THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND THE BRAND LOYALTY: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Özkara, Behçet Yalın

Department of Business Administration, Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Turkey

bozkara@ogu.edu.tr

Abstract

Criticisms against positivism have been increasing day by day and we are witnessing the increase of the qualitative researches in social sciences. This is also a current phenomenon for marketing. Based on this assumption; the aim of the paper is to try to discuss the inadequate side of positivist paradigm in order to explain brand loyalty and the extent of potential of the symbolic interactionism in understanding the brand loyalty concept in a better way. As a result, in order to understand brand loyalty; 1-Interaction 2-Symbolic value and meanings and 3-Personality phenomenons should be explained deeply with all their dimensions and the interpretative paradigm provides a highly convenient ground for this purpose. Based on this assumption, the author tries to put forth a base model to understand the brand loyalty in grounding the symbolic interactionism theory.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Symbolic Interactionism, Positivism, Interpretivism, Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Everything happening in the universe is governed by universal laws of nature. The science is primarily the activity of discovering these laws. From the positivist point of view, the only applicable way to discover the universal laws is the empirical questioning. Empirical questioning requires measurement. Measurement instruments must be developed for correct information in terms of the laws. As the measurement instruments are developed, it will be possible to obtain the data that is not known today. Apparently, according to this insight, many of the natural phenomenons are linear, their laws are universal and all the laws can be converted to mathematical language. So, the phenomenons exceed time. Thus, having such a law and knowing its conditions suffice to estimate what will happen (Kuş, 2003).

However, the criticisms against these opinions have been increasing day by day. We are witnessing the increase of the qualitative researches in social sciences which has been in continuation for the last 25 years. The popularization of qualitative research techniques as alternative to quantitative techniques is not a simple technique but a conscious or unconscious extension of the epistemological-ontological preferences (Özlem, 1998). The shift from quantitative research tradition to qualitative research tradition can be evaluated within a "paradigmatic change" from positivist paradigms to alternative paradigms. Today, it is possible to mention the existence of a paradigmatic change where positivist epistemology is criticized and alternative approaches are emphasized not only in social sciences, but also in natural sciences.

Similar criticisms apply to the marketing area as well, where positivist paradigm dominates. The interpretivist approach, which develops in opposition to the modeling assumptions taking a single objective reality as basis and oriented to the consumer behavior supports that the reality is structured socially; that there are a lot of realities; that multiple and simultaneous relations apply to the consumer behavior rather than causality and that, thus, it is more accurate to try to explain the consumer behavior rather than their estimation. Contrary to the positivist paradigm, which sees the consumer as a rational unit, interpretative and postmodern approaches aim to understand the consumer on the basis of the social and cultural reality s/he experiences.

The positivist approach assumption of estimating and modeling the consumer behavior, which takes a single objective reality, is insufficient in explaining the brand loyalty that the customer can display irrational behavior patterns. Considered in this aspect, it seems difficult to understand the brand loyalty in only positivist perspective. In order to overcome this problem occurring in understanding the brand loyalty, the researchers claim the necessity of benefiting the symbolic interactionism theory under the interpretative theory. When the relation between the consumers and products (consumer behavior) is evaluated, the symbolic meanings of the products/brands formed the ground of the symbolic interaction theory (Solomon, 2004).

In this sense, the aim of the article is to try to put forth the aspects of the pure positivist approach's inadequate sides in explaining the brand loyalty and to discuss which points the symbolic interaction theory can complete this inefficient aspects in explaining the brand loyalty. Within this framework, the paradigm shift in marketing is mentioned in the first section of the study; the basic assumptions of the symbolic interactionism are put forth and the brand loyalty is considered from a symbolic interactionist perspective and the article tries to put forth a model.

PARADIGMATIC CHANGE IN MARKETING

The dominance of the positivist paradigm in marketing has been taking criticisms over the past few years. According to Belk (1998), it is a hopeless effort to understand the consumer behavior before going into the consumer's interpretation process; and a different perspective is needed to understand the consumer. Interpretative perspective examines the consumer behavior in the basis of personal experience with symbols and meanings in personal level. In this perspective, the relation between subjective understanding systems of the consumers and the symbolic, hedonicand aesthetic structure is researched with qualitative methods. Its difference from the postmodern perspective is that the assumptions regarding the human nature in rationalism and learning methods of the consumers (Demir, 2000; Solomon et al., 1999).

