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An intellectual journey into the historical evolution of marketing research in brand switching behavior – past, present and future

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to explore the historical development of brands and the development of literature on brand switching to define the antecedents that cause switching behavior among consumers and the impact of switching on market share of companies.

Design/methodology/approach – The historical development of brands is tracked using different secondary sources. Then an intensive literature review is conducted on brand switching at the consumer and business levels. At each level, studies on brand switching are divided into several categories, such as household products, technological products and service providers, and the common factors behind switching for each category and between categories are determined.

Findings – An examination of the historical development of brands shows that brands appeared on products a long time ago and evolved through a number of stages based on the economic and social environment. The literature reveals that no single model can explain brand switching behavior of consumers or businesses across different industries and products. Each study uses a specific set of factors to explain brand switching. However, brand attractiveness can be counted as the most common factor behind brand switching.

Research limitations/implications – There is little understanding of the historical mutations of brand switching behavior and the influence of mutation on branding strategies. The study suggests that continuous exploration of consumer's preferences is needed to create and sustain attractive brands.

Practical implications – Managers increasingly recognize brands as one of the most valuable assets of an organization, and, therefore, an informed knowledge of the factors underpinning brand switching may help managers build attractive brands and prevent brand switching. This condition imposes significant challenges in a highly innovative environment, where technological changes can quickly make attractive brands obsolete.

Originality/value – This paper highlights that the factors behind brand switching should be monitored constantly, even for the same brand, to define an appropriate strategy that helps sustain brand attractiveness.

Keywords Perceived value, Brands, Product features, Consumer behavior, Relationship, Brand switching

Paper type Literature review

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Introduction

Generally, brand represents a name, term, design, symbol or any feature that identifies one company's product from those of other companies. Switching from one brand to another is a critical issue for a company because it indicates that the original brand no longer meets consumer expectations and that the new brand is more attractive. The negative side of brand switching is reflected in a reduction in the firm's market share (Anderson *et al.*, 1994), driving the firm to rely on a more unpredictable consumer mix, thus diminishing the firm's reputation (Levesque and McDougall, 1996). Market statistics show that, on average, many US firms lose half of their consumers over five years and that brand switching at this rate diminishes firm performance (Reichheld, 1996). Eventually, the switching erodes profits, because relative costs of retention of consumers are significantly less than those for acquiring new ones (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Thus, understanding the factors behind brand switching becomes an important issue to be investigated to reduce costs and to promote long-term consumer relationships. Once those factors have been identified, firms can act upon them to develop brand management strategies that discourage existing consumers from switching (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). On the other hand, competitive firms could use these factors as a tool to consolidate their brands and attract prospective switchers (Yani-de-Soriano and Slater, 2009) to increase their market share (Fornell *et al.*, 1996; Colgate and Lang, 2001; Ahmed and Al-Kwifi, 2014).

The literature reports considerable research on brand switching of various products across industries. However, little knowledge is available on the historical development of brand switching and how it impacts companies' performance. This study explores:

- the chronological evolution of brands since early ages;
- development of brand switching studies at the consumer and business levels; and
- determining the common theme behind brand switching.

Findings show that there is no distinctive approach to predicting brand switching behavior; each study adopted different independent variables to explain this behavior based on the industry or product under investigation. The implications of the findings of this study are discussed.

History of brands

Because companies like to have consumers appreciate their products for quality and value, they started to brand their products by various methods to sustain a good image among consumers (Park *et al.*, 1986) and encourage them to repurchase the same product. The following sections demonstrate that the brand system came into use a long time ago and evolved through a number of stages, each reflecting the economic and social environment at a specific era.

Brand usage before 1500

Historically, the term "brand" came from "brandr", meaning *to burn*[1], which can be traced to ancient times when farm animals in 3000 BC were branded to prevent theft or to enable owners to reclaim lost livestock. The practice of burning a special mark was applied widely to various handcrafted goods, and counted as the earliest form of branding to distinguish products in the market. The idea of branding was to claim ownership, especially of valuable goods. This practice continued over time and across

all civilizations, using different methods to mark goods with either a unique name or symbol. For example, archaeologists have discovered proof of advertising among Babylonians dating back to 2800 BC. In 1300 BC, trifle signs were placed on ceramics and porcelain in China, Greece and Rome. In the 1200s, England demanded goldsmiths and silversmiths to put their symbols on products, mainly to recognize the manufacturer. Italians used brands in the form of watermarks on paper and various craft guilds[2]. Also, hallmarks and silver-makers are different types of brand widely used in that era.

Brand usage between 1500 and 1900

In Medieval times, the word of a brand was listed in the dictionary of the 1500s as an "identifying mark made by a hot iron[3]". However, it entered the business territory between the sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, where it was used widely to identify the goods of different manufacturers. Although many brands had been used during this period, it was not feasible to patent inventions or claims in the US legal system until the Constitution was founded in 1790.

