

How to anticipate and manage customer satisfaction and brand loyalty by investigating emotional aspects in the B2B setting

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CHRONICLE

ABSTRACT

Article history:

Received: May 29, 2020

Received in revised format:

May 30 2020

Accepted: June 3, 2020

Available online:

June 4, 2020

Keywords:

Brand image

Social bond

Brand association

Customer satisfaction

Brand loyalty

In the hypercompetitive B2B market, branding strategy becomes a competitive advantage to sustain the business. Two common forms of brand evaluations are an evaluation by either the cognitive or affective aspect, and this paper focuses on the affective aspect, which concerns emotional factors. The paper analyzes two drivers corresponding to satisfaction - the brand association, reflected by brand image, and social bonds - and how strongly these both drivers influence satisfaction; hence sellers can anticipate future actions in order to keep business going. The finding confirms that the brand image has a stronger influence on satisfaction than social bonds; furthermore, customer satisfaction leads to brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

B2B branding has received less attention than B2C in the academic literature (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011, p.830), and thus B2B branding is a highlight requiring further research (Sheth & Sharma, 2006). Furthermore, as the industrial market is under the pressure of commoditization and globalization, the B2B industry seeks a competitive advantage through the branding strategy (Walley, Custance, Taylor, Lindgreen, & Hingley, 2007). In the hypercompetitive industrial market, branding is most likely the truly sustainable competitive advantage (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). Aaker's brand equity is becoming more critical because of its influence to keep the relationship between buyer-seller (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir, & Zhu, 2016). Two different perspectives can help analyze brand equity: first, customer standpoint, and second, stakeholder standpoint (Elsäßer & Wirtz, 2017). In most cases, disproportionately, the evaluations come from the customer's view; marketers seek to understand the drivers of brand equity in different markets (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011, p.833), as well as this paper. Customer-based brand equity can be analyzed based on either rational or emotional perspectives. In the past studies, scholars focused on tangible products and rational factors only when examining purchase decision process in the B2B setting (Rosenbröijer, 2001), meanwhile intangible factors and emotional factors, such as image and reputation are neglected (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004). It triggers the research question: what emotional factors influence customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, and how to manage these emotional factors for business sustainability? Customer satisfaction can be evaluated either from functional or cognitive dimensions, or emotional or personal dimensions (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). The emotional factor plays a vital role in the development and sustainability of a relationship over time (Andersen & Kumar, 2006). The buyer's emotions, as well as other affective factors, influence the final decision-making process, as well as the buyer-seller's social bond (Klemz & Boshoff, 2001). In a further development, emotional brand attributes, such as image,

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trust, and reputation, are also involved, when branding industrial goods (Jensen & Klastrup, 2008; Wind, 2006). Elsäßer and Wirtz (2017) introduced a combination of rational brand quality and emotional brand association, as being the drivers of customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. When referring to the theory of the embedded market, it is not only the economic and rational motives that influence social relationships to embed economic decisions, but it also includes the emotional factors (Granovetter, 1992). While many past studies evaluate satisfaction and loyalty rationally, this paper examines the exogenous variable of brand loyalty from a different standpoint, and the authors will analyze the drivers of brand equity from the perspective of the emotional factors, the brand association, and the social bond. The objective of the study is to examine the success factors of a brand loyalty, from an emotional evaluation standpoint.

2. Literature Review

Since buyers evaluate sellers based on an emotional factor, sellers must have emotional intelligence (EI), purposely to anticipate the future response of buyers. The ability to project the appropriate emotions and the avoidance of the unnecessary emotions can enhance relationships and eventually, the organization's effectiveness (Chrusciel, 2006). The emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to monitor others' and one's own feelings and emotions and to use the information to influence one's thinking and actions (Lam & Kirby, 2002, p.135). EI introduces a competitive edge to an individual's relationship with others (Lam & Kirby, 2002, p.134).

