

The Impact of Sales Encounters on Loyalty Brand TV Samsung in Tehran

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Abstract

sustaining brand loyalty is a key challenge in increasingly competitive markets. Many marketing researchers as well as practitioners emphasize the critical role of the interpersonal interaction between the customer and the salesperson in influencing customer satisfaction, generating favorable brand attitudes and strengthening the bond between the customers and the brand. Using data from 154 dyads of customers and Samsung TV in Tehran, this study shows the perceptions of both the customer and the salesperson regarding the impact of sales encounter performance on satisfaction. Sales encounter satisfaction, in turn, leads to brand loyalty by enhancing brand attitude and salesperson loyalty.

Keywords: Brand loyalty · Brand attitude · Sales encounter · Sales encounter satisfaction · Salesperson loyalty

1. Introduction

The development of consumer-brand relationship has been focus of branding theory in recent years. A brand acts as a mechanism in engaging both buyer and seller in a long-term consumer-brand relationship (Davis, Oliver and Brodie, 2000; Fournier, 1998; Keller 1993, 1998; Rao and Ruekert, 1994). The main input of this relationship is brand experience and the main output of this relationship is brand loyalty. The traditional method of brand marketing mostly appeals to functional links with consumer, but consumers now wish for a more compelling experience (Schmitt, 1999). Schmitt (1999) indicated that experiential marketing has proven itself to be a good starting point for studies on consumer-brand relationship. Franzen (1999) stated that the consumer-brand relationship is in the final stages of the mental brand responses. He also claimed that the consumer-brand relationship is formed by consumer experience and brand knowledge or brand meanings. Meanwhile, Keller (2001) laid out a series of steps for building brand equity, also suggesting consumer-brand relationship as the final step. The consumerbrand relationship depends on largely on the successful establishment of the brand meanings. In highly competitive markets brand loyalty generates numerous benefits like erecting barriers to competitors, generating greater sales and revenues, reducing customer acquisition costs, and inhibiting customers' susceptibility to marketing efforts of competitors (Knox and Walker, 2001; Rundle-Thiele and Mackay, 2001). As such, the sources of brand loyalty and the process of developing brand loyalty are of central concern for brand management. Building brand loyalty requires investments in marketing programs that target current and potential customers. These marketing activities can influence the customers' mindset and may result in a number of different outcomes, such as brand awareness, brand associations, attitude and behavior towards the brand, and eventually brand loyalty as a central measure for brand performance (Keller and Lehmann, 2003). All different areas of a customer's contact with the brand provide an opportunity for creating a favorable attitude and enhancing loyalty to the brand. A key area of contact is the sales encounter (Sujan, 1988; van Dolen et al., 2002; Grace and O'Cass, 2005). Since a salesperson is often the only contact person for the customer (Crosby et al., 1990; Chow and Holden, 1997), she or he can play a crucial role for the customer's experience with and evaluation of the brand (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Berry, 2000; Mitchell, 2002; Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005; Lynch and de Chernatony, 2007). Salespeople epitomize, represent, and define the brand to the customer (Booms and Nyquist, 1981; Berry, 2000; Mitchell, 2002; Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005); by this, they transform and implement a company's brand strategy. During a sales encounter, mainly the interaction between the salesperson and the customer impacts the customer's perception of the salesperson and the perception of the brand (Iacobucci and Hibbard, 1999; de Chernatony, 2001). The salesperson's behavior leads to associations that the customer relates to the brand, specifically to the meaning of the brand. Feelings and experiences during the interaction with the salesperson help the customer construct brand meaning that impacts the preferences for as well as the evaluation of the brand (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2007; Brakus et al., 2009).

Previous studies show that the ability of both the customer and the salesperson to communicate, to interact, and to build strong relationships leads to favorable outcomes in terms of satisfaction (Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Brown and Swartz, 1989; Crosby et al., 1990). So far, previous research has neglected whether

and how these perceptions regarding the interaction between customers and salespeople can also lead to brand loyalty (Gremler and Brown, 1996).

Additionally, most of the empirical studies addressing buyer–seller relationships measure only one side of the salesperson/customer dyad, thus neglecting the interactive character of the encounter. This study contributes to previous research in brand management by investigating how perceptions of the sales encounter performance affect encounter satisfaction and, by this, lead to brand loyalty. For this purpose, the study uses customer–salesperson dyads as units of the analysis.