During the industrial revolution and with the emergence of mass production (mid-1800s) there was a dramatic change with the arrival of new brands in the clothing sector (Levi's 1850), the food sector (Heinz 1869), the soft drinks sector (Cola 1886) and the consumer electronics sector (Kodak 1887)[3]. Later, the introduction of advanced transportation and long-distance product distribution (around 1880s) offered consumers the option to choose from a wider selection of brands, made locally or imported from other regions. The ability to distribute products globally and reach any location was an important impulse for the development of exclusive brands, so consumers could distinguish that one company's products was different from those of other companies (Murphy, 1990). As most consumers are familiar with locally made products, companies entering new markets are forced to brand their products effectively to increase consumers' familiarity with their merits.

Brand usage between 1900 and 1960

During the early twentieth century, industrialization brought an extraordinary wave of life-changing innovation and the introduction of new products like the automobile and home electronic devices. Such products started to follow a certain system of manufacturing standards to meet global requirements for safety and quality. Imposing a high level of standardization after WWI made it a challenge for a savvy consumer to distinguish between products of almost equal quality. This condition forced companies to find a new way to differentiate their products from those of their competitors.

When more brands appeared within the same market sector and when the quality of products being offered by competitors improved, the use of standard advertisement methods was not sufficient. This pushed consumer packaged company Procter & Gamble to establish, in 1931, the foundation of brand management department (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), in which a team was devoted to reflect on every feature of only one brand. This team was responsible to study data from each market to understand target consumers and offer them a functional and emotional value. Over time, if the brand proved to be good, consumers perceived it as superior value to its competitors and they would pay more for it (Henard and Szymanski, 2001). Brand management has helped many companies to shine in the market, including Procter &

Gamble, Kraft and Lipton. Success in the market was determined by understanding the consumer better than one's competitors understood (Ganesh *et al.*, 2000). This required the brand management team to manage a complex system, including coordinating different activities between marketing and manufacturing departments, research and development, advertising, promotion and distribution.

Faced with tough market competition, companies started looking for new branding strategies to distinguish themselves from competitors, which led Rosser Reeves (an executive and pioneer of television advertising)[3] to focus on showcasing the value or Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of a product. In *Reality in Advertising*, Reeves (1961) claims that no amount of advertising can help flawed products or build a market demand for them because such activities would only increase the number of unsatisfied consumers, who would abandon the brand. He encouraged companies to invest in creating unique selling points (features) in their products before they advertised them because good brands are built up from repeated purchasing by satisfied consumers (Reeves, 1961). Minute Maid orange juice, M&M's candies and Colgate toothpaste were among the products that made remarkable success using his advertisement approach.

From the same perspective, David Ogilvy (an advertising executive known as the Father of Advertising)[3] introduced new principles; in particular, that the purpose of advertising is to sell, and that successful advertising for any product is based on information about its consumer (Ogilvy, 1983), while every advertisement should be considered an involvement in the complex symbol, which is the brand image (Giesler, 2012).

Brand usage between 1960 and 2000

Conventionally, most company names originated from the founder's family name or country of origin of the company. By the 1960s, to help create a better brand image in the mind of consumers, there was a shift in the method of selecting the name of the brand. For example, in the USA, it was known that the finest dairy products were Danish, because Denmark produced the highest-quality dairy products in the world. Using consumers' perception and manipulating the words, the Häagen-Dazs company was established in 1961 by Reuben and Rose Mattus[4]. Although the brand name implies it originated in Denmark, the truth is that two men from New York had designed the attractive brand name. However, many of the foreign food companies had selected their company's name in a way that helped create a good impression in the mind of the consumer.

In the 1970s, with intensive competition among companies and heavy advertisement campaigns, brands become something more than just a product (Maixé-Altés, 2010) – a brand turned into a contract between a company and consumers. If a consumer believed a company was in breach of that contract either by underperforming or by not delivering what was promised, the consumer elected to enter a contract with another brand by implementing *brand switching*. Faced with wider choices of brands, consumers started to question the honesty of each brand; they suspected the language used in advertising, which was particularly deceptive. For example, McDonalds as a gigantic family brand was now perceived as an unhealthy fast-food restaurant that used harmful ingredients. To face the risk of switching to other brands, McDonalds started to revise its products by introducing new healthy items and to redesign their advertisement by using tones of green and yellow to reposition themselves in the healthy lifestyle arena. Over time,

McDonalds regained consumer trust to a large extent and, as a result, it was ranked among the best ten global brands over many years[5].

