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**WMG Service Systems Research Group  
Working Paper Series**

# **Exploring Store Loyalty From an Interpersonal Theory Perspective**

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Helen Woodruffe-Burton**

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The Service Systems research group at WMG works in collaboration with large organisations such as GlaxoSmithKline, Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems, IBM, Ministry of Defence as well as with SMEs researching into value constellations, new business models and value-creating service systems of people, product, service and technology.

The group conducts research that is capable of solving real problems in practice (ie. how and what do do), while also understanding theoretical abstractions from research (ie. why) so that the knowledge results in high-level publications necessary for its transfer across sector and industry. This approach ensures that the knowledge we create is relevant, impactful and grounded in research.

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- Dematerialisation
- Service Design
- Value and Business Models
- Visualisation
- Viable Service Systems and Transformation

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# Exploring Store Loyalty From an Interpersonal Theory Perspective

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## Introduction

Many perspectives have been employed in store/brand loyalty research (such as social identity perspective, e.g., He et al, 2011; relational perspective, e.g., Kim and Lee, 2010; interpersonal relationship theory, Fournier and Yao, 1997). However, there is still a lack of progress in terms of conceptualisation and measurement of store loyalty, currently still dominated by cognitive/psychological and behavioural approaches (e.g., Bloemer and de Ruyter, 1998). Despite customer loyalty being regarded as a relational phenomenon (e.g., Sheth and Parvaiyar, 1995; Kumar and Shah, 2004), relational aspects of store loyalty are not well represented in store loyalty research. We argue that interpersonal relationship theory can provide a theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of consumer store loyalty and to improve measurement of store loyalty. This research investigates consumer store loyalty from an interpersonal relationship theory perspective to explore why and in what sense consumer store loyalty exists. We have identified various types of loyal consumer store relationships, which reflect different characteristics and strength. Meanings consumers derive from their interactions with these stores were also examined. The analysis shows that store loyalty can be reframed as one component in a multifaceted construct of consumer/store relationships in terms of strength and character. Store relationship quality (relational aspects/attributes) can potentially be used to measure store loyalty, which can reflect its relational strength and characteristics.

### Existing Research on Store Loyalty

The literature shows the lack of progress in terms of understanding, measuring and leveraging of store loyalty. It can be argued this may be attributed to store loyalty's theoretical foundations. Indeed, much store loyalty research (including the most recent research) adopted the established loyalty frameworks such as Oliver (1999), Dick and Basu (1994) and Bloemer and de Ruyter (1998). These conceptualizations have regarded consumer loyalty as the consequence of psychological evaluation and decision processes which aim to achieve the optimization of benefits (e.g. Bloemer and de Ruyter, 1998). The focus is on the cognitive process for the development of store attitude and subsequent behavioural outcomes. Thus, store loyalty is either defined as 'high positive attitudes and repeat purchase behaviour towards a store' (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Omar, et al, 2010); or 'a tripartite attitudinal component (cognitive, affective and conative) plus a behavioural component' (Nesset et al, 2012). However, cognitive approaches to store loyalty cannot capture consumers' experiential hedonic and emotive experiences in their mundane shopping.

Many research findings reveal that emotive, hedonic, symbolic and expressive meanings consumers derive from their lived experiences are important for development and sustainability of their loyalty (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fouriner and Yao, 1997). For example, 'emotional

loyalty', which focuses more on 'emotional bonds' (e.g. Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Kim and Lee, 2010), 'emotional connections' and brand 'love' (e.g., Fullman and Gross, 2004; Berry and Carbon, 2007; Carrol and Ahuvia, 2006) can be useful constructs to understand and describe store loyalty. Research has demonstrated that emotional connections between employees and consumers can generate exceptional service quality and service loyalty (e.g., Reynolds and Arnould, 2000; Sierra and McQuitty, 2005; Moris, et al, 2005). Emotional connectivity between consumers and organizations can feature higher levels of meanings and commitment for consumers (Berry and Carbone, 2007). Brand love links to higher level of brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Interpersonal relationships (such as service provider and consumer; consumer-consumer) have been found to be more important than tangible products for the formation of service loyalty (e.g., Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Wong and Sohal, 2003; Chao, et al, 2007; Han, et al, 2008). Hart et al (2007) suggest that shopping enjoyment has a significant influence on consumers' store (re)patronage behaviours. However, these research findings have not been reflected in conceptualisations and measurement for store loyalty. Thus, these findings challenge the existing assumptions for store loyalty.

