

Turning Customer Feedback into Commitment

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Abstract— A growing number of firms are investing in being on the cutting edge of customer connections. However, when retailers continually promote customer feedback, it can be a huge weakness if there's not a unique and involved communication channel with desirable customer benefits. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of customer product involvement on satisfaction, emotional connectivity, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior. The major findings of this study are that customer product involvement has a strong positive relationship to a customer's satisfaction and emotional connectivity, and brand loyalty, through customer product involvement, significantly influences a customer's word-of-mouth behavior. The participant's responses supported all hypotheses within data analysis. Secondary findings suggest that shoppers who purchase and browse many times per year are more likely to becoming involved in the CPI process.

Keywords— component; customer involvement; satisfaction; emotional connectivity; brand loyalty; word-of-mouth behavior

I. INTRODUCTION

Emergence of Internet has changed the way retailers communicate with customers. Retailers are continually promoting customer feedback forums, virtual brand communities, and inquiring on services. In order to survive in this 'Information Age,' it is crucial for companies to achieve customer product involvement and establish long-term relationships with customers. However, this can be a huge weakness if there's not a unique and involved communication channel with desirable customer benefits. To gain a competitive advantage, all retailers require effective and competent communication solutions in order to continuously meet and exceed their customers' expectations. With the speed of modern telecommunication systems, young customers' expectations and demands for products have dramatically increased. There is a greater need now

more than ever for an efficient network between the fast retailer and consumer. A growing number of firms are investing in being on the cutting edge of customer connections and interactions. "Customerization" (Miceli, Ricotta, & Costabile, 2007), customer co-creation, and reverse marketing are all part of a new mantra for online marketers. Nevertheless, in the age of the "paradox of choice" (Schwartz, 2004), there are no marketing strategies, even customization, which can be adopted without fine calibration (Miceli *et al.*, 2007).

Particularly apparel retailing has evolved greatly over the past decades due to the escalating popularity of 'fast-fashion' and the increasingly accelerated use of e-commerce and Internet shopping. Fast-fashion retailers (i.e., H&M, Zara, etc.) achieve higher turnover by actually creating the demand (Bhardwaj *et al.*, 2011). In addition, products offered by fast-fashion retailers may result from design changes decided upon as a response to actual sales information during the season, which considerably eases the matching of supply with demand (Caro & Gallien, 2010).

Backward and forward knowledge sharing is an extremely important and beneficial line of communication for a global company. Also, very little empirical data on product involvement in the retail sector supports previous literature on this topic.

It is not too much of a speculation that customer-driven technologies and mechanisms will become a high industry standard that all retailers. Encouraging company-customer connectivity through a modern feedback system that promotes customer ideas for apparel will enhance the personal brand experience for any customer shopping in the store or online. Therefore the purpose of this research study is to examine the effects of customer product involvement on satisfaction, emotional connectivity, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior.

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A. *Fast-fashion and Customer Involvement -- Zara*

Zara has become known the number one fast-fashion retailer after posting sales of \$8.15 billion to fellow fast-fashion retailer Hennes & Mauritz's (H&M) \$7.87 billion in 2006 (Bhardwaj, Eickman, & Runyan, 2011). Although more than 50% of Zara's profit is in international retail outlets (Folpe, 2000; Bhardwaj et al, 2011, Zara still has a huge opportunity to innovatively cater to their market by integrating a feedback based involvement system, namely CPI.

Zara has been making constant efforts to incorporate customer feedback into their product development and merchandising (Businessweek.com, 2011). Store managers are to making sure that corporate designers have up-to-the-minute customer information, so they can accurately decide on the latest fabric, cut, and price point for a new garment (Folpe, 2000; Bhardwaj et al, 2011). Vertically integrated, the company's speedy supply chain, from design to production to delivery, has set it apart from any other retailer. Zara uses information and technology to decide on new merchandise, and then uses its own resources to execute new ideas in the fastest possible time (Folpe, 2000; Bhardwaj et al, 2011). The whole process takes as little as 10-14 days thanks to more than 60% in-house production.