In the early 1990s, branding became ubiquitous when large retailers started an equal push to build real brands (King, 1991). Their attention was to focus on selling better-branded products to improve profit and enhance reputation as a trusted retailer (Kent and Brown, 2006). Thus, retail companies have built a portfolio of brands that enjoy equal and sometime better brand loyalty than any of the manufacturer brands they carry. This branding game started at the retailer landscape, but soon it expanded to the fast-moving consumer goods markets and to the rapidly growing mobile phone markets. In 1993, WalMart set a new branding strategy that included the "Great Value" brand to deliver to consumers its promise of "Save Money. Live Better" and gain consumer trust[6].

Brand usage from 2000 onwards

During the early 2000s, branding emerged as a significant area of emphasis not only for companies and their products but also for sport clubs (Seifried, 2014), cities (Rothschild *et al.*, 2012), universities (Chapleo, 2007), non-profit organizations and even individuals. During this period, many factors that have an impact on branding started to emerge rapidly. First, the widespread Internet changed the landscape of communication from one-way communication between company and consumer to an interactive discussion with the consumer and among consumers[3]. Second, the accelerating pace of globalization and ability to penetrate all courtiers allowed consumers to access a remarkable number of competing brands. Third, rapid technological development and the increased speed of product imitation noticeably reduced product life cycle (Bayus, 1994). These factors have imposed significant consequences on the product-related competitive advantage, jeopardizing its value in a highly competitive market. Therefore, companies started to collect intensive information about consumers' behavior and culture to develop a map for building a company's brand, a map that is continually changing based on learning consumers' needs and expectations (Tan *et al.*, 2001; Ahmed, 2003). For example, the Philips brand has changed over 120 years to reflect its strong belief that innovation is important only if it is based on a profound understanding of consumers' needs and desires. In 2013 therefore, Philips revealed its brand positioning as "innovation and you", which emphasizes the company's legacy of producing innovations that matter to consumers[7].

This historical review shows how "brand" has evolved through a number of phases, during which economic and social developments reshaped its perception by consumers and influenced how it is managed by companies. Without doubt, companies need to maintain good brands in market if they are to sustain market share and seek expansion; failing to do so results in brand switching to other more attractive brands. This important behavior has been studied widely in the literature to define the underlying factors to identify the right strategies to enhance or rebuild the brand (Ahmed *et al.*, 2002; Ghosh *et al.*, 2004; Zbib *et al.*, 2010, Ahmed *et al.*, 2012). The following sections describe the historical development of brand switching literature and explain how switching has varied significantly across different products and industries.

Development of brand switching literature

The marketing literature studies brand switching at two levels: consumer marketing and business marketing or organizational buying. At the consumer level, the consumer takes full control over the switching process, from evaluating different brands to making a final decision. However, at the organizational buying level, the switching process becomes more complicated because organizational buying behavior involves complex environmental influences and different individuals' involvement in the decision-making process (Sheth, 1973; Barclay, 1991). Therefore, the factors behind brand switching at the consumer and organization (buyer) levels are expected to be different. Factors that are used to explain brand switching behavior can be classified under five categories:

1. marketplace characteristics;
2. interpersonal relationships;
3. switching costs;
4. marketing strategies; and
5. consumer characteristics.

The following sections review key studies from the literature on brand switching to explain factors that underpin switching, while demonstrating the study's limitations.

Antecedents of consumer brand switching

The literature records significant research that investigated consumer brand switching, which is conceptualized as terminating the relationship with a certain brand and moving toward a more attractive alternative (Ping, 1993); usually the switching comes after the first purchase decision of a certain brand (Xia *et al.*, 2006). Most of the existing literature on consumer brand switching examines differentiated competitive markets and focuses on frequently purchased consumer products such as software programs (Pae and Hyun, 2006), financial services (Bell *et al.*, 2005; Ganesh *et al.*, 2000; Colgate and Lang, 2001; Kim *et al.*, 2003), hairstyling and banking (Jones *et al.*, 2000), auto repairs and hairstyling (Bansal *et al.*, 2005), mobile phones (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2006; Lam *et al.*, 2010), airlines (Klemperer, 1987), automobiles (Bayus, 1991), online services (Keaveney and Parthasarathy, 2001), retailing (Seiders *et al.*, 2005), service industry (Burnham *et al.*, 2003; Ruyter *et al.*, 1998; Sharma and Patterson, 2000), TV-entertainment (Lemon *et al.*, 2002), television (Bayus, 1992), coffee (Jain *et al.*, 1990), household products (Shukla, 2004; Van Trijp *et al.*, 1996; Raju, 1984) and insurance (Crosby and Stephens, 1987).

Brand switching of household products

In one of the first attempts to explore brand switching, Raju (1984) explained the behavior as an intrinsic desire for a change or variety which takes place regularly in market, especially for food and household products like shampoo, laundry bleach, shower soap and blue jeans. He proposed a model based on four elements:

1. individual difference variable;
2. product awareness;
3. product switching cost; and
4. product class.