The lack of advancement is also reflected in operationalization of store loyalty concept. 'Share of wallet' (e.g., Cooli, et al, 2007; Zhang, et al, 2011) and 'repeat purchase intention' (e.g., Martos-Partal and Gonzalez-Benito, 2011; Meyer-waarden and Benavent, 2009) has been central to store loyalty measurement for much recent store loyalty research. 'Share of wallet' intends to divide individual consumer's store loyalty among stores the customer patronises, with the assumption that the smaller share of purchase means smaller share of loyalty and less meaningful for the consumer. By using the proportion/share of purchase, consumers are categorised either as 'loyal' or 'disloyal'. This can lead to the neglect of various levels and forms of loyalty and other valuable and meaningful relationships, which might even be labelled as 'disloyal' (Fournier and Yao, 1997). In addition, 'repeat purchase intention' has been criticised as their inability to explain how and why consumers' store (re)patronage occurs. These measures merely reflect outcomes of decision-making process but internal dispositions are ignored. Despite recognizing underlying preferences for stores as reasons for store patronage, however, these measures have ignored preference creation process (e.g., Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). Moreover, these indicators for store loyalty cannot differentiate between repeat purchase behaviour and loyalty behaviour (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973; Jarvis and Wilcox, 1977; Dubios and Laurent, 1999). Thus, the measures for store loyalty such as 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intentions' cannot distinguish loyalty behaviour, habits and situational-driven store patronage.

In contrast to the cognitive approach, consumer brand loyalty research has been conducted from anthropological/sociological approach, which is

concerned about meanings and emotions consumers derived from their lived experiences (Fournier and Yao, 1997, p.452). This perspective enables researchers to investigate the dynamics, diversities and varieties of valuable consumer relationship forms. As a relationship phenomenon, brand loyalty is reframed as one component in a multifaceted construct of consumer/brand relationships. The focus is on hedonic/emotive and relational aspects of consumer loyalty, which is developed from their interactions with brands in their daily life by highlighting personal meanings consumer invests in their brands.

Thus, this research attempts to explore store loyalty from an interpersonal relationship perspective to enhance our conceptualisation, measurement and leveraging of store loyalty.

### **Methodology**

The research is exploratory in nature. The present study explored loyal store relationships of UK supermarket shoppers. A single store category provides common ground for comparing store loyalty phenomena. Indeed, it does limit the generalizability of findings. However, exploratory nature of the research is concerned more with depth of understanding than generalization/quantification of the findings. The research approach was existential phenomenology, adopting the format and context outlined by Thompson et al (1989). Ten women living in the UK who were in paid employment outside home at the time of the study, were recruited through social networks and “snowball” approach. This was a relatively small group but one which represents an acceptable number for qualitative research aimed at developing insight and understanding (McCracken, 1988; Fournier and Yao, 1997).

The objective is to understand the nature of loyal store relationships, therefore, consumers store loyalties are identified and their store experiences are used for the data analysis. The criteria for selecting loyal consumers are ‘share of wallet’ and ‘repurchase intentions’. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis and were of between one and two hours’ duration. The interviews were recorded, with the respondents’ full agreement, for later transcription. Within this paper, respondents have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

The analysis aimed to identify meaningful patterns in the data that would enhance our understanding of consumer store loyalty phenomena. Participants’ phenomenological descriptions were interpreted according to the criteria noted by Thompson et al. (1990). The idiographic analysis started with an impressionistic reading of the transcripts. The goal of this analysis was a holistic interpretation of what role stores play in the life of the given individual and a holistic interpretation of consumer/store relationships manifested in the life of the respondent. During the within-person analysis, we focused on participants’ interactions with their loyal

stores within the contexts of significant personal, psychological, and sociological themes and details for store meanings. The second level of interpretation involved an across-person analysis, the aim of which was to discover convergent themes capturing commonalities and patterns in the data across stores and individuals. Through the comparisons, these themes were reduced to fundamental patterns that constitute the principal emergent themes in the data (Schouten, 1991). Literature on shopping and consumption meanings informed the construction of themes. Interpersonal relationship theories also informed construction of themes related to consumer store relationships such as basic relationship descriptors, provisions of relationships, and relationship bond types. After we finished the second stage of data analysis, we returned to individual participants' profiles. At this stage, individual participants' profiles were organized by symbolic metaphors of relationship descriptors catching significant personal meanings participants attached to their stores.

### **Theme 1: 'loyal' store relationships**

According to traditional 'loyalty' criteria, three types of loyal consumer store relationships have been identified: (1) committed partnership; (2) kinship relationship; (3) best friends.

#### *(1) Helen and TESCO: the case of committed partnership*

Helen shops weekly for almost all of her groceries in TESCO. TESCO positions itself on best value, choice and service. Helen's store loyalty can be defined by high 'share of wallet' and high 'repeat re-patronage intention'.