2.1 Social Bond and Brand Image

From the traditional paradigm, the definition of social bond is a feeling of friendship and mutual liking shared by the seller and buyer (Wilson, 1995). Further conceptual development sees social bonds comprising of social attachments that influence the economic behaviors between the involved parties (Bonner & Calantone, 2005). Social skills refer to an individual's ability to interact with others by involving the emotions, forming social bonds as a result (Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2004). The effect of the social bond is even more significant than the value's effect; hence, the social bond is a crucial and a fundamental cornerstone of B2B relationships (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). The affective components define a strong social bond and the results of the relationships (Čater & Čater, 2009); furthermore, the strong social bond leads to a feeling of friendship and liking that helps maintain a buyer-seller relationship (Wilson, 1995). Keller introduces the customer-based brand equity pyramid, which confirms the existence of feelings towards a brand from the buyers' perspective (Keller, 2001). On the opposite standpoint, feelings towards a brand are less critical (Ćorić & Jelić, 2015). These different opinions become a social science challenge at the authors' perspective; it motivated these researchers to study the findings. Some past studies found a positive relationship between social bonds and satisfaction (Doney, Barry, & Abratt, 2007; Palaima & Auruškevičienė, 2007). From the conceptualization of the social bond, the authors develop a hypothesis as follows.

H1. The social bond has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Intangible or non-functional factors were neglected in previous research until the appearance of some studies with emotional attributes, such as image, and reputation (Jensen & Klastrup, 2008; Wind, 2006). Brand equity outcomes, such as customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, are influenced by emotional brand associations (Elsäßer & Wirtz, 2017). Brand associations can create a positive feeling or attitude of being closely linked to a brand (Aaker, 1991, p.20). The brand association is reflected by brand image only in this research, authors disregard reputation purposely to avoid redundancy with brand image at customer's perspectives. Others irrelevant dimensions of brands associations are also ignored such as, advertising style, and country of manufacture image. Brand image is a perception, thought and feelings about a brand as reflected by brand associations in the customer's memory and derived by all related brand activities engaged in the organization (Chahal & Bala, 2012; Lee, Lee, & Wu, 2011). In an empirical study of the chemical industry, Ćorić and Jelić (2015) found that the drivers of a brand's image are the quality, safety, consistency, delivery, accessibility, and availability of the product. The authors have developed the following hypothesis from the conceptualization of brand images.

H2. Brand association that is reflective and that captures the brand image, has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

2.2 Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty

In the industrial context, satisfaction is an affective state that results from the aspect of a working relationship between one firm and another (Walter, Ritter, & Gemünden, 2001). This means that the emotional aspect influences satisfaction, which plays a dominant role in obtaining a customer's loyalty (Spiteri & Dion, 2004). Customer loyalty contributes to the profitability of a company in the long-term, because loyal customers, who stay in the relationship, ensure that there is a steady stream of revenue for a company (S. Y. Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004). Most past studies have found that customer satisfaction is linked to loyalty (Ramaseshan, Rabbanee, & Tan Hsin Hui, 2013). Brand loyalty is the final endogenous construct, and the most common brand equity outcome (Baumgarth & Binckebanck, 2011; Taylor, Hunter, & Lindberg, 2007). Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on brand loyalty in the B-2-B setting (Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Marell, 2015; Da Silva & Alwi, 2006). From the conceptualization of customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, the authors have developed a hypothesis as follows.

H3. Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on brand loyalty.