He demonstrated that product awareness, including advertising, has a significant impact on exploratory brand switching and a monetary deal could counter that switching. Subsequently, variety seeking as a motive for consumers to switch has generated considerable attention (Roehm and Roehm, 2005; Kahn and Isen, 1993; Feinberg *et al.*, 1992; Bawa, 1990; Mazursky *et al.*, 1987).

To expand the scope of previous studies, Van Trijp *et al.* (1996) found that the variety-seeking model can not be explained just by the characteristic of individual difference; therefore, they added product category factors such as need for variety, hedonic features, strength of preference, perceived differences between brands and involvement with the model to determine situations that are more likely to promote variety seeking than repeated purchasing. The model demonstrates that the consumer variety-seeking does not occur for all products to the same extent because category factors for products like beer, coffee, tobacco and cigarettes influence the degree of that behavior. The selection of these kinds of consumables may reflect their addictive nature during variety-seeking behavior, which do not ably to other household products.

Trivedi and Morgan (1996) found that the extent of brand switching can change over time, and the degree of switching can be different for selected brands such as household items, hotels, automobiles and TVs. The strongest influence behind brand switching is market leader effect (a brand with wider market share), followed by the unique product features that distinguish a brand from a competitor's. Contradicting some findings from previous studies, Shukla (2004) observed that product usage and related level of satisfaction fail to explain the brand switching behavior; however, product involvement was found to have a moderate impact on readiness to switch, which means that consumers would like to experience the new brand and find out if it matches their preference. The study recommends that, to lessen the brand switching behavior among their customers, marketers should keep a constant eye on sales to understand the usage pattern associated with their brands and the satisfaction derived from it, and understand how customers involve themselves with the product.

Seiders *et al.* (2005) investigated the relationship between satisfaction and switching behavior using more moderating factors such as marketplace characteristics (convenience of offering and competitive intensity), relational characteristics (relationship age and relationship program participation) and consumer characteristics (household income and involvement). The empirical study was conducted in the context of the retail home furnishing business. Their findings emphasize that consumer and marketplace characteristics play important moderating roles on purchasing. Consumer satisfaction has a strong effect on repurchase intentions but has no direct effect on repurchase behavior, whereas relational characteristics have a positive direct impact on repurchase behavior. Therefore, satisfaction scores may not predict repurchase/switching behavior accurately and may create a false impression if suppliers assume that higher satisfaction scores lead to stronger repurchase behavior (Oliver, 1999). This study attempts to include a wider range of moderating factors, but some important ones are not included, such as switching barriers, attractiveness of alternatives, gender and marital status (Athanassopoulos, 2000; Burnham *et al.*, 2003).

Brand switching of technological products

Motivated by consumer demographic characteristics, Bayus (1991) conducted a study to understand the timing of consumer brand switching in the automobile industry, and

relates a behavior to demographic characteristics (income, education, age, occupation, marital status, working spouse, number of cars owned and residence location); product perception (value, size, styling, cost and brand image); and search activities (number of dealers visited, number of information sources, considering other automobiles, time to gather information, time to visit dealers and time and effort devoted to the final decision). He found that early switchers are more concerned with styling and fashion and less worried about the cost than are late switchers, who pursue more detailed search activities to find a good deal. These findings were associated with the higher income and lower education of most early switchers than most late switchers. This study reflects the importance of considering the demographic factors for this product, although the effort required to gain the knowledge can be expensive and search-extensive. Nonetheless, findings from one product category are difficult to generalize to other product categories until the model is verified using different products.

Studies suggest that dissatisfaction explains only some of the consumer band switching behavior (Dabholkar and Walls, 1999; McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Bansal *et al.*, 2005; Keaveney, 1995). Therefore, Keaveney and Parthasarathy (2001) tried to include factors other than satisfaction to study the switching behavior in online services (such as MSN, AOL and CompuServe); those factors were behavioral (information that consumers used to make the decision and level of service usage), attitudinal (risk-taking tendency, satisfaction and involvement) and demographic (education and income). They found that brand switchers were individuals who subscribed to the online service without conducting a thorough search; who used the service less frequently; and who had a lower income and education. Although this model is useful and predictive for certain brands, the marketing literature suggests that consumers perceive the selection of service brands as riskier and more complicated than the selection of products (Murray, 1991; Murray and Schlacter, 1990); therefore, applying the Keaveny and Parthasarathy model to other products may reflect a different weighting of the attitudinal and demographic factors.

From the responses of 100,000 automotive consumers, Mittal and Kamakura (2001) demonstrated that measuring consumer satisfaction using a typical consumer satisfaction survey as described in previous literature does not reflect well the true consumer satisfaction because few of the studies take into account the consumer's characteristics – such as gender, educational level, marital status, age, number of children in household and area of residence. Their findings showed that consumers with different characteristics have progressively different thresholds and different response biases, to the extent that their satisfaction level could translate into repurchasing or switching behavior that varies steadily. Interestingly, they found that the relationship between satisfaction and repurchasing behavior is highly non-linear. This finding represents a milestone on the way researchers can conduct and interpret consumer satisfaction surveys.