*I buy all my weekly food and everything just everything we need for the week. ...So I don't need to shop everywhere else because it saves time. ...I think the food are fresher and last longer...they might last the whole week...So in that way, I can plan to shop the whole week.*

Helen has a busy life style: shopping, cooking, and looking after two school-aged daughters, working (part time) and studying (full time). 'Time' has been a main factor affecting the meanings of products and services for her (e.g., Thompson, 1996). In this sense, functionally, TESCO is convenient for her. Indeed, she can conduct her weekly shopping tasks with minimum time and effort in one store. In the interview, she described the convenience she can get including: variety and quality of food; store layout (cleanliness and wide aisles); helpful staff service.

In addition to functional support, various kinds of pleasures she obtains from shopping in the store include: being recognised and valued as a valuable customer and being served well by the same staff. Thus, she feels that staff try to build connections with her and thus she feels comfortable shopping there. Research has shown that personal service can be a means for the establishment and enhancement of relationships between consumers and sales people (Beatty, et al, 1996).



*They seem friendly and value you as a customer... You feel sort of connected although it is a big store. It almost feels like a corner shop we used to have many years ago where everybody knew everybody. Because the staff are so friendly, they might not know you, you feel they try to connect with the customers.*

The social support Helen obtains (such as personal interactions and communications with friends, neighbours and people she knows) makes her feel good and makes the store feel personal to her, in line with existing research (e.g. Stone, 1954; Westbrook and Black, 1985; Rosenbaum, 2006).

*I see people I know In TESCO. ...It is sort of a thing for me to go there and meet people. It is fun when you walk around and my daughter says 'hello'. And I saw my friend's husband waving there. ...That is a bonus.*

Shopping in TESCO is also a means for Helen to construct and maintain her self-concept and identity (social/group/collective identity and private self). Customers can establish psychological connections with other customers in store through 'self-categorization'. In this process, individuals define themselves as 'self-stereotyping' in terms of the characteristics that define the in-group as opposed to out-group members (Guidmond, et al, 2006). Customers tend to compare themselves with other customers in terms of relevant qualities by focusing on intra-group similarities and inter-group differences. These comparisons can lead to enhanced identification between individuals and intra-group members. For Helen, there are three attributes/characteristics for her self-categorization: the way of dressing, social status, and age. Helen is a lady who always dresses well. She describes that:

*I feel comfortable in the TESCO store. I have noticed that people there tend to be better dressed in TESCO.*

Helen's identification with groups of shoppers in TESCO based on standards of dress can be described as her identification to her actual reference group. Indeed, self- and social-identification are identified as antecedents for store/brand loyalty (e.g., He et al, 2011; Jones and Kim, 2011). Helen has three daughters. She feels that she can identify with customers in TESCO because they all have well-behaved children.

*You do get children but they seem not to be wild. You know they seem to be under control. Sometimes I take my daughters to TESCO when they went dancing. They come with me...They are pretty well-behaved in the supermarkets. I trained them.*

For Helen, customers in TESCO are 'younger' and 'moving faster in the store'. She can identify with these customers in TESCO.

*When I think about it in TESCO, I think you get younger people because everybody is moving around at a fast pace.*

Helen can express an aspect of her private self (spiritual self), which is manifested as her eco-concern through reusing carrier bags. According to relationship theory, a relationship partner can provide self and identity support (Duck, 1977). Indeed interdependence has developed between Helen and TESCO, which has expressive value for her and further enhanced her relationship with the store.

*They give you rewards for taking your own carrier bags there. And I like the green issue that you can take your own bags... In TESCO, you feel encouraging, you feel comfortable.*

Helen likes browsing and buying things she does not need. Indeed, she perceives this behaviour as one of her undesired self. However, shopping once a week enables her not to encounter her undesired self.

*If I go somewhere else, I buy extra things I don't need each time I go to the shop.*

Grocery shopping has been regarded as life role tasks and is related to social status –'Housewifery' (Miller, 1998). Shopping in TESCO enables her to fulfil her life task role very successfully and construct her conative perspective of self (Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw, 2011).

#### *(2) Clare and ASDA: the case of kinship*

Clare has shopped in ASDA for 25 years and is loyal according to the traditional criteria. ASDA is positioned on low price and promises to be 10% lower in price than competitors.

Clare has to pay for groceries from her wage and has a tight budget for her grocery shopping. She always buys products that are on special offer or marked down and buys ASDA own branded products. Thus, the functional support such as 'value for money' is crucial for Clare. The store is convenient in terms of her familiarity with store layout and products. The pleasures Clare gained from shopping in ASDA primarily lies in her feeling of being in control. The sense of control can make her shopping easier and more enjoyable. In addition, with recognition from staff (having a small chat) and other customers (nodding) and the familiarity with other customers, social support makes the store feel personal to her.