While the postmodern perspective completely rejects the lawlike generalizations, interpretative perspective does not see wrong to go towards these generalizations. Especially during the 21th century when the consumption society rapidly progresses, the fact that the productions are consumed not only due to their functions but also their meanings, symbols and signs; that the consumers are not only production consumers but image and meaning creators in terms of individuality and social aspects and the phenomenons to define the personal identity with the symbols that the owned products bear, support the opinion that the application of the interpretative approach to the consumer behavior researches is more appropriate. It is stipulated in the interpretative paradigm that the researcher should interact and cooperate with the subject it examines, in other words, s/he should be the participant to the topic.

Within these justifications, it is claimed that the symbolic interactionism has a more explanatory justification in understanding the brand loyalty of the customer.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interactionism emerged through the end of 19th century with the inspiration from the studies in social psychology as an American sociology approach which researches the social aspects of the behaviors of the individual and examines the socialization process. The symbolic interactionists emphasized on analyzing the social processes with minor scale rather than studying the societies as a whole (Giddens, 2000).

According to symbolic interactionists, the behavior of the individual is completely determined by the frameworks. The individual has the partial freedom and choice in the actions s/he commits (Poloma, 1993). Further, according to symbolic interactionists, the people create a reality covering the moral rules, ethics, values, attitudes and perceptions by means of creating social interaction with each other. The society is created and it is created again by the people

who choose to live in this society establishing rules and the change in such rules in time. Thus, people are the reflections of the society they create (Poloma, 1993).

It is claimed that theoretical points of view, symbols and meanings are also reflections of the society; that it happened as a result of the interaction of the people and that it can be examined by the people by means of communication and interaction. The symbols are social objects specified by the members of the country, conveying or facilitating the common meanings forming in time as a result of these members. According to the interactionists; objects include animals, people, physical objects and ideas and they become meaningful for the people within the society only when they are given symbolic importance (Solomon, 2004). The aim of the interactionists is to examine the behaviors in order to reveal the effects of the interactions and symbols. Symbolic Interactionism maintains the qualification to be a useful approach in questioning the language, thought, meaning, symbols, roles played by people, behaviors and how these interact to create the society and create it again (Swingewood, 1998).

The first discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective in marketing occurs with the symbolic consumption concept. As known, the Consumers consume the products due to fact that they have symbolic meanings in conformity to their own identities, along with their visible benefits (Jamal ve Goode, 2000). Symbolic interaction theory discusses the individuals explaining the meaning of their worlds and focuses on the individuals interpreting the reactions of others instead of directly reacting. The important thing for the consumer is to interpret the reactions of other and giving reactions to these occurs via symbols (Trucker, 1957).

The most important feature of the symbolic interaction theory is to help the individual to express himself/herself to his/her social circle (Solomon, 1983). The concept of symbol mentioned in the symbolic interaction theory points out the product and brand having the commercial and symbolic qualifications (Kurtuldu and Çilingir, 2009).

According to this perspective, the objects do not have meanings by themselves; the social actors in symbolic interaction put meaning on the objects. Symbolic interaction is a process that includes the interpretation of the actions. While simple physical objects or events include the indicators that are not symbolic or that are observed similarly by everyone, their symbolic meanings can form differently for everyone (Dedeoğlu, 2002).

When we approach the topic in terms of marketing, it is safe to state that the symbolic interaction puts forth three main assumptions (Solomon, 1983):
1. The personality of the consumer depends on perceiving reactions of others that are important for the consumer.
2. The personality of the consumer is a function of the direct behaviors.
3. The perceptions of the consumers regarding the reactions of others reflect these reactions to some extent.

The symbolic meanings of the products are quite effective in product choices of the consumers. The consumers purchase the products to exhibit the perceived messages to others (Julian, 2001). When the symbolic interaction theory is discussed in brand aspect, the reason why the consumers express themselves by means of using branded products is the symbolic values of the brands as well.

So, how does the self-expression process of the consumer by means of the brand occur? In order to put forth the answer to this question from interactionist perspective, it is required to understand the concept of personality. Symbolic interactionists stated that the social theory was not able to develop an approach discussing the personality concept in a sufficient degree and that this concept was constantly ignored. They claimed that the personality is considered as an ordinary social actor indigenizing the norms and values imposed by the system and generating meanings by means of undertaking roles oriented to the needs of the system. Within this framework, the personality is defined in line with institutions, organizations and culture and the rich constituents of the personality, its versatile properties and the types of action and conscious are not very much included (Swingewood, 1998).

In this sense, symbolic interactionism, which is an approach opposing the positivist point of view, discusses the identity with the focus on its willing and active aspect by means of putting the concept at the center of the approach.

BRAND LOYALTY AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Concepts of Brand and Brand Loyalty

We encounter the brands as the basic sources in correlating symbolic meanings to the products -hence the consumers owning the product- (Holt, 2004).

