalty. For example, the current study showed full mediation of brand preference on the relation between COO and brand loyalty, whereas the influence of brand preference on the relationship between brand name and communication was partial mediation. These results are consistent with previous study [14]. This study contributes to relevant literature in consumer-brand relation and has several theoretical implications. First, the current work proposed a model of how brand cues can have positively impacts on both brand preference and brand loyalty. In this regard, the researchers identify the contribution of brand preference that was mostly negligent in previous studies. The expanded model of this study was examined in the electronic brands context, but this model may be applied in other contexts. Second, based on CUT and previous research, researchers were able to treat important issue such as consumer lack of information about complex technology products by applying consumers' perception of multi dimension of extrinsic brand cues. The study has extended the brand preference concept in the context of technology goods that might facilitate other scholars to have deeper understanding on brands function in the business and service environment. Third, the findings reveal that among the brand cues variables; brand name and brand communication enable customers to evaluate brand quality and brand selection within other brands, which in turn lead to enhance consumers' loyalty and create positive word of mouth (WOM). One of the main objectives of brand management is to create powerful brand that is able to affect consumer preference to the brand and motivate future buying decisions. This research has important implications for marketing managers wanting to boost consumer preference for their brands of technological goods. First, the results reveal that consumers essentially rely on extrinsic brand cues in evaluating brand quality and making purchase decisions as well as selecting brand. These results provide brand managers and practitioners important insight into the positive role of these constructs, which help them in developing effective marketing strategies according to these multi dimensions to enhance consumer' preference and loyalty

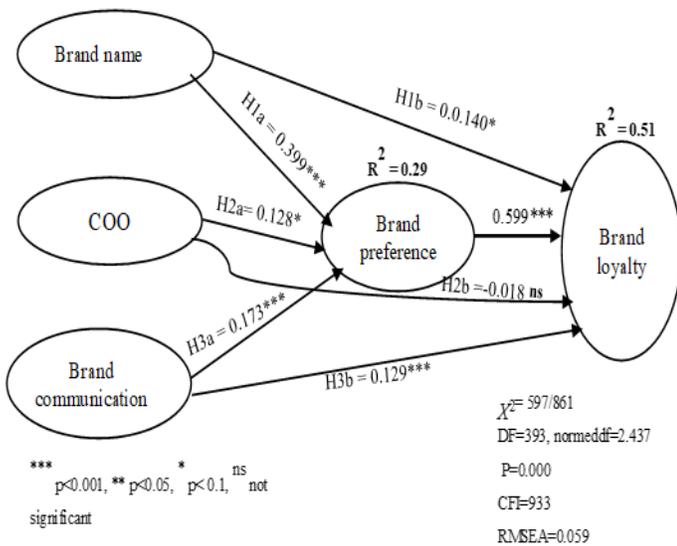


Figure 2: Results of the Proposed Structural Model

Analyses of Mediator

The mediating effect of brand preference in forming the brand loyalty was estimated using bootstrapping in AMOS. Table 4 shows that the partial mediation exists in the relationship between brand name as well as brand communication with brand loyalty. Hence, these results supported H4 and H6. However, the relationship between COO and brand loyalty is full mediation by brand preference. At this point, the findings provide support for H5. Therefore, the brand preference acts as a mediator in the standardized path coefficients from three diminutions of brand cues to brand loyalty.

Table 4: Hypotheses Testing of Mediating Effects

Path	Standardized Estimate			p-value	Conclusion
	Direct without mediator	Direct with mediator	In direct		
BN → BPR→BL	0.143	0.399	0.213	***	H4 is supported
COO→BPR→BL	-0.018	0.128	0.070	0.031	H5 is full mediation
BC → BPR→BL	0.129	0.173	0.133	***	H6 is supported

towards their brand. Second, extrinsic brand attributes can affect the consumer's feelings and attitude toward brand, would in turn increase loyalty in such a way that long-term product repurchase behaviour will occur. Therefore, it is important that marketing manager strengthen brand attributes through advertising and promotion campaigns. Finally, the results provide significant inputs for brand management when preparing effective campaign to increase brand preferences and brand loyalty in the context technological products. In other words, marketing managers and practitioners can employ positive brand attributes on electronic products in order to retain customers' loyalty and attract the competitor's customers to their brands.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

This study has some limitations that can present opportunities for future studies. First, the study explored just one electronic product category in the Saudi Arabia context which has limited the generalizability of the results to other fields. Further studies should be replicated applying different brands of product categories in the context of different countries. Second, the findings of this research confirmed the effect of mediating on the relationship between brand cues and brand loyalty. Therefore, future research can include additional mediating factors that may influence brand loyalty in the context consumer-brand relationship to evolve a conceptual framework for empirical studies. For example, consumer trust and commitment may be affected from many factors such as communication tools and brand attributes, which impact a wide range of behaviours in continuing the relationship marketing [48]. Finally, additional measures of study constructs should be developed, which in turn drive to a better interpretation of the relationship outcomes between consumer and brand loyalty.

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