Shopping in TESCO is a means for Clare to construct and maintain her self-concept and identity (relational self). After twenty-five years shopping in ASDA, all her family like ASDA food and enjoy shopping there. Thus, the shared preference for the store and ASDA food can be the means for Clare

to express and communicate her relational self and family identity ( Epp and Price, 2008). In addition, ASDA has always supported her life role tasks throughout her life stages. Indeed, we can use 'kinship' to describe her relationship with ASDA. Women view grocery shopping as predominantly a gendered, female activity associated with their legitimate life role tasks in the family (Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw, 2011). ASDA provides the support which allows her to form and express her conative perspective of self-concept competently.

Due to external constraints (financial and relational), she is not able to shop in different supermarkets. However, Clair likes trying new things so '*putting the same things in the trolley every week*' reduces shopping gratification over time. Therefore, she goes to other stores occasionally for some variety.

*I go to TESCO, Morrison's and Sainsbury's. But I always find if I go to different supermarkets, I tend to buy just things like different washing-up with different smell or different shampoo. I don't really buy different food. I usually end up spending a lot more money and not having half of the grocery done.*

Clare's relationship with ASDA is self-determined and voluntary. In order to decrease temptations of other supermarkets, she tries to reduce other stores' attractiveness by denying differences between products from different supermarkets. The way for her to sustain the relationship is through cognitive mechanisms such as devaluation of alternatives. This indicates that she is committed to continuing the relationship, the endogenous commitment. Clare used 'love' many times when she talked about the store. Her relationship with ASDA is centred more on affective attachment, not being exclusive nor entailing fidelity.

### *(3) Barbara and Booths: the case of best friend*

Barbara's relationship with Booths can be categorized as 'loyalty' in terms of 'repeat purchase intention' and 'share of wallet'. She has conducted her main weekly shopping in Booths for 14 years. Booths is a regional chain which specialises in high quality products ("the best products available", according to the company website) and service. While Booths is not positioned on low price, they promise to match competitor prices on everyday basics and big brands. Stores tend to be smaller format than ASDA and TESCO.

Working part time and being relatively well-off, Barbara has less external constraints for grocery shopping. Thus, Barbara can make voluntary choices in terms of where to shop and what to buy. Functionally, convenience of Booths lies in: location and facility (being the nearest store with parking facility) and size of the store (allowing her to get everything she needs very quickly and easily). However, for her, '*it has not always been the cheapest things and it is much better than it used to be*'.

The main pleasure Barbara obtained in the store is personalising, which has been manifested in social support, personal service, supporting her personal values and Booths' very high quality service.

Social support makes Booths store more 'intimate' and 'personal' than other supermarkets. This kind of recognition and connection with other people are very important for her. Indeed, she always meets and chats with customers she knows. In addition, she knows several check-out staff and meat counter assistants and always has a conversation with them. Booths feels personal to her as she thinks the store provides personal service to customers. For example, she witnessed how the staff cared for and helped a customer, who suffers from dementia. Booths is personal for her because it shares and support her personal values, for example, Barbara always supports local farmers partly because of her connections with farmers. Thus, she always buys locally produced meat and vegetables and Booths specialise in local and regional produce. This makes her feel that Booths shares and support her personal values. She appreciates their efforts for customers. For example, Booths tried to make use of the limited space and provide the best product varieties. What impressed her is that Booths' beer collection gives customers the best and cheapest bottled beers. She also saw staff constantly re-stocking the shelf and thus it is very rare to find products unavailable in Booths.

Symbolically, she can construct and maintain various aspects of self and identity through shopping in Booths and using Booths' products. Booths can bring back her memory of her past. For example, when she was a little girl, there were a lot of local corner shops. Indeed, Booths is like the local corner shop she used to have when she was a little girl. In Booths, the meat counter reminds her of the traditional butchers. It can be suggested that the layout of the store can represent her 'past' self. In addition, the size and layout of the store makes her comfortable because it reflects her taste/disposition (e.g., Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw, 2011).

However, existing research shows that 'thrifty' is an important disposition for women to be regarded as successfully fulfilling life role tasks. Barbara described how her husband likes bargaining hunting. The data show that 'thrifty' is a disposition at the personal level, a shared attribute between her and her husband at the relational level and a virtue shared by all family members at the family level. Thus, in order to reconcile these aspects of self and identity at various levels, she does her shopping in other stores as well (ALDI, a discount store). More importantly, she shopped around to save money in order to pay the premium prices at Booths.

Barbara's relationship with Booths is centred more on the 'intimacy' through self-disclosure and support with regard to her personal values. Her relationship with Booths can be described as 'best friend', which is voluntary

and self-determined. However, her relationship with Booths does not entail exclusivity and fidelity. She has to pay for the premium prices for produces in Booths. This is in contradiction with one of her disposition-‘thrifty’. Thus, she has to shop in other stores to get the bargains to save money and then she can justify her choice to shop in Booths. This indicates that she is committed to continuing the relationship, i.e., the endogenous commitment.