Alternatively, Lemon *et al.* (2002) took the consumer decision to either keep or drop a TV-entertainment service, arguing that the consumer's future expectations of usage and anticipated regret have a significant influence on consumer brand switching, in addition to satisfaction. This study suggests that consumers will follow an adaptive approach to update their future expectations based on current usage experience. But, in reality, not all users are capable of making a good judgment and evaluation about their existing experience of the service or about how to generate reasonable expectations regarding

future benefits that reflect the actual pace of technology change. This study therefore could be relevant for knowledgeable users with high expertise in available brands. For rapidly changing technological products, the expected future use is difficult to assess, and reaching a decision based on expectations is even more difficult.

To test the impact of switching costs and demographics on brand switching among European mobile users, Ranganathan *et al.* (2006) found that increasing service usage and bundling of services have a significant impact on switching from one supplier to another. Also, a strong association was found between age and gender on mobile user switching, with young users being more likely to switch and male users being the main switchers. Other studies evaluated various marketing strategies adapted by suppliers that encourage consumer switching by introducing special discounts and promotions (Fudenberg and Tirole, 2000; Sun *et al.*, 2003). These studies reflect how different marketing approaches could increase the incentives to switch a brand by giving more perceived value to the brands and reducing switching costs.

Lam *et al.* (2010) explored brand switching when a radically new brand is launched. They realized from a longitudinal study during the introduction of the iPhone in Spain that both relative consumer – brand identification and relative perceived value prevent brand switching; however, this impact changes over time. Interestingly, they claimed that relative consumer – brand identification allows a greater limitation on brand switching than relative perceived value. This outcome suggests that brand switching by consumers can be elucidated by social movement between brand identities rather than by functional utility maximization as a standard economic perspective.

The difference between findings of Ranganathan *et al.* (2006) and Lam *et al.* (2010) indicates that consumers could perceive the same brand differently the first time it is introduced to market and after using it, as consumers are looking for the brand that satisfies various consumer-related requirements at the same time. To some extent, this could explain the significant brand switching from Blackberry to iPhone when the latter was launched to market, and then from iPhone to Galaxy because every new brand is perceived as delivering more capabilities to consumers.

Brand switching of service providers

To account for different aspects of brand switching, Bansal *et al.* (2005) did a comprehensive study to include most of the previous factors in their model, adding new ones to understand how different variables might influence the switching in new service providers for auto repair and hairstyling. They divided these variables into three categories:

1. push effects (low quality, low satisfaction, low value, low trust, low commitment and high price perceptions);
2. mooring effects (unfavorable attitude toward switching, unfavorable subjective norms, high switching costs, infrequent prior switching behavior and low variety seeking); and
3. pull effect (alternative attractiveness).

This comprehensive model allows the assessment of the relative influences of different categories. An important result of this study is that the push effects, which include some of the most important switching predictors that dominate extant switching models, appear to be the weakest of these three categories, whereas the mooring effects are the strongest drivers of brand switching behavior (Smith *et al.*, 1999), especially when the

switching cost is low (Jones *et al.*, 2000). The pull factor was characterized by a single variable, "alternative attractiveness", which may not explain the whole case for this category. Adding more variables related to marketing strategy or product design itself might identify what factors make other products highly attractive (Jones *et al.*, 2002). In addition, incorporating additional categories to this model, such as demographic and attitudinal, can be useful, to give more explanatory power to switching behavior for different product types because product type could moderate the relationships found in this model.

Antecedents of buyer brand switching

Organizations exhibit brand switching similar to that demonstrated by consumers; however, brand switching at this level is more complicated than otherwise because of the greater complexity of buyers' requirements and the long-term relationships with providers (Claycomb and Frankwick, 2005; Jackson and Cooper, 1988). Also, products used by buyers are more specialized so as to meet certain needs and are more technology-intense because of the complexity of organizational requirements (John *et al.*, 1999; Glazer, 1991). Usually, buyers are more likely to focus on long-term relationships and engage in cooperative activities that result in greater benefits for both partners (Flint *et al.*, 2002; Dabholkar *et al.*, 1994), further complicating the brand switching process (Weiss and Heide, 1993).

Different studies have evaluated buyer brand switching by using similar variables adapted in the consumer brand switching research and through monitoring different products:

- courier service provider (Lam *et al.*, 2004);
- service provider (Yanamandram and White, 2006);
- computer workstation (Heide and Weiss, 1995);
- banking (Wathne *et al.*, 2001);
- financial industry (Liu *et al.*, 2005);
- insurance and advertising (Money, 2004);
- telecommunication services (Low and Johnston, 2006); and
- hardware retailers (Ping, 1997).