Brand can be defined as a name of symbol aiming to introduce the good or service to the consumer (Tokol, 1994). The brands reflect the company and their products and a specific brand image. Beyond being a single logo or name, a brand is the expression and transmission of the feelings and thoughts of the consumer regarding the corporation and its products. Despite the fact that the product is the thing that is owned in concrete both for the consumer and manufacturer, the constituent bearing the actual value is the brand. Without brand value, every product becomes an object that can be copied. The brand is not the product. It is the source, meaning and aspect of the product and bears the identity of the product everywhere.

Brand loyalty is the ability of a consumer to look for and purchase a single brand again and again instead of a rival brand even though the rivals propose low prices and promotions (Palumbo andHerbig, 2000).

The consumer perceiving distinctive features in a brand and being affected from these features cause an increase in the loyalty against that brand. The most basic feature of a strong brand is evaluated to create a loyal customer (Uztug, 1999).

It is a huge fault to define the brand loyalty as a process in which the consumer exhibits rational behavior patterns. Thus, in order to understand the brand loyalty for which a rational behavior pattern, it is required to understand what meanings the consumer gives to the brand and how these meanings have occurred. As a result, it is not possible to explain the brand concept, to which each individual gives a meaning in their own subjective world, with an understanding putting forth a single objective reality. In this sense, in the final section of the study, the aim is to put forth a model to understand the brand loyalty in grounding the symbolic interactionism theory.

A Different Perspective to Understand the
Brand Loyalty Symbolic Interactionism and Personality

The consumers purchase the products not only due to their concrete functions, they also purchase due to their symbolic meanings as well (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel ve Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988). So, how do these symbolic meanings attributed to the products and brands emerge? And why do people display the behavior of purchasing the same brand?

The positivist approach assumption of estimating and modeling the consumer behavior, which takes a single objective reality, is insufficient in explaining the answers to these questions sufficiently. Considered in this aspect, it seems difficult to understand the brand loyalty in only positivist perspective. In order to overcome this problem occurring in understanding the brand loyalty, the researchers claim the necessity of benefiting the symbolic interactionism theory under the interpretative paradigm (Solomon, 2004).

In this chapter, the aim is to put forth a conceptual model oriented to explain what kind of benefits the symbolic interaction theory can present at the point of explaining the brand loyalty and to understand the brand loyalty from symbolic interactionist perspective.

All voluntary consumptions, consciously or unconsciously, bear symbolic meanings. These meanings can be unique for person or be shared by the other people commonly. For instance, using recycled envelopes may mean "I care about the environment"; going to classical music concert may mean "I'm sophisticated"; protecting gay rights may mean "I'm open minded" or buying unbranded detergents may mean "I'm a smart consumer".

In his study, Belk (1988) claims that the products owned by the individual form an important portion of the personality extensions. This can be expressed as "personality creation" via symbolic meanings (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

The brands can be used as a source by the consumers for the symbolic structure of the personality. The symbolic consumption of the brands can contribute to the formation and transfer of the basic cultural classes such as social status, gender, age and social values such as family, tradition and reliability (McCracken, 1993).

The two-dimension function of the products explains the relation between consumption and personality. The first function, set out as personality symbolism or personal symbolism, states the activities of personality formation, completion, continuation and development of the personality via consumption. The second function, set out as social symbolism, states the integration of the individual with the society with the communicative role of the products and by means of meaning conveyance or receiving; in other words, configuration of the social world (Elliot, 1997). To put it another way, the products are not only used in the personality formation; they also direct the behavior towards the individual by helping the inferences of other individuals (Dittmar, 2000).

In another study, Arnould and Price claim that individuals carry out two types of activities via consumption. These are stated as "activities for personality formation" and "acceptance demonstrations". Activities for personality formation occur in two ways; in the first, the consumer makes a creative effort in products or consumption experiences to form his/her personality. In the second, the consumer converts the consumption experience which s/he can include into his/her own life or story into a personal ownership or experience. The consumer uses the consumption in the activities mentioned with the purposes of individualization and differentiation from the others. The acceptance demonstrations are reproductive consumption activities carried out with the purpose of communicating and integrating with the society, fitting in and membership (Arnould and Price, 2000).

Uztug (2003) defines the similarities and matching between the image of the brands or products and the personality as brand image-personality conformity. We encounter the brand image-personality conformity theory as a theory used to explain the relation between the symbolic values of the brands purchased and the personality of the individual (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). As the level of harmony between the personality and product image increases, the purchase intention of the individual regarding that product/brand increases at the same extent (Ekinci ve Riley, 2003). Westfall (1962) claims that if the consumer deduces before the purchase that the product and brand is fitting for his/her personality, such product and brand is an extension of his/her personality. According to this model, the important thing for the

individual is that the purchase behavior of him/her is perceived positively. According to Metha (1999), the symbolic meanings of the products and brands affect the purchasing decisions of the consumers via personality. Each individual has a personality with behavior types, habits, temperaments, possessions and relations.