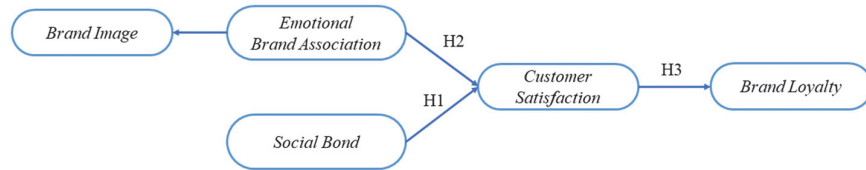


Fig. 1. Proposed model

3. Research Methodology and Sample

The design of the empirical study is a conclusive descriptive and quantitative method. Questionnaires were developed and validated by a team, consisting of authors and practitioners; questionnaires use the five-point Likert scale to measure all constructs. To ensure the readability of each construct or dimension, the authors sent questionnaires to ten potential respondents (Carmine & Zeller, 1979). The respondents came from various industries located in Indonesia: coating, paper, textile, wood, panel, putty, and printing industries; the field survey was conducted from January 7 to April 30, 2019. Since the respondent population is limited, the total number of valid samples is 96. Since the model has never been developed before, moreover this study aims to explore the new framework, therefore the authors have employed PLS-SEM (Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Model). Furthermore, PLS can measure a reliable result with as low as 20 samples (Chin & Newsted, 1999) and PLS can avoid multicollinearity risks (Ryan, Rayner, & Morrison, 1999).

3.1 Result and Model Testing

PLS analysis starts with the measurement model or the outer model; it specifies the rules of correspondence between measured and latent variables (Hair Jr., Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019). Two criteria used to assess the measurement model are reliability and validity (Ramayah, Mohamad, Young, & Lo, 2011). Reliability is a construct's quality that necessarily requires a strong correlation among the indicators of a particular construct (Kline, 2016); two standard measures are Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The standard of Cronbach's alpha is ≥ 0.70 (Pallant, 2001) and that of composite reliability is ≥ 0.70 (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013). Table 1 depicts details of Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability of each construct; all these pass the standard and indicate the reliability of each construct.

Table 1

Internal consistency reliability

Variable	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha	R Square
Emotional Brand Association	0.916	0.875	
Brand Image	0.916	0.875	1.000
Social Bond	0.910	0.868	
Customer Satisfaction	0.948	0.931	0.678
Brand Loyalty	0.915	0.886	0.687

Table 2

Validity indicators

Construct and Indicators		Factor loading	t-value	AVE
Brand Association				0.732
Brand Image	BI1 Brand familiarity	0.889	86.567	0.732
	BI2 Company image	0.901	87.190	
	BI3 Company reputation	0.901	95.863	
	BI4 Company knowledge	0.719	28.687	
Social Bond	SB1 Good friendship	0.738	19.494	0.718
	SB2 Personal relationship	0.944	213.29	
	SB3 Close relationship	0.850	44.005	
	SB4 Good friendships	0.844	43.818	
Satisfaction	CS1 Excellent quality	0.841	50.604	0.784
	CS2 Excellent service	0.903	128.76	
	CS3 Fairness	0.904	86.423	
	CS4 A good company	0.867	67.181	
	CS5 Brand integrity	0.909	92.613	
Brand Loyalty	BL1 Rebuy the product	0.888	88.715	0.685
	BL2 Rebuy more quantity	0.756	38.584	
	BL3 Buy other products	0.895	81.051	
	BL4 Prioritize the company	0.879	72.497	
	BL5 Recommend to others	0.701	21.125	

Validity is the accuracy of a measure to which a value truthfully represents a concept (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2010); two types of validity tests are convergent validity and discriminant validity (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The convergent validity

is the extent to which a measure correlates positively with other measures in the same construct; it is examined by the average variance extracted (AVE) with a score ≥ 0.50 and item loadings with a score ≥ 0.50 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). Table 2 depicts detail item loadings, *t-value*, and AVE; all these pass the standards. Discriminant validity is the uniqueness of a construct; it depicts the phenomenon captured by a construct and not represented by the other constructs in the model (Hair et al., 2013).

Table 3

Latent variable correlations

	BI	BL	CS	EBA	SB
BI	1.000000				
BL	0.700950	1.000000			
CS	0.813850	0.828679	1.000000		
EBA	0.999988	0.700990	0.814421	1.000000	
SB	0.332897	0.625825	0.383697	0.332674	1.000000

The evaluation of discriminant validity is by measuring the cross-loadings among the constructs; the loadings of each construct must be high on itself and low on others (Vinzi, Trinchera, & Amato, 2010). The cross-loadings in Table 4 and latent variables in Table 3 are used to evaluate discriminant validity; the results achieve the discriminant validity.