Brands as intangible assets are one of the most valuable assets that companies have. In this context, brand loyalty is at the hearth of the marketing activities of firms. With intensified fragmentation, sophistication and competition of markets traditional manufacturers of brands are forced to be more concerned with the development and maintenance of long-term relationship with their consumers and therefore seeking to adopt relationship marketing (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Rust, Zeithaml and Lemon, 2004). Brand-loyal consumers may be willing to pay more for a brand (Jacoby and Chestnut 1998; Pessemier 1959; Reicheld 1996). This uniqueness may derive from brand communication, service quality brand trust and loyalty when customers interact and use the brand. Similarly, brand loyalty leads to greater market share when the same brand is repeatedly purchased by loyal consumers (Assael 1998). Furthermore, because of various affective factors, loyal consumers may use more of the brand - that is, may like using the brand or identify with its image (Upshaw 1995)

This loyalty, in turn, may be determined by trust, communication, customer–salesperson dyads in the brand. The present study explores the relationship among brand communication and service quality in a relational context with an emphasis on understanding of the linking role of brand trust and sales encounter performance affect encounter satisfaction and, by this, lead to brand loyalty. In what follows, we begin by defining the constructs of our interest and developing a model of the relationship among these constructs. To develop our hypotheses, we draw from the new and emerging concepts of relationship marketing. In this direction, we present the methods, measures, and results of the surveys designed to test the hypotheses of interest.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. Conceptual framework

A sales encounter is an event of ongoing interaction between the salesperson and the customer where both the salesperson's and the customer's behavior affects perceptions, beliefs, and the behavior of the interacting partner (Susskind et al., 2003; Subramony et al., 2004). Studies in personal selling and service research show a close relationship between the perception of the salesperson and the perception of the customer and her or his satisfaction with the service (Schneider et al., 1992, 1998; van Dolen et al., 2002). The more successful the perception of the encounter, the higher the satisfaction with the encounter will be (van Dolen et al., 2002). A dyadic approach considers (both) the customer's and the salesperson's perceptions of encounter performance and experiences of encounter satisfaction (van Dolen et al., 2002). Customer sales encounter satisfaction relates to brand loyalty. The study considers a direct and an indirect path from satisfaction to loyalty, taking salesperson loyalty and brand attitude into account. Fig. 1 shows the basic framework that guides the present research. The following section develops the underlying hypotheses within this framework.

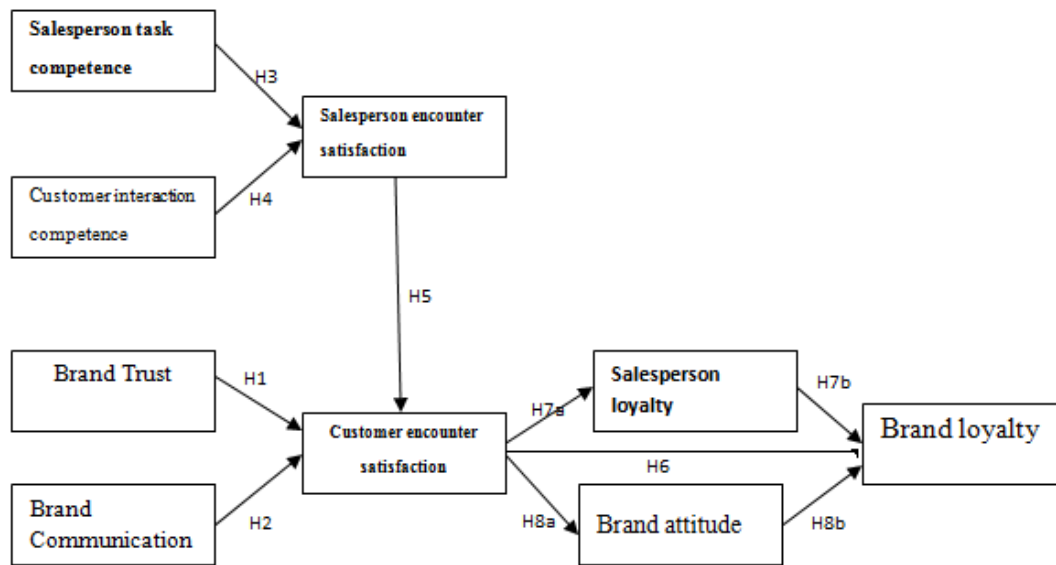


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

2.2. Hypotheses

2.2.1. Brand Communication

Schultz (1998) has argued that the brand is the very key to integrated marketing. The brand, in increasingly, is the central core or hub of what consumers want, need, and consider to be value. And, it is the brand with which customers and consumers have ongoing relationships. The objective of brand communication has been to expose the audience to a brand, whereby the effect can be maximized in terms of increased awareness and higher recall, so that the customer will buy the brand which has the highest recall; and to satisfy the customer to the optimum level. Any exposure to the brand communication affects consumer response, which can be measured by analyzing variables like brand awareness in terms of recall and recognition, favorability, strength and uniqueness of the brand associations in the consumer memory. These dimensions affect other characteristics of brand congruity and relationships among the brand associations in consumer memory for building a positive image. (Panda, 2004, p.9). Brand communication is the primary integrative element in managing brand relationships with customers, employees, suppliers, channel members, the media, government regulators, and community. Brand communication should aim to enhance brand loyalty by making consumer more attached to the brand in order to strengthen the consumer's brand relationship over time (Pearson, 1996; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Brand communication is the most important factor for successfully launching a new service. The key is to 'tangibilize' service concepts, particularly those that are new to the world" (Terrill, 1992, p. 25). Defined as "the consumer's overall evaluation of a brand whether good or bad" (Low and Lamb, 2000, p. 352), brand attitudes encapsulate the meaning that consumers attach to brands, which in turn effects their purchasing behaviour (Low and Lamb, 2000). Positive brand attitudes such as brand trust and loyalty are vital to the long-term success and sustainability of brands (Hoek et al, 2000). As such, astute marketers expend considerable effort on creating and maintaining positive attitudes towards their brands and this is usually achieved through the brand's communications. Brand communication has been consistently found to play an important role in creating positive brand attitudes (Kempf and Smith, 1998). The ability of brand names to evoke feelings such as trust, confidence and the like (Turley and Moore, 1995) indicates that brand names should not be overlooked as a valid and useful avenue of communication in the creation of brand attitudes. (Grace and O'Cass, 2005, p.107). Based on these findings the following hypotheses are suggested:

H1; Brand communication has positively associated with the consumer encounter satisfaction.

2.2.2. Brand Trust

A brand is a trust mark for all intangible trust-generating activity, and absent human touch, it can be a symbol of quality and assurance in building trust (Keller, 1993; Bart, et al., 2005). The importance of the trust construct has already been demonstrated in sustaining buyer and seller relations (Chow and Holden, 1996; Amine, 1998; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Bart et al., 2005; Agustin and Singh, 2005). Trust can be defined as a consumer's

confident beliefs that he or she can rely on the seller to deliver promised services, whereas a relational value can be defined as consumer's perceptions of the benefits enjoyed versus the cost incurred in the maintenance of an ongoing exchange relationship (Agustin and Singh, 2005). The trust in the purchased brand may be viewed as leverage of its credibility, which in return may reinforce the consumers' repeat buying behavior (Amine, 1998). Brand trust is defined as 'the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function (Chaudhuri, and Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust has two dimensions. The first dimension of brand trust, reliability, has a technical or competence-based nature, involving the ability and willingness to keep promises and satisfy consumers' needs. The second dimension comprises the attribution of good intentions to the brand in relation to the consumers' interests and welfare, for example when unexpected problems with the product arise. Consequently, a trustworthy brand is one that consistently keeps its promise of value to consumers through the way the product is developed, produced, sold, serviced and advertised, and even in bad times when some kind of brand crisis arises (Delgado et al., 2003; Doney and Cannon, 1999; Ganesan, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust is essential in building strong consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Urban, Sultan, and Qualls, 2000), and it is positively related to brand loyalty (Lau and Lee, 1999). Consumers, develop trust in a brand based on positive beliefs regarding their expectation for the behavior of the organization and the performance of products a brand represents (Ashley and Leonard, 2009). Trust reflects cumulative effects over time on loyalty in high-involvement, high-service product markets (Chiou and Droge, 2006). The domain of trust in this study is the brand experience in its entirety (encompassing both product and service aspects offered by the brand's provider) but not focusing on specific attributes. Based on the above literatures, the hypotheses for this research is proposed as below:

H2: Brand trust has a positively associated with the encounter consumer satisfaction.

2.2.3. Antecedents of salesperson encounter satisfaction

Little research has focused on salesperson satisfaction with the sales encounter (van Dolen et al., 2002). This study suggests that the salesperson's perceptions of her/his task competence and of the customer's interaction competence impact her or his satisfaction with the encounter. Skills and aptitudes are main determinants of a salesperson's performance (Churchill et al., 1985). In order to capture relevant constructs, such as talent, experience, and expertise, this study refers to perceived task competence of a salesperson in order to predict satisfaction with the sales encounter. The meta-analysis by Churchill and colleagues supports the appropriateness of such self-reported measures as predictors of a salesperson's performance. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), self-efficacy refers to a salesperson's beliefs in her or his ability to perform job-related tasks properly. Thus, the extent to which the salesperson sees herself or himself as capable of fulfilling customer expectations will influence her or his satisfaction with the encounter (van Dolen et al., 2002); the feelings of competence that accompany self-efficacy make her or his job more enjoyable (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Additionally, the salesperson encounter satisfaction depends on her or his perceived performance in interacting with the customer. The performance of the encounter depends particularly on the competence of the interaction partner and thus, the customer comes into play. While the salesperson may perceive her or himself as having high interaction competence, the crucial factor is actually the interaction competence of the customer. In order to be successful, a salesperson tries to establish a strong bond with the customer (Beatty et al., 1996). The interaction competence of the customer facilitates the interpersonal relationship and creates a positive evaluation of the salesperson, for example by showing cooperativeness, the willingness to establish a personal relationship and an interest in the salesperson. When the salesperson perceives the interaction as enjoyable, pleasant, and comfortable, salesperson encounter satisfaction increases (Williams et al., 1990; van Dolen et al., 2002).

H3. The salesperson's task competence as perceived by the salesperson is positively associated with the salesperson encounter satisfaction.

H4. The customer's interaction competence as perceived by the salesperson is positively associated with the salesperson encounter satisfaction.