However, as resourceful as reverse knowledge sharing is for Zara, the company still has no proficient, full-integrated feedback network in place on the website or across stores. If Zara customers were to become directly involved with the design process through feedback and potentially collaborate with designers and see its implementation into their actual product lines aided by its unique supply chain – dynamic manufacturing, it would gain competitive advantages by consumer involvement and in turn catering to them better than its competition. Therefore, product lines become even more exclusive when customer input is utilized, and then those satisfied customers spread the word to their peers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. *Emotional Connectivity*

The term 'customer commitment' encompasses the psychological and economic attachments that a customer might have towards a particular brand, store or product (Thomson et al, 2005; Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Fogueat, 2011). Dholakia and Bagozzi (1999) have researched that Web users' *mindsets* drive their

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies during Internet browsing. (Miceli et al, 2007).

Research in the area of commitment has identified two different types of customer commitment – affective and continuance (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2003, 2005; Evanschitzky & Wunderlic, 2006; Iglesias et al, 2011). Affective commitment is related to the feelings of a customer towards a brand, and it is based on *personal involvement* with the company (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Oliver (2010) refers to commitment as *affective loyalty* in defining his phases of loyalty development, meaning any brand loyalty exhibited is directed at the degree of affect (liking) for the brand. However, this form of loyalty remains subject to switching, as evidenced by data showing that large percentages of brand defectors claim to have been previously satisfied with their brand, a phenomenon known as the "satisfaction trap" (Oliver, 2010). Thus, it would be desirable if consumers were loyal at a deeper level of commitment (Oliver, 2010).

B. *Brand Loyalty*

Dick and Basu (1994) define loyalty as the relationship between the relative attitude toward an entity (brand/product/service/store/vendor) and patronage behavior (Carpenter & Fairhurst, 2005). Several researchers have argued that high levels of customer satisfaction will result in customer loyalty and will insulate companies from competitors by making consumers less receptive to the marketing efforts of competitors (Fornell et al., 1996; Fitzell, 1998; Carpenter & Fairhurst, 2005). Oliver (2010) sees no true loyalty-enhancing value to loyalty programs despite the fact that they make great strategic sense under the right circumstances. Oliver also proposed a very interesting question: Can the consumer be socially integrated in an exclusive environment that envelops and directs the consumer's choices in a satisfying way? (Oliver, 2010). Other researchers have theorized that customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability are related (Heskett et al., 1990; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Zeithaml et al., 1990; Anderson et al., 1994; Gummesson, 1993; Heskett et al., 1994; Storbacka et al., 1994; Rust et al., 1995; Schneider & Bowen, 1995; Hallowell, 1996; Carpenter & Fairhurst, 2005). Loyalty, with its relation to satisfaction, is now considered the penultimate pursuit (second to profit for those organizations having monetary goals) (Oliver, 2010).

C. *Word-of-mouth Behavior*

According to *BusinessDictionary.com* (2012), word-of-mouth is defined as an oral or written

recommendation by a satisfied customer to the prospective customers of a good or service. Word-of-mouth (henceforth WOM) is one of the most credible forms of marketing since satisfied customers tell other people how much they like a business, product, service, or event. Beatty *et al.* (1996) reported that satisfied retail customers frequently engaged in positive WOM advertising for the retailer with whom they were satisfied. In addition, word-of-mouth recommendations are critical to consumers during the decision-making process about a product or service (Murray, 1991; Giese & Spangenberg, 1997; Carpenter & Fairhurst, 2005). Product or service expectations have been instilled through promotion because of WOM or previous experience (Oliver, 2010). WOM has been shown to have persuasive effectiveness (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Royo-Vela, 2002) as well as a significant impact on consumers' choices (Beale *et al.*, 1981; Richins, 1983) and on post-purchase product perceptions (Bone, 1995; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Some researchers define WOM as an individual's predisposition to purchase a product (Arndt, 1968) and the intention to pass along WOM communication about a specific product (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