These three stories have shown that store loyalty relationships entails not only high ‘share of wallet’ and ‘repeat purchase intentions’ but also emotional bonds. These emotional bonds can sustain loyal relationships (e.g. Carroll and Anhui, 2006; Yim, 2008; Kim and Lee, 2010). Indeed, these strong relationships have developed from store-self connection formed at the level of life themes. These loyal relationships are grounded in the predictability of performance of stores and sense of control participants can get in their hectic mundane lives. Culturally, wife and/or mother roles are fundamental for women’s self and identity. In reality, there are many external constraints that can impact on their ability to fulfil these roles (Thompson, 1996). Support from supermarkets is crucial for them to fulfil their life roles and to maintain their conative perspective of self and identity. Store and life-theme connection proposition (Fournier and Yao, 1997) can further extend our understanding of the factors motivating formation of store loyalties beyond store image congruence theories (Sirgy,1982; Sirgy, et al, 2000). This theme has threaded through all three loyal relationships. Consumers also strive to maintain various levels and aspects of their self and identity. These self-concept factors make roles more difficult to fulfil. They have to juggle between supermarkets to achieve it. For example, even though Barbara’s favourite store is Booths, however, the high prices in Booths make it impossible to share the disposition of ‘thrifty’ with her family and especially her husband, which is one aspect of her self (relational and collective). In order to communicate this aspect of self (relational and collective family identity), she shops in ALDI and seek bargains in Sainsbury to save money and then she can purchase the local products from Booths, which is significant for her. In order to fulfil the grocery shopping tasks under various constraints, consumers have to use multiple stores for their shopping. All three stories have not revealed exclusivity or fidelity assumed in traditional loyalty definitions.

While sharing a quality of depth and significance, the stories also reveal consumer-relevant features in the character of loyal consumer-store relationship forms. Helen’s loyalty, with its commitment, seems closest to committed partnership. Clare’s loyalty, also with its commitment at individual and family level, can be referenced with the metaphor of ‘kinship’ in light of emotion it contains. Barbara’s loyalty, a process of a shared intimacy development grounded in true understanding and sharing of values. This relationship can be described by another metaphor: ‘best

friend'. These variations in character reflect differences in the locus of relationships, with one on commitment, another in emotional attachment and the other in relation to intimacy.

## **Theme 2: deceptive loyal store relationships**

### *Susan and ASDA: the case of marriage of convenience*

Susan's relationship with ASDA can be categorized as 'loyal' according to 'repeat purchase intention' and 'share of wallet'. Susan has been shopping in ASDA for more than ten years.

The primary support Susan derives from ASDA is mainly functional such as the 'open hours', variety and location. ASDA opens 24 hours with a wide variety and being close to where she lives. Indeed, she shops in ASDA under many external constraints (time pressure) and some situational contingent needs (variety). For example, she had to conduct grocery shopping after work and she had to fit her shopping in her busy schedule. Thus, she shopped in ASDA on regular basis for five years because she had no other choices but to shop in ASDA. Her experience was not pleasant functionally because she had to wait for the staff to replenish the stock and sort out the piles of shopping after mid-night. She switched to Morrison's. But she has to switch back to ASDA because she can only do the shopping in the evenings.

*I have been shopping in ASDA probably for the last ten years.... Actually when I started to shop in ASDA...[], I was working in the evenings and I started to shop on regular basis when I first started to work. I finished work at 10 o'clock. I would go there [] the problems with the shelves. I waited them to refill the shelves...And I found it took so long....after I got home it was midnight and I had to put the shopping away so eventually I stopped shopping there in the evenings because it was too tiring.*

We can see how she struggled to cope with her life roles. Functionally, ASDA was the only solution for her to cope with the grocery shopping and other commitments. Thus, the relationship is not voluntary.

ASDA cannot support her to maintain and construct some aspects of self and identity (private self and social identity). She regards browsing and purchasing things she does not need as one aspect of her undesired self. In ASDA, wide variety of products can become distraction and forces her to encounter her undesired self. From her description, we can see that she has a sense of guilty of her behaviour.

*ASDA is a huge store and we know the distractions, the clothes, DVDs, and things like that. I don't like ASDA because on the one hand it is fun getting distracted but hours can pass and you think that you even have not started your shopping.*

*ASDA, usually I would go for Christmas shopping ... because ...a wide variety of things. I try to avoid ASDA because I spend too much if I go there every week. I will buy clothes every week because they are there and I don't need them and the children don't need them. Say it there was a birthday party, we need to buy a gift and I am shopping that day. ASDA would be a good choice because they sell toys. I can get the food at the same time for convenience.*

Indeed, she has to face the dilemma of work and fun and also ambivalence of her conative aspect of self and her undesired/negative self.