The amount of research that has studied the brand switching behavior of buyers is less than that for consumer switching, perhaps because of the difficulty of conducting such studies and getting reliable information at the organizational level. In the following sections, the major studies on buyer brand switching are reviewed to determine the factors behind switching and comment on the limitations of the studies.

Brand switching of technological products

To find the factors that influence buyers' consideration of new providers, Heide and Weiss (1995) proposed a model that emphasizes three categories of factors:

(1) buyer uncertainty (pace of technological change, technological heterogeneity and prior experience);

(2) switching costs (compatibility problems and related switching costs); and

(3) situational factors (buying process formalization and centralization and purchase importance).

The importance of the buyer uncertainty category appears from the product nature that is selected for this study, that is, computer workstation. The technological heterogeneity represents a lack of a common technology standard between providers (Tushman and Anderson, 1986), whereas rapid pace of technological change reflects the uncertainty because of time sensitivity of information (Glazer and Weiss, 1993). Study findings indicate that rapid pace of technological change and technological heterogeneity intensify the search activities efforts to get more information about different brands, but that they increase the probability to stay with the current provider, while limited prior experience increases the likelihood of switching to a new provider.

Al-kwifi and McNaughton (2011), however, conducted a study focused on exploring the factors behind brand switching by lead users of high technology capital products. They found that lead users are willing to face strong barriers to switching to a new brand that is critical to the renewal of organizational capabilities. They state that the decision to switch among high technology capital products is influenced mainly by the product features, product variety and research collaboration. Later, Al-kwifi and Yammout (2013) repeated the same study on mass-market users of high technology, and found that the brand switching is dominated mainly by product features (Bloch, 1995), which usually contain specific capabilities to achieve a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991), and by product service.

Brand switching of service providers

Using the banking industry, Wathne *et al.* (2001) studied the determinants of brand switching. They investigated the influence of interpersonal relationships, switching costs and marketing strategies (price and bundling) on brand switching. Data were collected from both buyers and providers to determine any differences between both sides regarding the importance of various variables. Wathne *et al.* (2001) found that buyers perceived marketing variables as the main factors underpinning switching, with price dominating all other factors. This outcome undermines the frequently mentioned role of interpersonal relationships and switching costs as a shield against price and product strategy. Another interesting result in this study is that both buyers and suppliers claim different perceptions of the determinants of brand switching: Buyers believe that switching costs are the most important factors in deciding to continue with an incumbent, whereas the incumbent perceives interpersonal relationships as the main switching barrier.

The influence of consultation on buyer brand switching was studied for the first time by Money (2004), when he examined whether buyers use recommendations to find a better service provider (appliances, food, banking and insurance). The study was designed in a cross-national context to evaluate the effect of culture, Japanese and American, and geographic location, foreign and domestic. He proposed a three-component model to explain the outcome of switching:

(1) number of consultations;
(2) tie strength (duration, frequency, social importance, business importance, attractiveness, trust and perceived expertise), which represents different dimensions of a referral source and buyer relationship; and
(3) centrality, which is defined as the strategic position of an individual within a firm.

Two important findings emerge from this study. First, buyers who conducted referrals to explore their potential service provider switched less frequently than those who did not; in addition, buyers working in foreign countries switched more than those working domestically, perhaps because domestic buyers are more familiar with their market and because finding a long-term provider is uncomplicated. Second, for Japanese buyers operating in Japan, attractiveness, business importance and perceived expertise have a significant influence on switching, whereas for American buyers operating in the USA, the business importance has a significant impact on switching.

Low and Johnston (2006) studied the effect of relationship equity (fair treatment) on brand switching. They proposed a model that links key dimensions of relationship equity in the process of adopting a new telecommunication service. The model considers that relationship equity is a result of a buyer's perception of key account manager practices (customer orientation, communication skills, ability to deliver promises, conflict resolution skills, buyer's trust and buyer's affective commitment). These practices are moderated by external factors (intensity of market competition and technological uncertainty) and internal buying firm factors (different rewards comparison). The study suggests that once a buyer perceives the relationship to be inequitable, he or she will switch to a new supplier after evaluating switching costs. This study represents a dynamic model to assess antecedents behind brand switching for the service industry, where managers can play an important role to build and manage strong buyer relationships.

Reviewing the extant literature on buyer brand switching shows that there is no distinctive model to describe or predict this behavior at the organizational level, with each study adapting different independent variables to explain this behavior. On the other hand, using a comprehensive model that accounts for the majority of factors mentioned in previous studies would be impractical because completing it by participating organizations would be a challenge.

Thus, each study has to focus on certain variables that are deemed relevant to the study context, which can provide a partial picture to the true factors behind brand switching.