Table 4

Cross loadings

	BI	BL	CS	EBA	SB
BI1	0.888742	0.640682	0.772206	0.890646	0.285904
BI1	0.888742	0.640682	0.772206	0.890646	0.285904
BI2	0.900991	0.607347	0.706301	0.900081	0.313766
BI2	0.900991	0.607347	0.706301	0.900081	0.313766
BI3	0.900743	0.673019	0.707680	0.899372	0.317725
BI3	0.900743	0.673019	0.707680	0.899372	0.317725
BI4	0.718578	0.459947	0.589757	0.719027	0.211880
BI4	0.718578	0.459947	0.589757	0.719027	0.211880
BL1	0.700488	0.887685	0.851115	0.700844	0.501369
BL2	0.446593	0.756023	0.462535	0.446342	0.600969
BL3	0.678344	0.895449	0.744811	0.677780	0.568227
BL4	0.630302	0.878933	0.765485	0.630623	0.448901
BL5	0.326956	0.700614	0.467239	0.327168	0.563826
CS1	0.686377	0.720298	0.840767	0.686347	0.351186
CS2	0.760698	0.803466	0.903211	0.761205	0.409449
CS3	0.701099	0.718213	0.904043	0.701613	0.281113
CS4	0.751851	0.681793	0.866760	0.752437	0.298884
CS5	0.697892	0.736768	0.909229	0.698833	0.350048
SB1	0.166762	0.520830	0.296072	0.166807	0.738439
SB2	0.317566	0.543774	0.340394	0.317337	0.944455
SB3	0.374335	0.578274	0.393761	0.374100	0.850300
SB4	0.219168	0.439905	0.219965	0.218809	0.844196

4. Result Discussion and Managerial Implication

Table 5 and Fig. 2 depict details of path correlations in the model; the first and foremost finding is the stronger influence of brand associations (estimates 0.772, *t-value* 36.095), reflected by brand image, towards customer satisfaction than social bonds (estimates 0.127, *t-value* 3.101).

Table 5

Path correlations

No	Path line	Hypothesis	Coefficient	t-value	Conclusion
1	Social Bond → Satisfaction	H1	0.127	3.101	Supported
2	EBA → Satisfaction	H2	0.772	36.095	Supported
3	Satisfaction → Brand Loyalty	H3	0.829	70.283	Supported

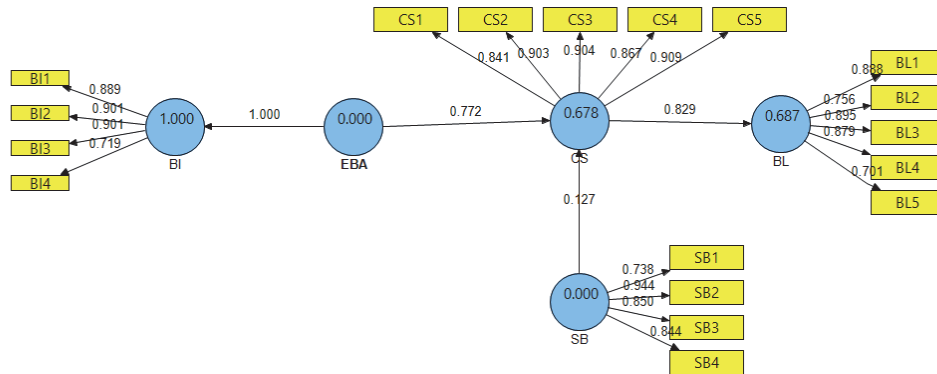
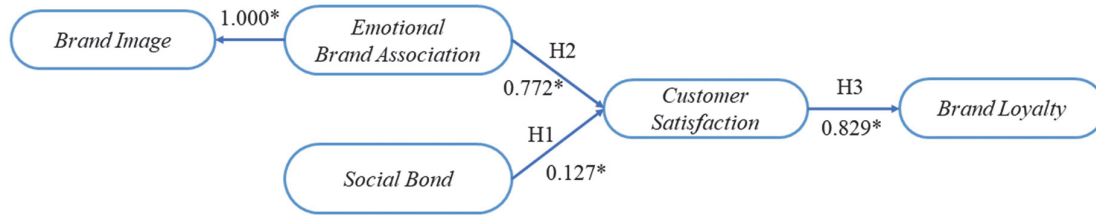