The customers are not her type of people in terms of their appearances and their behaviour (especially the children). She cannot develop psychological and social identification with other customers. The store atmosphere caused by other customers can really make her rush her shopping. She always ends up missing things and not having her shopping done properly. In addition, she does not like the store layout. ASDA cannot represent her personal self and her group identity.

*But I don't think it is nice to look around because it is very, very big so it takes longer to get around and more distractions such as televisions, CD players ...*

*In ASDA, you get mixed people....So you get very big mixture of people, just ordinary working class people, then you get the type on the verge on the street people.*

*I think it is not just their appearance...But I think what does influence me if parents shout at children. It creates a..not good atmosphere. I tried to get away if there are children. I hate children crying...chaotic.*

For Susan, her relationship with ASDA is long-term committed. However, instead of being voluntary, the relationship is constrained by external factors, i.e., her life circumstances. The commitment is externally driven, exogenous and commitment to content. It is 'locked-in loyalty'. Store loyalty measures (such as 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intention') cannot reflect genuinely superficial relationship (lack of emotional bonds). These measurements cannot differentiate different types of commitment. It fails to capture the deceptive characters of store loyalty relationships.

### **Theme 3: 'Non-loyal' store relationships**

According to 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intention' criteria, two types of 'disloyal' positive consumer store relationships have been identified: (1) compartmentalised friendship; (2) childhood friendship.

#### *(1) Sharon and M&S: the case of Compartmentalized friendship*

Sharon's relationship with M&S is 'not-loyalty' according to store loyalty criteria. M&S - Marks and Spencer – food is positioned as very high, luxury quality.

Due to Sharon's tight budget and product prices in M&S, she only shops in M&S on special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas and dinner parties. On these special occasions, Sharon wants to display bits of M&S food to show her love for her family and friends, which is one aspect of her conative self. Sharon is a lady with high self-monitoring. She deems the importance to conform to norms of these rituals and she is sensitive to others' view of her self concept. The provision of M&S food is a way to aid her to perform well on these ritualistic occasions. Indeed, M&S food represents various aspects of self her 'hoped for' self, her desired social/presenting self and her social identification with the aspirational reference group. M&S products have deep and significant connection to her self-concept and identity.

*I do like M&S... I think they are very good quality. But I do think it is very expensive. I don't think I can justify. ...I just wish I had more money. I could buy more and more. I like to be able to shop there more often.*

However, customer group in M&S is not Sharon's actual reference group. She does not identify with this group. Sharon does not normally dress up and she prefers casual style. However, she has to dress up when she shops in M&S. She does not feel high self-regard when she is among other customers in the store. There is not much acceptance and recognition from staff in M&S store. Sharon's description of her experiences indicated that she was not treated well in M&S. Due to lack of identification with and recognition from others (customer and staff), she does not feel M&S is personal to her.

Clearly, Sharon experiences ambivalence between positive personal (ideal and possible) self and negative social self. Thus, on one hand, she tries to avoid the store but on the other hand, she is attracted to the store due to the need for aspiration and sensorial stimulation (fantasy) from browsing M&S products.

*I think some of the customers are maybe different. Sometimes I think 'Oh, they are all dressed up to go shopping'. Many buy the full week's shopping there. I don't feel that comfortable there. I don't feel like a normal week shop you go there. I feel like you should make more effort to get dressed up before you go in.*

*Sometimes in M&S, I think if you don't dress up, you just feel you are not welcomed. [...] it is just me feel like that. It is not the staff that necessarily make you feel like that. I think sometimes in all supermarkets you might get staff ...just cannot be bothered if you ask them something. I think it is just down to the person. And some people are just more helpful, aren't they? I don't think I felt too bad.*

The metaphor of 'compartmentalised friendship' can be used to describe Sharon's relationship with M&S. Her M&S relationship is highly situation-confined enduring friendship with low intimacy. However, her M&S



relationship also is characterised with higher socio-emotional rewards and (expressive) interdependence. Indeed, the 'non-loyal' relationship is meaningful and enduring for Sharon. However, the store loyalty measurement cannot capture the meanings and emotional aspects of Sharon's relationship with M&S. Customers can be highly committed to this relationship. Potentially consumers can increase their 'share of wallet' when their life circumstances allows them to do so. This type of relationship categorised as 'not-loyal' can be very important for retailers.

### *6.2 Kate and Local shops: the case of Childhood friendship*

Kate's relationship with local shops is 'non-loyal' according to the store loyalty criteria.

Kate grew up in a small village where there were a lot of local shops. Functionally, these shops were convenient, always being there for emergency.