D. Customer Product Involvement

This unique construct is developed by the researcher in order to significantly improve upon the relationship between the customer and the brand. Customer Product Involvement (henceforth CPI) is defined by this study as the customer's willing participation in the apparel development process so the brand can communicate and make changes to the product lines. By this definition, CPI is not an existing construct in any other study. By providing the customer with an opportunity to suggest, customize, or give feedback about the brand's apparel products, customer product involvement evolves into a retail concept that can be used to improve satisfaction and develop an emotional connection to a brand, within a customer. A strong potential benefit of customer product involvement is that it will also enhance overall brand image and inspires customer feedback and word-of-mouth through an enjoyable channel. It is a general understanding that customers want a company to care about their thoughts and opinions regarding anything related to their business. This differentiating element using apparel involvement will increase consumer acceptance and draw more revenues from all participating customers and the people they spread the word to. However, even though this is a study-developed concept, CPI can be compartmentalized into three parts: feedback, suggestions, and customization.

Other definitions and previous literature on these three parts and on other types of involvement in this sector are as follows.

Participation is a behavior that may reflect a state of involvement or feedback (Cermak *et al.*, 1994). Participation also refers to the customer behaviors related to specification and delivery of a service, while involvement has traditionally referred to the personal relevance or importance a product has for a consumer (Day, 1970; Greenwald & Leavitt, 1985; Cermak *et al.*, 1994). Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) also argued that highly loyal people tended to exhibit high levels of involvement and that individual and social-situational factors, such as personal values or beliefs, social and cultural norms, influenced the feedback effects of behavioral loyalty (Quester & Lim, 2003).

Successful new product development requires in-depth understanding of the customers, their situation, their needs and their wants (Ka'rkka'inen *et al.*, 2001; Lagrosen, 2001; Lagrosen, 2005). This requires active interaction with customers and the collection of suggestions they have to offer. Consequently, it is valuable to study if, to what extent and how companies involve their customers in their new product development process and what results this involvement yields (Lagrosen, 2005). The Lagrosen (2005) study found a company that had the lowest level of customer involvement usually gathered their input and suggestions from the sales staff, where in contrast, a different company interacted fairly closely with their customers throughout the development process and resulted in high levels of involvement. Previous research by Suh and Yi (2006) found that the direct effects of customer satisfaction on brand loyalty are stronger when input and product involvement is low, whereas its indirect effects, through its mediating impact on brand attitudes are stronger when the previous are high.

The term 'customer involvement in product development' denotes the interaction between customers and the design process and promotes customization (Kaulio, 1998). Customer involvement occurs in different phases of the new product development process. Some customers are only involved in the initial stages of the process; others in the final stages and others interact continuously with the provider during the entire course of development (Lagrosen, 2005). Comparing different methods for involvement requires a framework to which the methods can be related. Kaulio (1998) proposes a framework based on two dimensions:

(1) The longitudinal dimension, which includes the points of interaction between customers and the design process.

(2) The lateral dimension, which captures the depth of customer involvement in the design process. This dimension is divided into three different categories:

- *design for*, where the products are designed based on customer research but the customer is not further involved;
- *design with* denotes an approach which, in addition to the above, also includes displays of different concepts for the customer to react upon; and
- *design by* signifies an approach where customers are actively involved and partake in the product design.

Sometimes customization merely involves modifications of existing products regarding color, form, size etc. In these cases, the customer is involved throughout the process and particularly in the design phase. Frequently, the customer has its own designer or interior architect and the interaction mainly involves this person (Lagrosen, 2005). However, sometimes the customer provides a sketch of their view of the product. In other cases, the design is a matter for discussion between the customer and the company's designers and CAD-technicians (Lagrosen, 2005). From the drawings that they develop together, one or often several full-scale models can be produced for the individual customer or the greater customer congregate.