2.2.4. Encounter satisfaction mirror

The mutual influence between satisfaction of the salesperson and the customer is a "satisfaction mirror" (Heskett et al., 1997). Referring to emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1992), previous studies argue that positive emotions displayed by the salesperson can transfer to the customer (Verbeke, 1997; Pugh, 2001). Emotional contagion pronounces that emotions and attitudinal states of individuals meeting each other automatically transfer between the initiator and the recipient of the encounter in order to synchronize moods and emotional states (Hatfield et al., 1992; Barsade, 2002). According to balance theory, such conforming interactions result in increased attitudinal similarity (Newcomb, 1958) which increases the liking of the interaction partners. Both emotional contagion and balance theory provide an explanation of the relationship between the salesperson encounter satisfaction and customer sales encounter satisfaction. Bernhardt et al. (2000) have provided empirical support for a positive relationship between salesperson and customer overall satisfaction. This study focuses on encounter satisfaction and assumes a similar satisfaction mirror. Although both salesperson and customer satisfaction are mutually dependent, the main focus of marketers is the impact of salesperson satisfaction on

customer satisfaction (Homburg and Stock, 2004). Therefore,

H5. The salesperson encounter satisfaction is positively associated with the customer encounter satisfaction.

2.2.5. Outcomes of customer encounter satisfaction

2.2.5.1. Brand loyalty (direct). The literature distinguishes between two separate loyalty concepts — behavioral brand loyalty and attitudinal brand loyalty (Baldinger and Rubinson, 1996). Behavioral brand loyalty refers to the customer's tendency to repurchase a brand, revealed through behavior or brand sales (e.g., actual purchases observed over time) (Hammond et al., 1996). In contrast, attitudinal brand loyalty contains favorable attitudes towards intention to repurchase as well as commitment towards the brand (Mellens et al., 1996; Bennett and Rundle-Thiele, 2002). The present study focuses on the concept of attitudinal brand loyalty. Several studies show that satisfaction with a brand is a key antecedent of brand loyalty (Bloemer et al., 1999; Szymanski and Henard, 2001; Chandrashekar et al., 2007). If salespeople do indeed represent a brand and transmit a brand image during the encounter with a customer, satisfaction with the encounter may affect brand loyalty in a similar way (Bloemer and Lemmink, 1992). Successful interactions between the salesperson and the customer build customer bonds with the salesperson and thus with the brand as well (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf et al., 2001). Thus,

H6. Customer encounter satisfaction is positively associated with brand loyalty.

2.2.5.2. Brand loyalty (indirect). To further specify the effect of customer encounter satisfaction on brand loyalty, the study introduces two mediating paths. One path is referring to the salesperson by using salesperson loyalty as a mediator while the other path is referring to the brand by using brand attitude as a mediator. Bansal et al. (2004) state that customers feel an obligation to stay with an employee because of the positive experience they had with the employee. During the interaction process a social bond between the salesperson and the customer emerges (Goodwin and Gremler, 1996; Price and Arnould, 1999; Butcher et al., 2002). Thus, a sales encounter builds customer bonds with the salesperson (Crosby et al., 1990; Czepiel, 1990; de Wulf et al., 2001) and a satisfactory sales encounter increases the loyalty of the customer to the salesperson. The relationship with a salesperson can influence the brand decision process (Chow and Holden, 1997). In particular, loyalty to a person affects loyalty to things the person endorses. For instance, loyalty to customer contact personnel precedes business loyalty (Björkman and Kock, 1995; Halinen and Salmi, 2001). Prior findings also suggest that a strong relationship at the interpersonal level between contact personnel and customer provides an additional bond that ties the customer to the brand as well (Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997). Thus, the loyalty to the salesperson has very likely positive effects on brand loyalty (Selnes and Hansen, 2001; Palmatier et al., 2007).

H7. Customer encounter satisfaction is (a) positively associated with salesperson loyalty which is (b) positively associated with brand loyalty.

As for the relationship of satisfaction and brand attitude, Cronin and Taylor (1992) have shown that overall customer satisfaction leads to a positive brand attitude. If a salesperson represents a brand, the satisfaction with the sales encounter may transfer to the brand endorsed by the salesperson. Brand attitude refers to the customers' positive or negative disposition towards a brand, resulting from the overall perception and satisfaction with brand stimuli (Day, 1969; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; Keller, 1993; Low and Lamb, 2000).