Future research directions

Future research needs to evolve in different directions to yield better approaches, thereby helping to create attractive brands that accurately match the perception of consumers. First, more research is needed to develop dynamic systems to track consumers' knowledge and preferences. It is not enough simply to use regular surveys to collect information about consumer needs because the results could be misleading for certain products. Because a survey targets a group that takes the time and effort to answer specific questions, the results may have limited application. We propose, therefore, to continue exploring the influence of online technology, such as social networks and discussion boards, to monitor how consumers describe and discuss their personal experience with a brand: how they utilize it daily, how it adds value, what they like and dislike about the brand and what features they like to see in future products. Such information represents an excellent source of new ideas to improve brand value as well as discover why competitor brands are more attractive to consumers. This interactive tracking system has proved to be highly efficient for certain industries, such as the hotel and tourism industry, in which users are asked to provide their feedback.

Many companies are tracking this information about their own and competitors' brands to enable them develop strategies that improve their brand image in the market.

These tracking systems are a good source of information about consumers' interest in and content ideas about most products and services. For high technology products, however, where the rate of technological change is high and technology standards are difficult to define, defining the optimum preferences of consumers is a challenging task because preferences change constantly, while each product represents a unique feature that might achieve different objectives. Therefore, selecting the optimal preferences for products requires collecting information from multiple sources and defining the most critical product features that would make the brand attractive to consumers. Future research should explore the impact of lead users as a useful source of information to define the best product features of high technology products. Previous research has shown that lead users can be a trusted source of ideas for new products and a reliable source of market demands (Morrison *et al.*, 2004), but more research is needed to prove the importance of lead users in building successful brands.

Second, because best brands provide a comprehensive understanding of the demographics of their target market, more research is needed to discover how different cultures perceive the same brand. This information is essential for building a successful global brand (Schuiling and Kapferer, 2004) and the appropriate marketing strategy for it. Academics and marketing managers can achieve this objective by conducting continuous research to track the fluctuation in consumers' preference across cultures and thereby define the common tone of consumers and the overall identity of a brand. The use of social networks and targeted surveys (for specific regions) can be a useful tool in building international connections between a company and its global consumers. Although some research has been conducted in this avenue, more study is needed to examine the different ways that global consumers perceive brand value to define the need for implementing marketing strategies that target specific cultural regions.

Third, research exploring the link between developing innovation strategies and creating brand identity is needed because uniqueness of a product is what makes it attractive to consumers. This requires companies to focus more on the consumer's perspective and less on the company's perspective, given that innovation starts with creating a unique customer value. Previous research has tried to integrate consumers' needs and contexts (Kotler and Trias de Bes, 2003), but it did not originate explicitly from existing offerings to consumer value. In reality, knowing consumers' preferences and contexts is part of the challenge, and building an innovation strategy to meet accurately these preferences is the most challenging part of the process. Future research is therefore needed to develop better strategies and organizational structure that help the innovation process in building unique consumer value and sustain consistency in this process.

Fourth, there is little understanding of the antecedents of brand switching in business markets, especially in markets for high technology products, where organizations are faced with numerous implications and significant costs at each step of the switching process. The characteristics of these products are that they tend to be information-intensive and impose high uncertainty during the switching process. The complexity of brand switching at organizational level makes it difficult to conduct such studies and gather reliable information at the organizational level. Therefore, more

research is needed in this avenue to help companies build stronger brands that prevent switching behavior.

There is no doubt that today's consumer preferences are highly unpredictable and fluctuate at the local and international levels, and therefore building attractive brands becomes a continuous challenge for companies. This condition requires a change from previous approaches in the evaluation of consumer needs and contexts and in building the attractive brand. Future research should explore this issue from different perspectives to find practical solutions that support companies in building their brands and sustaining competitiveness advantage.

Conclusion, discussion and managerial implications

A review of the many studies on brand switching reveals that brands are becoming something more than just a product: they are becoming a relationship between a company's products and consumers' perception (Keller *et al.*, 2008). Such relationship is built on trust that the brand will fulfill consumers' expectations (Money, 2004; Low and Johnston, 2006). If the brand fails to maintain this trust, it will cause consumers to switch to more attractive brands. However, if trust is no more granted, brands need to be rebuilt on the basis of returning this trust with consumers. This study demonstrates that brand switching is influenced by different factors based on the product/service/industry under investigation. Comparing the outcome from our literature review, we can define that brand switching is a dynamic and complex process at the individual and organization levels, and there is no single model to cope with the complexities of this situation. This is why we find that each study comes up with a different model based on the way researches set up their study framework.