E. Satisfaction

Reynolds Satisfaction is defined by Severt (2002) as "the affective condition resulting from an overall evaluation of all aspects making up a relationship (i.e. products, prices, a firm's physical facilities, and so on) and an overall evaluation of several interactions among the parties" (Casamassima & Royo-Vela, 2011). According to Geyskens, Steenkamp, and Kumar (1999), satisfaction is linked to psychological factors, such as a partner fulfilling promises (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). A satisfactory purchase is an achievement; it signals that the consumer has mastered the complexity of the marketplace (Oliver, 2010). Oliver (2010) proposed the definition that satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product/service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment (Oliver, 2010). Here,

pleasurable implies that fulfillment gives or increases pleasure or reduces pain, as when a problem in life is solved (Oliver, 2010). However, for the sake of the study, the potential problem could be with the garment. Moreover, fulfillment does not need to be constrained to the case of met needs (Oliver, 2010). Over-fulfillment can be satisfying if it provides additional unexpected pleasure; and under-fulfillment can be satisfying if it gives greater pleasure than anticipated in a given situation (Oliver, 2010). Since satisfaction is positively related to psychological factors and interactions with the retailer, an act of customer product involvement can be predicted to also have a positive effect. Comparatively, goals may be satisfied not just by the products and services that consumers buy, but also by the involvement channels that consumers employ to obtain these products and services (Verhoef & Donkers, 2005; Frambach, Roest, & Krishnan, 2007).

III. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The research model (Customer Product Involvement model) developed for this study incorporates constructs from the virtual brand community's model (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011) and Reynolds and Beatty Model (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). The Customer Product Involvement research model explains how involvement and participation from the customer affects the customer's satisfaction, emotional connectivity and word-of-mouth behavior towards a brand. It is expected that brand loyalty will be affected by involvement, although indirectly. Satisfaction and emotional connectivity are expected to directly affect brand loyalty. Satisfaction and brand loyalty are also to influence word-of-mouth behavior. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed;

H1: Customer product involvement (CPI) will have a positive influence on satisfaction.

H2: Customer product involvement (CPI) will have a positive influence on emotional connectivity with the brand.

H3a: Customer satisfaction will have a positive influence on developing brand loyalty.

H3b: A customer's emotional connection will have a positive influence on developing brand loyalty.

H4a: Customer product involvement (CPI) will have a positive influence on word-of-mouth behavior.

H4b: Customer satisfaction will have a positive influence on word-of-mouth behavior.

H4c: Brand loyalty will have a positive influence on word-of-mouth behavior.

IV. METHODS

A. Survey development and data collection

An online survey was created and administered to males and females 18 years and older those reside in the United States. The questions were adopted and modified from existing literature. Several trend preference questions were personalized from a sample survey from Survey Monkey (2012) regarding fashion styles and Generation Y. In addition, all demographic questions were adapted from the U.S. Census (2000). Survey invitations containing the link to the survey were sent out to potential respondents via email solicitations, social media networks, and a university's online student and faculty list. Respondents were asked about their preference for submitting feedback, suggestions and customizing apparel to determine their likelihood of involvement with a brand. The survey included questions regarding satisfaction, emotional connectivity, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth behavior relating to customer product involvement as well as general shopping habits, trend preferences, and demographic information of the respondents. The online survey was sent to 2,000 shoppers in the United States (the number of useable responses $N = 409$).

V. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A majority of respondents were female ($N = 306$), and more than half (53%) of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25. Surprisingly, the age groups between age 45 and 65+ were almost identically evenly distributed among the 31.3 percent they make up, although only 8 percent represented age group 26 to 34.