Several studies reveal a strong positive relationship between brand attitude and brand loyalty (Keller, 1993; Grace and O'Cass, 2005) and support the impact of brand attitude on loyalty (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973; Aaker, 1991; Chaudhuri, 1999). Thus,

H8. Customer encounter satisfaction is (a) positively associated with brand attitude which is (b) positively associated with brand loyalty.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection and sample

A mall intercept, investigating sales transactions of twenty different dealers of a large tv brand, provides the data for the study. The Samsung tv were either company-owned stores or contractually bound dealers who exclusively sell the particular brand. TV retailing is an appropriate context for the study as customers show high involvement during such purchase processes, which enhances the accuracy of the perception measures in the study. The process of data collection closely follows the procedure in the study by Williams and Spiro (1985). Customers who visited the dealer in order to buy a tv and who spoke a minimum of 10 min with a salesperson were the target group of the study. Eighty-eight percent of these customers agreed to participate in the study. The main reason for nonparticipation was lack of time. This response rate is comparable to other studies addressing salesperson–customer relationships (Bush and Hair, 1985; Williams and Spiro, 1985) and the low number of non-response decreases the risk of serious non-response bias. The sample consisted of a total of 154 customer–salesperson interactions, with reports from 98 salespeople and from 154 customers. Each salesperson completed questionnaires for a maximum of three different customer interactions. This guarantees a sufficient variety of salespeople and makes the risk of learning effects of salespeople that may bias the results negligible (Williams and Spiro, of structural equation modeling, the number is still well above the sample sizes of other studies that

have applied structural equation modeling to salesperson–customer dyads (Yagil, 2001).

3.2. Measures

The scale of each item ranges from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Three items of task competence taken from a study by Price et al. (1995) provide the task competence measure that is in line with the measure in the study by Van Dolen et al. (2002). Williams and Spiro (1985) provide a measure for interaction competence. The present study assesses sales encounter satisfaction by a measure taken from a study by Van Dolen et al. (2002), and brand attitude by three items taken from a measure by Yoo and Donthu (2001) research. The study uses Reynolds and Beatty (1999) scale in order to measure loyalty to the salesperson. Due to the fact that the present model focuses on the attitudinal aspect of brand loyalty, the study uses an attitudinal measure of brand loyalty, capturing the two components repurchase intention (Kressmann et al., 2006) and recommendation (Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997). Table 2 provides the correlation matrix of the latent variables.

4. Measurement model

To assess reliability and validity of the scales, the study follows the approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Table 1 reports Cronbach's alpha, t-values, item reliabilities, the average variance-extracted, and factor reliability of each scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients are in the range between 0.74 and 0.91, indicating adequate internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Next, a confirmatory factor analysis proves the convergent validity of the scales. All factor loadings are statistically significant (t-values range from 5.53 to 15.37) and the results show satisfactory overall fit indices (Chi-square/df=1.26; CFI=0.96; TLI=0.95; Gamma Hat=0.95; SRMR=0.06; RMSEA=0.04). Thus, the findings demonstrate convergent validity of the measurement scales. A comparison of the fit statistics for a model with a one-dimensional attitudinal measure of brand loyalty and a model with a two-dimensional measure of brand loyalty shows that the first model has a significantly better fit to the data. Finally, the factor reliability and the average variance extracted further support convergent validity and prove discriminant validity. The factor reliability coefficients of each scale exceed the recommended 0.6 threshold (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The average variance extracted estimates are higher than the critical value of 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In all cases the average variance extracted for each measure is greater than its squared correlation with the other variables, proving discriminant validity.

4.1. Structural model

The overall fit measures of the structural model indicate adequate fit of the model to the data (Chi-square/df=1.39; CFI=0.94; TLI=0.93; Gamma Hat=0.93; SRMR=0.08; RMSEA=0.05). Fig. 2 provides the standardized parameter estimates for the proposed model.

4.2. Hypotheses test

The customer's perception of the salesperson's task competence is significantly related to the customer encounter satisfaction ($\gamma=0.29$), supporting H1. Salesperson interaction competence as perceived by the customer significantly enhances customer encounter satisfaction ($\gamma=0.36$) as suggested by H2. As for the salesperson, the perception of one's own task competence influences salesperson satisfaction with the sales encounter ($\gamma=0.18$) and so does the salesperson's perception of customer interaction competence ($\gamma=0.48$). The results support the predictions of H3 and H4. Additionally, the relationship between the salesperson encounter satisfaction and the customer encounter satisfaction is significantly positive ($\beta=0.28$), supporting H5. The direct effect from customer encounter satisfaction to brand loyalty is not significant ($\beta=0.01$) as assumed in H6, but the results provide support for both mediating paths. Customer encounter satisfaction increases salesperson loyalty ($\beta=0.23$) which in turn impacts brand loyalty ($\beta=0.18$). Thus, the results support the mediating effect as suggested in H7. Customer encounter satisfaction further increases brand attitude ($\beta=0.41$) which in turn impacts brand loyalty ($\beta=0.76$), supporting the mediating effect as suggested in H8. Following the recommendations made by Iacobucci et al. (2007), a Sobel z-Test tests the nature of the mediation. The results confirm full mediation of brand attitude ($z=3.76$; $p<0.01$) and partial mediation of salesperson loyalty ($z=1.69$; $p<0.1$). The mediation through brand attitudes explains 88% of the variance in brand loyalty, whereas the mediation through salesperson loyalty explains 12% of the variance in brand loyalty. Table 3 summarizes the results of the hypotheses test.