Fig. 2. Result model in details



*t-value > 1.96

Fig. 3. Result model

Transferring to the chemical emulsion’s market, the justification of the main finding is the consistency of excellent brand performance, and other positive news related to the brand also contributes to influencing customer satisfaction. Further, customer satisfaction leads to loyalty; the indicator is a robust positive correlation between satisfaction and loyalty (estimates 0.829, t-value 70.283). A buyer decides a purchase based on whatever brand information is associated with the product and/or services in the buyer’s mind. Although social bonds have a positive influence on customer satisfaction, at the moment the buyer makes a purchase decision, the influence of social bonds is less meaningful. This finding confirms that a chemical emulsion is a chemically complex product, not a commodity. The strong brand image that has a set association with product and service from the customer’s perspective becomes a competitive advantage of sellers, and it confirms the dependency of a customer with product and service quality. To conclude, brand information as it relates to a product, service, or organization influences purchase decisions emotionally. The involvement of a social bond at the final purchase decision point is less meaningful compared to the brand image. Indicator SB2 (estimate 0.944) shows that a personal relationship develops social bonds. However, the findings support hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2. The second finding of the study is about the substantial contributions of positive image (estimate 0.901) and respectfully of the brand (estimate 0.901) as the two most reliable indicators of the brand’s image variable. Transferring to the chemical emulsion’s market, the justification of the finding most likely is about the product and services performance, other things associated with the brand such as, health aids, donations to charity, and sports sponsorships. These positive activities and programs seem to encourage positive feelings and image from the buyer’s perspective. To conclude, the chemical emulsion industry needs to monitor product and service performance consistently to further develop a more positive brand image through associated activities and programs. The consistency of product and service performance shall emotionally influence positive feeling and confidence level and prevent anxiety, which results in greater peace of mind for buyers.

The analysis of implications of the first and second finding can be interpreted from the buyer's side or seller's side. From the buyer's standpoint, if the buyer has direct experience with the brand, as long as the brand performance meets buyer's perception, then the buyer will retain the relationship with the brand. In the case of prospective buyers who have no experience with the product, prospectives buyers tend to decide based on brand associated-information they obtain from product offerings or networks; this supports past studies (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011). From the seller's standpoint, with less meaningful social bond influence, sellers should focus more on developing a strong positive-brand image in every relevant thing, such as corporate social responsibility. Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth (2018) find that such kind of environmental and community

programs are able to enhance and accelerate a positive brand image as, green products, scholarships, cancer aids, and sports programs. The seller must consistently improve products and service quality to ensure brand position as a quality leader that results in the higher confidence and peace of mind of buyers; the poor performance of a product or service is associated with the negative brand image. This finding supports past studies on brand image in the chemical industry (Ćorić & Jelić, 2015).

5. Conclusion and limitation

Brand associations, as reflected by brand image, positively influence customer satisfaction stronger than social bonds do; this satisfaction leads to brand loyalty and business sustainability in the chemical complex product. Brand image comes from the set of all associations with brands, either related to products and services or activities that relate to organizations; hence, brand image influences both existing buyers who have direct experience with product and services, and potential buyers. Brand image is an essential emotional factor that influences the purchase decision from the buyers' perspective in the chemical complex products industry. Although the study contributes to the emotional aspect analysis of brands' loyalty drivers, the results are still subject to limitations. The authors suggest replicating the study in a different industry, such as B2B commodity products and durable B2B products. The empirical study has limitations in the specific area of Indonesia only. The authors suggest expansion into other regions with different cultural backgrounds and business contexts. This study also focuses on the buyers' evaluation from the emotional aspect only. Other cognitive constructs involved in the model are worth examining.

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