*It was not just a shop. It affects family life really[...]They were closed on Sunday. We could go and knock on the door. They would let us in and get what we need. ...*

Like her 'close' friends, Kate had some fun and had shared good times with these shops. These shops could remind her of her past experiences and memories. From her narratives, these corner shops could represent her past and nostalgia self. She could gain various kinds of social support. For example, she always had some personal 'gossiping' with staff and other customers. Due to the self-disclosure with people, she feels that there are intimacy between her and the stores. The intimacy developed in 'commercial friendship' has been explored by Price and Arnould (1999). Indeed, these shops were not only physical place but also third place, which is personal for her and meaningful in her life (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2006). Emotionally she feels attached to these shops. It was the only place she could really enjoy grocery shopping.

*I know the staff there and I can have a chat. You actually know them as friends. So it is quite nice to go in and have a chat and catch-up to see if they have got any news.*

She intended to buy too much when shops in these stores. She could not afford to do so due to her financial situation. Kate has to face the ambivalence between her intention of supporting these stores and dealing with her financial problems. The dilemma also represents the ambivalence between her life role task fulfilment (conative aspect of her self-concept) and her seeking for hedonic experiences and personal meanings. In addition, the ambivalence also reflects her struggle to maintain her relational self. For example, her husband thinks thrifty and seeking value for money is important for grocery shopping. Thus, conformity to these

values is crucial for her to maintain her personal and relational self. In addition, the external constraints such as the financial and relationship factors make the ambivalence more severe. Thus, she personally could not support these corner shops. Moreover, she has to witness the closing down of these stores.

*Sometimes you feel you should support your local shop [...]But when you go in, you always end up buying a bit more and you can spend nearly as much as your whole weekly shop for a few bits and pieces. I find it pretty annoying.*

The metaphor of 'childhood friendship' can be used to describe Kate's relationship with these local shops. Kate is frequently engaged in the affective relationship, which started from her childhood. However, corner shops are not her main shop. Thus, from mainstream store loyalty criteria, she is not loyal to the stores. However, these shops have deep and significant connection with and meanings for her self-concept.

Certain consumer store relationships (Sharon's M&S and Kate's local shop relationships) have not revealed high wallet share and high frequency of repurchase. However, they are characterised with meanings and significance in consumers' lived experiences. These store relationships are particularly meaningful in terms of the quality of depth and significance. However, the mainstream loyalty criteria fail to capture the depth regarding the meanings and significance of these 'non-loyal' relationships.

### **Discussion**

Our analysis of consumers' loyal store narratives revealed that consumer-store loyalty measured by 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intentions' can vary in terms of character and strength. Further, some store 'loyal' relationships do not possess characteristics and strength at all while some consumers' 'not-loyal' store relationships could be especially meaningful to consumers. Thus it can be suggested that store loyalty measured by 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intention' cannot reflect the diversity and dynamics of the meaning-laden consumer-store loyalty.

From the analyses, we can argue that an interpersonal relationship perspective can enhance our understanding of consumers' store loyal behaviour at the lived experience level. Store loyalty brings to our mind such a wide range of meanings and individual interpretations that the traditional loyalty concept or even 'loyal relationships' cannot capture them. Store-customer bonds also reveal diversity in characters (e.g., committed relationship, best friends, kinship, childhood friendship, etc), depth (connection to the life theme or other aspects of self and identity). However, the cognitive –attitude dominant conceptualization fails to capture the diversity and depth of consumers' store loyalty.

Consumers' store loyalty stories also reveal that the culturally-biased assumption for loyalty as exclusive partnership cannot apply to store loyalty domain. The analysis shows that 'exclusive' relationships between consumer and store do not exist. Participants in this study regard fulfilling life role tasks as their primary objective for grocery shopping. Due to various external constraints, they have to juggle between various stores. Consumers have a constellation of stores to conduct their grocery shopping even though they do claim that they have favourite stores. As long as the preferred store remains a place to support their life role tasks, to give them some other values for them to maintain and construct various aspects of self and identity, they will maintain a regular and meaningful place in participants' lives. Even the strongest of consumer-store bonds seems to align various value constellations (functional, hedonic, symbolic and expressive) with a focus on reconciliation of various aspects and levels of self and identity that the postmodern consumers have to juggle (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). As Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that expression of loyalty does not need to be associated with exclusivity. What is more important is their emotional attachment and sincerity intention over time. The mainstream cognitive-based or behavioural-based store loyalty concept cannot recognize multi-store relationships. With a meaning-based perspective, we are able to address the 'contextual, temporal and evolutionary aspects' (Fournier and Yao, 1997, p. 467) of participants' store choices. Indeed, this perspective can be meaningful lens through which to explore lived experiences of consumer store loyalty phenomena. Thus, the relevance of current cognitive-psychological-evaluative oriented conceptualizations of exclusive committed relationships between consumer and their stores in current market and culture has to be challenged and questioned.