4.4. Results

The analysis of the measurement model and structural model uses the ML estimator in Mplus V4.1 with the Satorra and Bentler rescaled statistic TSB (Satorra and Bentler, 1988, 1994). The Satorra and Bentler correction deals with the skewed distribution as provided by several measures (Table 1).

Table 1
 Construct measurement, descriptive statistics, and measurement validity assessment.

Construct			Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	Item reliability	
Average variance	Factor reliability	Cronbach's alpha					
Extracted							
Brand Trust					0.89	0.45	0.89
This brand takes a good care of me	6.71	1.07	6.98	0.78			
X meets my expectations.	6.89	1.06	6.34	0.45			
I feel confident in X	6.02	1.05	6.23	0.67			
X never disappoints me ,504	6.05	1.04	6.28	0.45			
Brand Communication					0.78	0.78	0.89
I react favorably to the advertising and promotions	6.07	1.45	6.87	0.78			
I feel positive toward the advertising and promotions	6.03	1.34	6.12	0.98			
The advertising and promotions of this brand are good	6.05	1.07	7.34	0.56			
The advertising and promotions of this brand do good	6.07	1.03	8.34	0.45			
Customer encounter satisfaction					0.74	0.89	0.88
I am satisfied with this encounter	6.39	1.09	7.84	0.86			
This encounter was exactly what I needed	6.37	1.13	8.23	0.85			
I have truly enjoyed this encounter	6.36	1.00	7.55	0.50			
Brand attitude					0.62	0.82	0.81
The brand is very attractive	6.61	0.74	7.29	0.41			
The brand is very desirable	6.07	1.24	11.15	0.63			
The brand is extremely likeable	5.93	1.24	11.87	0.81			
Salesperson loyalty					0.62	0.76	0.74
I am very loyal to my salesperson	5.66	1.58	8.18	0.80			
I don't consider myself very loyal to my salesperson	5.64	1.72	8.75	0.43			
Repurchase intention					0.75	0.90	0.86
I will buy this brand the next time I buy a TV	4.82	1.59	12.27	0.83			
I intend to keep purchasing this brand	5.81	1.60	13.20	0.91			
I will buy this brand again if I have to replace my TV	4.82	2.12	11.65	0.50			
Recommendation						0.80	0.92
0.91							
I recommend the brand	4.22	2.28	7.94	0.76			
I stick up for the brand	4.75	2.18	7.81	0.79			
I try to convince friends and relatives to the brand	4.73	2.22	7.56	0.83			
Brand loyalty					0.64	0.78	
Repurchase Intention	0.00	1.00	7.73	0.63			
Recommendation	0.00	1.00	5.53	0.65			
Salesperson perception							
Customer interaction competence					0.69	0.90	0.90
The customer was interested in socializing	5.16	1.57	13.46	0.68			
The customer genuinely enjoyed my helping him	6.10	0.99	8.19	0.50			
The customer tried to establish a personal relationship	5.77	1.27	10.94	0.68			
The customer seemed interested	5.49	1.47	15.19	0.89			
Salesperson task competence					0.55	0.83	0.83
I was capable	6.51	0.62	8.14	0.47			
I was organized	6.30	0.75	15.37	0.69			
I was thorough	6.48	0.63	12.26	0.63			
I performed as I expected	6.42	0.67	13.02	0.42			
Salesperson encounter satisfaction					0.68	0.86	0.86
I am satisfied with this encounter	6.06	1.22	7.37	0.48			
This encounter was exactly what I needed	5.77	1.35	10.47	0.78			
I have truly enjoyed this encounter	5.80	1.28	11.82	0.78			

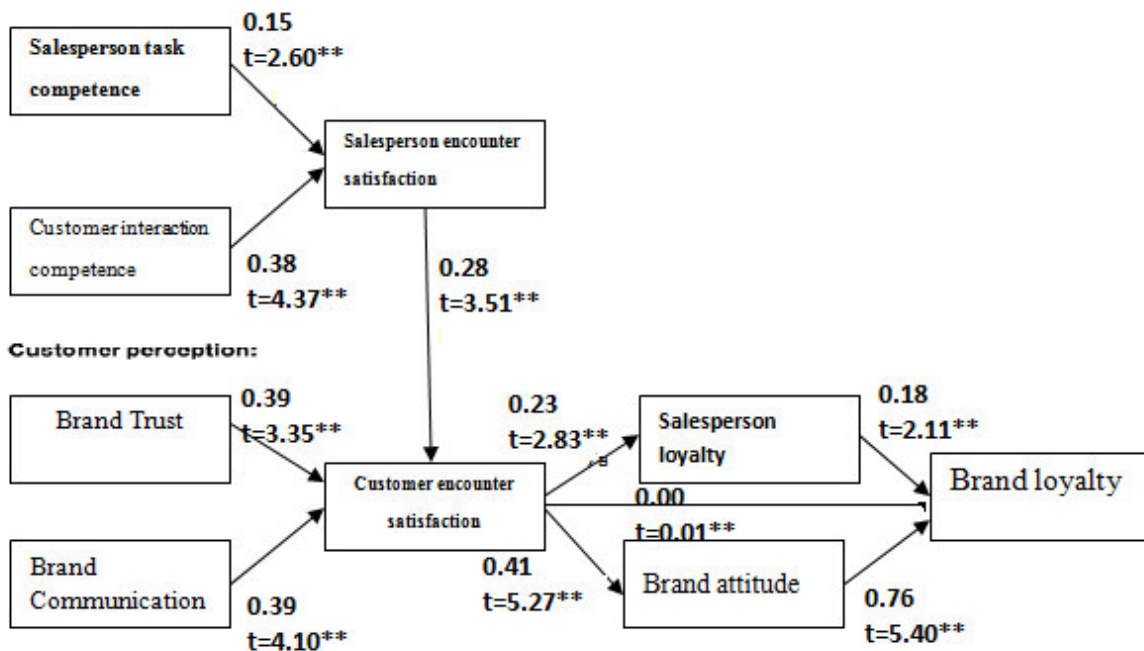
Fit indices: X2/df=1.26; CFI=0.96; TLI=0.95; Gamma Hat=0.95; SRMR=0.06; RMSEA=0.04.