Reliability indicates the stability of a measure in a given context. The statistics of Cronbach alpha and item-to-total correlations were undertaken to assess the internal consistency of the instrument (Leo, Bennett, & Härtel, 2005; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Reliability tests were conducted on all 39 items within the 5 constructs and Cronbach's alpha for all items were

above .9 indicating excellent reliability (Cortina, 1993; Kline, 1993)

Pearson correlation was conducted to check the construct discriminant validity. Constructs were moderately correlated yet all coefficients were below 0.85 (Campbell and Fiske, 1959), conforming discriminant validity among the five constructs.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted for hypothesis testing. The results showed that all hypotheses are supported at 0.05 level of significance. Customer product involvement (CPI) appeared to have positive influence on satisfaction ($\beta = .66$, $p = .000$) emotional connectivity with the brand ($\beta = .51$, $p = .000$). Customer satisfaction ($\beta = .41$, $p = .000$) as well as a customer's emotional connection ($\beta = .47$, $p < .000$), showed a positive influence on developing brand loyalty H4a: Customer product involvement (CPI) ($\beta = .10$, $p = .030$), Customer satisfaction ($\beta = .13$, $p = .038$), and Brand loyalty showed a significant impact on word-of-mouth behavior ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$) will have positive influence on word-of-mouth behavior.

VI. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

The major findings of this study are that customer product involvement has a strong positive relationship to a customer's satisfaction and emotional connectivity, and brand loyalty, through customer product involvement, significantly influences a customer's word-of-mouth behavior. The participant's responses supported all hypotheses within data analysis. Secondary findings suggest that shoppers who purchase and browse many times per year are more likely to becoming involved in the CPI process.

Through this research, it has been discovered that customers are less receptive to participating in customer product involvement through feedback, apparel suggestions and customizability of garments as it stands by itself. However, when looking at the ability to customize and give suggestions and feedback by examining how it makes a customer fulfilled, connected, and potentially loyal, the results support a positive outcome. Specifically for H1, customers were more satisfied when asked if a brand would listen to their suggestions and take their input into consideration regarding apparel styles and products. Furthermore, supporting H2, shoppers feel a stronger emotional connection to a brand that does this, as well as

communicates about the suggestions. To add, the respondents that would always feel connected through communication to the brand on this item were mostly female (92%).

The findings for H3a suggest that for loyalty to occur, a customer's satisfaction with the brand and its subsequent products must be quite high, which support Oliver's (2010) findings. H3b suggested that customers cared more about identifying with the brand and making repeat purchases to be considered brand loyal.

It is clear from both qualitative and quantitative findings that word-of-mouth (H4a, H4b, H4c) has a significant impact on consumer brand choices and peer persuasion of where to shop even after a purchase. This finding is supported by the previous work of retail researchers (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Royo-Vela, 2002; Beale *et al.*, 1981; Richins, 1983; Bone, 1995; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Involved and satisfied customers more frequently spread word-of-mouth behavior than those that are uninvolved and unsatisfied. Other findings on word-of-mouth behavior such as high intention to pass along information about a *specific* product also support the work of researchers (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). As anticipated by this study, however, customers will still have strong word-of-mouth behavior whether their interaction experience with the brand is negative or positive. Customers participate in visual and verbal word-of-mouth by showing friends and family their purchases and frequently telling them where they get their favorite apparel items. Customers were very likely to share their involvement experience with others signifying the relationship between word-of-mouth behavior and customer product involvement.

Overall, this study found customer product involvement to significantly influence a customer's satisfaction, emotional connectivity, word-of-mouth behavior, and indirectly brand loyalty. Throughout the process of this study, the researcher hopes to provide clarity to customers and retailers about perceptions of involvement with a brand and how they can expect to improve customer involvement. Customer product involvement as a measure by itself may have yielded less dominant than originally predicted. With that being said it would be interesting to see the constructs reversed and examine how they each measure involvement. Although there could be other tests conducted in the future with this research, the findings confirm that the CPI model works.

This customer product involvement concept may be a bit ahead of its time, but as was stated when

introducing this study, within the next 5 years customer-driven technologies will be a commodity that all businesses will strive to adopt.

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