There is evidence that factors behind brand switching behavior can be different across the product life cycle, once it is launched to market (Lam *et al.*, 2010) and during the utility stage (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2006). This means consumers' perception of new brand would vary from the early technology adoption stage to the point of fully exploring its capabilities, where consumers will start looking further for the next attractive brand in market that fulfill their needs. This condition requires companies to regularly improve their brand building capabilities to meet changing consumers' preferences (Cornwell and Roy, 2001), especially for high technology products where consumers prefer to own advanced technology to secure a competitive position. The brand itself could cause consumer switching if the associated features that are important to consumers are slow in embracing new technology.

In addition, antecedents behind brand switching are found to be different across different market segments. For example, lead users, who are at the cutting-edge, perceive product features, product variety and research collaboration as the key drivers in changing the brand and getting the capabilities needed to leverage significant advantages from the new brand (Al-kwifi and McNaughton, 2011). Mass-market users, however, claim that product features and product service are the motivation factors to switch their brand (Al-kwifi and Yammout, 2013). This means companies must perform extra efforts to identify consumers' preferences in different market segments, especially in high technology markets where consumers' requirements are changing (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1998). These efforts will help companies build a strong brand reputation by the ability to translate consumers' preferences into product features that fit the needs of a specific market segment (Dahlén *et al.*, 2009).

It is obvious that different studies define the factors behind brand switching using various indicators, such as demographic characteristics (Bayus, 1991), consumers' characteristics (Mittal and Kamakura, 2001), cultural context (Money, 2004), interpersonal relationships (Wathne *et al.*, 2001) and marketing strategy (Bansal *et al.*, 2005). Regardless of the specific factors behind switching, consumers generally switch to more attractive brands. Thus, the attractiveness of a new brand can be considered the common factor behind brand switching. This attractiveness can be enhanced by improving one or more of the product/service dimensions (Jones *et al.*, 2002). For example, a brand can be realized as more attractive by availing of one of these dimensions:

- offering an enhanced customer service (e.g. banking, service industry);
- product features (e.g. technological products);
- low prices (e.g. retailers, household products); and
- bundling services (mobiles, banking).

Since attractive brands live and die by the will of market consumers, companies must constantly collect information about consumers' behavior and culture and develop a map for building a better brand, one that is alive and moving based on learning consumers' needs and expectations. For example, when Apple introduced the "iPhone" brand, it was the most attractive smartphone on the market, causing significant consumer switching from other brands including Motorola, Nokia and Sony Ericson. Later, Samsung continued to learn more about consumer tastes and needs, which helped it launch a more attractive brand, "Galaxy". Samsung differentiated its smartphone with different features, big screens and a successful marketing strategy (Nisen, 2013), through which it offers different options of brand new smartphones targeting different consumers, including low-end smartphones for the developing world (Schuiling and Kapferer, 2004).

This study demonstrates that research on brand switching should continue to investigate, across different industries and using numerous factors, the influence of various factors on consumer behavior toward replacing a brand. Future research will provide a better understanding of how consumers' preferences and perception of a particular brand can change over time due to several elements, such as technological change, cultural context, demographic aspects, marketing strategy and consumer relationship. Given that brand switching behavior is a dynamic and complex process, it is important that future research explore this issue from diverse perspectives and introduce new approaches to interpret this behavior. It is believed that literature on brand management and marketing has the potential to delineate the appropriate strategies that build strong brands locally and internationally (Schuiling and Kapferer, 2004).

Although many managers claim they have the knowledge of how to make their brands attractive, in reality they have to conduct frequent market research analyses to learn from competitors and consumers. Managers should not rely on their existing knowledge to predict how to make an attractive brand because research shows that consumers and suppliers claim different perceptions of the determinants of brand switching (Wathne *et al.*, 2001). Determining what makes a brand attractive is therefore

a critical matter when defining the appropriate strategy, to prevent market share from eroding.

One strategy that helps to build an attractive brand is to integrate consumers' knowledge and feedback into defining the appropriate product features in the market (Al-Kwifi and McNaughton, 2011; Zha and Sriram, 2006); this knowledge fills the gap between what companies think consumers want and will buy, and what consumers really want and will really buy. In practice, this strategy can be implemented by targeting different groups from various market segments, and using them in building and verifying the brand (Morrison *et al.*, 2004). In high technology markets, this process becomes more challenging, as consumers' preferences are changing rapidly with continuous launching of innovative technologies. Another effective strategy that helps in building attractive brands is using consumer feedback after they try the brand. For example, in the hotel industry, consumers are asked to provide online reviews describing their hotel experience during the last visit. Collected information (as positive and negative reviews) can benefit weak brands, leading to greater sales and even more positive reviews. The feedback loop can continue to boost sales and strengthen overall brand equity in the process (Ho-Dac *et al.*, 2013).

From this study, we conclude that brand switching is a critical issue. If managed properly, switching can increase market share for a company, otherwise it erodes the company's consumer base. Although many studies have defined various factors to explain antecedents of brand switching, the common factor behind this vibrant process is the creation and sustaining of brand attractiveness.

Notes

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