Note: The range of the measure is from 1 to 7. Repurchase intentions and recommendation are second order constructs with standardized values for mean and variance.

Table 2
 Correlation matrix for the latent variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Customer perception											
1. Brand Trust	1.00										
2. Brand Communication	0.77	1.00									
3. Customer encounter satisfaction	0.57	0.76	1.00								
4. Brand attitude	0.23	0.47	0.41	1.00							
5. Salesperson loyalty	0.13	0.15	0.23	0.09	1.00						
6. Repurchase intention	0.16	0.17	0.28	0.62	0.20	1.00					
7. Recommendation	0.16	0.17	0.38	0.64	0.24	0.64	1.00				
8. Brand loyalty	0.20	0.95	0.35	0.98	0.35	0.35	0.80	1.00			
Salesperson perception											
9. Customer interaction competence	0.24	0.31	0.31	0.13	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.11	1.00		
10. Salesperson task competence	0.02	0.07	0.08	0.43	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.05	1.00	
11. Salesperson encounter satisfaction	0.12	0.16	0.39	0.15	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.47	0.17	1.00

Salesperson perception:



Fit indices: $\chi^2/df=1.39$; CFI=0.94; TLI=0.93; Gamma Hat=0.93; SRMR=0.08; RMSEA=0.05
 *p<0.05, **p<0.01 (two-tailed test)

Fig. 2. Structural model results: fit indices and standardized parameter estimates

5. Discussion

5.1. Contribution to theory

Although several studies have emphasized the role of the sales encounter for the perception and beliefs of and the loyalty towards a brand, empirical research, dealing with this issue, is still scarce. This study tests the path from customer and salesperson perceptions during a sales encounter to encounter satisfaction which might impact brand loyalty. The findings support the important role of interpersonal encounters in attaching customers to a brand. The study results concur with the idea that salespeople represent and define a brand to the customer during a sales encounter (Booms and Nyquist, 1981; Berry, 2000; Mitchell, 2002; Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). Although practitioners have paid broad attention to this idea, scholarly research on this issue is scarce. This study shows that positive experiences with a sales encounter can transfer to the brand and eventually increase brand loyalty. Satisfaction with the sales encounter is a mediating factor that provides the link between

sales encounter perceptions and brand-related outcomes. When taking into account brand attitude and salesperson loyalty as mediators, the direct effect of sales encounter satisfaction on brand loyalty becomes insignificant, showing that both mediators provide a better explanation for the relationship between both variables. Particularly, the brand path provides the highest explanatory power which supports a transfer from the encounter experience onto brand evaluation. While previous research has provided support for the mutual impact of satisfaction and brand attributes on brand attitude (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), the link between satisfaction with the sales encounter and brand attitude provides new insights by showing a link between satisfaction and attitude even when they relate to different objects. The theoretical explanation beyond this transfer refers to evaluative conditioning or associative learning that explains the underlying mechanism of an associative link between a salesperson and a brand (Shimp, 1991; De Houwer et al., 2001): pairing of the unconditioned stimulus (e.g., positive experiences with a salesperson) with a conditioned stimulus (e.g., a brand) can create liking and positive attitude towards the conditioned stimulus. This effect can happen even with only a single pairing. Evaluative conditioning does not necessarily depend on the awareness of the critical pairing as in this study a link between satisfaction with the salesperson and attitudes towards a brand seems to be less obvious to the customer. The valence that the brand acquires by such processes holds even on presentation of the stimulus solely on its own afterwards, unless customers learn other associations with the brand or reevaluate the unconditioned stimulus (the salesperson). Knowing the mechanisms behind these processes helps shaping the way people behave towards new or unknown brands and products.

Table 3 Results of hypotheses tests.