In order to measure store loyalty, we agreed with what Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested using a construct to single out those strong and potentially enduring relationships. This construct is sensitive to many factors that contribute to the strength and endurance of consumer brand/store over time (p.468). From earlier research (Wakenshaw 2011), five dimensions of consumer store relationship have been identified in the context of grocery shopping: interdependence (functional, experiential and expressive), affective bonds (love or liking), intimacy, commitment (exogenous and endogenous) and partner quality. Table 2 summarised the relationship quality 'profiles' for participants' loyal and other stores based on the researcher's qualitative interpretations of each stores performance according to the dimensions of consumer store relationship quality (SRQ).

We now discuss the question raised: can 'share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intention' reflect consumer store loyalty? Is the SRQ a better measurement for store loyalty relationship? For loyal store relationships, when measured by the criteria ('share of wallet' and 'repeat purchase intention'), two measures (SRQ and mainstream criterion) come to the

similar results for three types of store relationships (such as ‘committed partnership’, ‘best friends’, ‘kinship’). However, results from mainstream measures will disguise the differences between these relationships in terms of depth of meanings and significance. Mainstream measures failed to identify the non-loyal relationship (such as ‘marriage of convenience’). More importantly, SRQ measurement can reveal meanings and significance of non-loyal store relationships defined by traditional criteria. As a result, many valuable consumer-store relationships would be ignored under the loyal/disloyal dichotomy. In addition, description of the variance in relationship strength with respect to the SRQ attributes can provide a diagnostic tool to manage the relationships. Indeed, these distinctive characteristics of diverse loyalty forms require tailored marketing actions for development and management over time.

The analysis proposes that it is useful to expand our view of consumer store loyalty from consumers’ loyal store connections to meaningful relationships consumers form with the stores. The analysis also suggests that meaningful and individual-assigned consumer-store relationships can be of interest to retailers and more importantly, how they can manage these relationships according to their different relationship qualities of consumer-store connection. Indeed, as Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that a shift is needed from the existing ‘share-based’ to ‘meaning based’ perspective. The store loyalty analysis can really capture the ‘richness, sensitivity and consumer-relevance’ (p.468).

### **Conclusion**

Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that relationship perspective has not been tested against other alternative theoretical frameworks; this study is a response to Fournier and Yao’s (1997) call. The research shows that relationship perspective is one useful approach to the conceptualisation and measurement of store loyalty behaviour. This study is a context-bound exploratory study, which extended Fournier and Yao’s (1997) study to store loyalty domain.

The research has demonstrated that existing cognitive-behaviour conceptualization and measurement for store loyalty behaviour has disguised the differences, the diversity and dynamics of meanings and significance of store loyalty. Traditional conceptualizations fail to capture the depth and characteristics of meaning-laden store relationships in consumers’ lived shopping and consumption experiences. The study has some implications for academics. Firstly, the research has shown that stores can become a part of consumers’ lived experiences and entail rich meanings. However, the operationalization and ‘culturally-bound’ (Fournier and Yao, 1997, p.476) definitions of loyalty have hindered our understanding of value of stores for consumers’ lives and their relationship with stores. In order to develop and protect the meaningful consumer-store bonds, by following Fournier and Yao’s (1997) proposition, we also suggest

that in the store loyalty research domain, we can replace the ‘store loyalty’ term with a relationship framework which covers it more accurately.

This study has practical implications for retailers. By moving from share-based exclusive psychological commitment to a broader relationship framework, managers can gain rich insights and information which will enable them to conduct marketing segmentation studies. Managers can further design strategies to develop, enhance and maintain consumer-store relationships. In addition, by viewing the scope of store relationships, managers can pay more attention to the variances of interactions between consumers and stores and the diversities and the heterogeneity of customers and their relationships with stores.

**Table 1: Loyal and non-loyal store relationships by mainstream criteria**

Informants	Store	Type of relationship	Store relationship quality facets									
			Commitment (endogenous)	Commitment (Exogenous)	Interdependence (functional)	Interdependence (experiential)	Interdependence (Expressive)	Affective bond (liking)	Affective Bond (love)	Intimacy	Partner quality	
Helen	TESCO	Committed partnership (L)	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	Med	High
Clare	ASDA	Kinship (L)	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Barbara	Booths	Best friends (L)	High	Low	High	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Susan	ASDA	Marriage of convenience (L)	Low	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Med	Low	Low	Med
Sharon	M&S	Compartmentalised friendship (non-L)	High	High	Med	Low	Low	Low	High	High	Low	High
Kate	Corner	Childhood friendship (non-L)	High	Low	Low	High	High	High	Low	High	High	Med

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