In short, the consumers use the products/brands in order to form their personalities and help these personalities be approved by the society as well. Consumers define, maintain and extend the perceptions towards them via product/brand usage and purchase. Since purchasing and consumption is an effective instrument in self-expression, the consumers usually purchase the products and brands which they perceive as similar to their personalities (Jamal ve Goode, 2001). It is known that the individuals' self-expression contribute the development of the brand loyalty by means of causing positive attitude and behavior towards the brands (Kim et al., 2001; Kressmann et al., 2006; Sirgy et al., 2007).

The development of the conscious is mostly affected by the reactions of the people around the individual. Thus, the individual tends to get approval of the surroundings in consumption. This issue, also named as "Social approval", states that the symbols are explained and interpreted in the same way. During the evaluation of the individual in his/her symbolic consumption, the stage of self-explanation by the individual during his internal communication is added as much as the social approval. They continue their social existence in a "symbolic" environment added to the natural conditions, forming and developing their personalities via symbols. Thus, the fact that the existence of the products, services, brands and images are used and consumed by individuals contributes to the definition of their identities. Images replace the symbolic sources in forming the consumer personalities, thus they are also used as the communication means of the individual (Kuşakçıoğlu, 2003).

In line with the definitions above, it can be stated that the consumption is in a position of being an instrument within the formation and presentation of the personality concept apart from the fulfillment of the physical needs of the individuals. Explaining the consumption that is an instrument for the formation and presentation of the personality concept and the loyalty towards the brand is only possible by putting forth what the relation between the personality and consumption is in terms of a social environment.

In conclusion, in order to understand the brand loyalty, one firstly must put forth what kind of symbolic meanings are given to the brand during its socializing period. Secondly, it should be explained how these meanings are formed with social interaction and how they have emerged within a subjective period belonging to the individuals. Finally, the elements of the process of personality and brand completing each other and the progress of this process should be understood in order for the consumer to develop a brand loyalty. In order to understand

these three phenomenons, the interpretative paradigm provides a highly convenient ground. To summarize, the model required to explain the brand loyalty is based on three elements; 1-Interaction 2-Symbolic value and meanings and 3-Personality. The model assumptions can be explained as follows;

1- The personality develops by being affected by the people around.

2- What the brand means to the consumer occur by passing from an objective filter during social interaction process.

3- The consumer tends to prepare the brand which s/he believes to send a correct message to the society about him/her.

4- While committing a brand choice, the consumer expects his/her behavior to be approved by the surrounding social actors.

5- The consumer feels a loyalty towards the brand as a result of the fact that s/he accepts the brand that is approved by the surrounding social actors as a supplementary element for his/her personality.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the positivist paradigm has some problems in explaining the brand loyalty phenomenon to which the individual attributes symbolic meanings, commingling irrational actions. The fact that the positivist paradigm can explain the brand loyalty, which sometimes even the customer has difficulties in grounding on a logical basis (Zaltman, 2004), includes some difficulties in methodological aspect as well In order to understand such a process, one firstly needs to understand what the social context to which s/he is included means to the consumer. For the positivist paradigm, the fact that each consumer can attribute meanings and values to the brand within his/her own objectivity during the meaning explanation process of the brand becomes of secondary importance.

Certainly it cannot be claimed that the positivist paradigm can have no contribution towards understanding the brand loyalty; however, it seems like a hard effort to explain the brand loyalty completely with a pure positivist approach. Positivist paradigm will be able to provide explanation regarding the brand loyalty only for limited occasions which the consumer displays the purchase behavior that s/he can explain logically. On the other hand, the instruments and insight provided by the interpretative paradigm is in the position of bringing much more solid initiatives to the subject. The role of symbolic interactionism for the meanings arising as a result of the interactions an in this processes of explaining the personality, gives way to a quite solid conceptual path to put forth the brand loyalty realistically. In this sense, it is considered that this humble conceptual model put forth in this study in order to understand the brand loyalty from a symbolic interactionist perspective might help the researchers in lighting a bulb of idea.

Future research is needed to further exploration of the brand loyalty with the help of qualitative methods based on symbolic interactionism. With the help of these researches brand loyalty concept can be understand more deeply. Future researches should also consider other phenomenons that can be explained by interactionist perspectives. Luxury consumption, hedonic buying, ongoing information searches and many other phenomenons still need deeper explanation and positive perspectives have some limitation on this occasion. The domination of positivist perspective in marketing area can be broken with explain those phonemons based on different and more appropriate perspectives.

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