Hypotheses	Supported
H1 Brand Communication (customer perception)→ Customer encounter satisfaction	Yes
H2 Brand Trust (customer perception)→ Customer encounter satisfaction	Yes
H3 Salesperson task competence (salesperson perception)→ Salesperson encounter satisfaction	Yes
H4 Customer interaction competence (salesperson perception) → Salesperson encounter satisfaction	Yes
H5 Salesperson encounter satisfaction → Customer encounter satisfaction	Yes
H6 Customer encounter satisfaction → Brand loyalty	No
H7a Customer encounter satisfaction → Salesperson loyalty	Yes
H7b Salesperson loyalty → Brand loyalty	Yes
H8a Customer encounter satisfaction → Brand attitude	Yes
H8b Brand attitude → Brand loyalty	Yes

5.2. Managerial implications

This research provides a number of insights to managers. The findings show that managers can enhance brand loyalty by focusing on satisfaction with the sales encounter. Close collaborations between sales management and brand management can help enhance customer encounter satisfaction and build strong loyalty to the brand. Salesperson loyalty mediates the effect of encounter satisfaction on brand loyalty. Previous research shows that a company should not always enforce very strong salesperson loyalty (Goodwin and Gremler, 1996; Bove and Johnson, 2001, 2006), as salespeople may take loyal clients with them when they resign and start working for competitors (Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; Chow and Holden, 1997). The results of this study suggest that brand attitudes contribute more to the overall impact on brand loyalty than salesperson loyalty. The predominant role of brand attitudes in creating brand loyalty compared to salesperson loyalty gives managers reasons to believe that they do not overly depend upon each individual salesperson. In the case of a salesperson's leave, marketing managers can reduce the risk of a customer loss by fostering stronger bonds with the brand than with the salesperson, particularly by enhancing favorable brand attitudes.

5.3. Study limitations and directions for future research

The particular context of the study (automotive industry) is an obvious caveat to the research findings, suggesting the need for further replication of the current study in other settings. In particular, the study suggests an impact of salespeople on high-involvement decisions which have a variety of information sources besides salespeople, such as other individuals or public sources of information. Although evidence exists that car dealers do influence purchase decisions to a large extent (Bob, 2003), the strength of this impact compared to other sources and whether the impact has changed given the development of new information sources such as the Internet is an important point for further research. Further research should investigate multi-level loyalties. Loyalty to the salesperson is part of loyalty towards the dealership and loyalty towards the brand. The present

study analyses the impact of salesperson loyalty on loyalty towards a company's brand. Further studies should also take the loyalty towards the dealer into account. The consideration of dealer loyalty is highly relevant since the number of brand-exclusive dealerships will decline in the next years while at the same time dealers will try to increase customer loyalty to their particular store (Huber and Herrmann, 2001). Several avenues for future research arise from the study. Especially the investigation of the underlying mechanisms that could explain the relationship between sales encounter variables and brand performance measures provides a promising direction for future research. Further studies could expand this research by considering moderator variables that strengthen or weaken the relationships examined in this study. For instance, several characteristics concerning the relationship between the customer and the salesperson, (e.g., duration of relationship), characteristics of the customer, (e.g., variety seeking behavior) or the employee, (e.g., social competence) (Homburg and Stock, 2004) might moderate the link between sales encounter satisfaction and salesperson loyalty. The study would benefit from including profitability measures as further outcomes variables beyond brand loyalty (Rust et al., 2004). By this, the study opens the door to a host of important research questions, involving the role of customer contact personnel in building brand loyalty.

Table 4 : questionnaire

	1 = Very Strongly Disagree	2 = Strongly Disagree	3 = Disagree	4 = Neutral	5 = Agree	6 = Strongly Agree	7 = Very Strongly Agree
Customer perception Brand Communication I react favorably to the advertising and promotions of this brand I feel positive toward the advertising and promotions of this brand The advertising and promotions of this brand are good The advertising and promotions of this brand do good job Brand Trust X meets my expectations I feel confident in X X never disappoints me X guarantees satisfaction Customer encounter satisfaction I am satisfied with this encounter This encounter was exactly what I needed I have truly enjoyed this encounter Brand attitude The brand is very attractive The brand is very desirable The brand is extremely likeable Salesperson loyalty I am very loyal to my salesperson I don't consider myself very loyal to my salesperson Repurchase intention I will buy this brand the next time I buy a TV I intend to keep purchasing this brand I will buy this brand again if I have to replace my TV Recommendation I recommend the brand I stick up for the brand I try to convince friends and relatives to the brand Brand loyalty Repurchase Intention Recommendation Salesperson perception Customer interaction competence The customer was interested in socializing The customer genuinely enjoyed my helping him The customer tried to establish a personal relationship The customer seemed interested in me not only as a salesperson, but also as a person Salesperson task competence I was capable I was organized I was thorough I performed as I expected Salesperson encounter satisfaction I am satisfied with this encounter This encounter was exactly what I needed I have truly enjoyed this encounter							

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