Brand Loyalty and Consumer Stress: Are Brand Loyalists More Stressed?

Consumers face numerous stressors in today's world. A recent report suggests that **half of all consumers are actively preventing or treating stress** (*Health + Wellness*, 2017). Despite the prevalence of stress in people's lives, surprisingly little empirical research has examined how stress influences consumer behavior. In this research, we aim to examine the relationship between consumer stress and their interactions with brands, especially the tendency be loyal in consumer–brand relationships.

A possible result of brand loyalty is reduced consumer stress. Brand loyalty is the strength of the relationship between an individual's relative attitude and repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994). For example, imagine a consumer couple that is stressed about welcoming their newborn. Brand loyalty could ease their anxiety by restricting their purchases to one trusted brand. Positive attitudes and repeat purchase of one brand over others can help a consumer justify their actions and ease subsequent stress. According to a wealth of attitude and decision-making literature, **brand loyalty should ease subsequent decision-making stress** because the brand to which consumers are loyal becomes more available and important in memory (e.g., Feldman & Lynch, 1988).

In contrast, another stream of research that examines what happens when brands fail suggests that **brand loyalty can be accompanied with additional stress**. Brands are constantly failing to meet consumer or regulatory expectations (e.g., United or Volkswagen). In most cases, loyal customers are the first and strongest defenders of a brand's failure (e.g., Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). However, defending the brand – or brand loyalty in general – can take a toll on loyalists. Recall the example above. The same consumer couple who relied on a brand of diapers to keep their baby clean and comfortable might become stressed when the brand fails to meet its claims. Consumers prone to brand loyalty may subject themselves to more opportunities of stressful episodes post-brand failure. Indeed, additional research has found that the threat of having to defend a position can induce stress (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012).

To our knowledge, the current work proposes the **first empirical examination** of the relationship between the tendency to be brand loyal and consumer stress. The Nielsen consumer survey data present an exciting opportunity to test the competing relationships in a compelling and relevant context. In addition, Nielsen and its partners stand to benefit substantially from our research. First, we highlight an **overlooked segment of consumers** who are more prone to brand loyalty that may be fruitful for managers to target specific marketing communications. Simultaneously, our results will inform market researchers and managers on how to **communicate with brand loyalists** based on their relationship with stress. From a theoretical standpoint, our research proposes new insight on an overlooked, yet important, consequence of consumer–brand relationships. Moreover, we call into question the belief that justifying one's actions (e.g., supporting a brand after a scandal) is a wholly effective defense mechanism.

To test these ideas, we **request access to individual-level data from Nielsen's syndicated surveys** including, but not limited to, the Scarborough Survey of the American Consumer ®. We are particularly interested in analyzing the correlation between items that reflect brand loyalty (e.g., "When I find a brand I like, I stick to it") and those that reflect stress (e.g.,

"Juggling family and work demands is very stressful for me"). We have access to financial support from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Business to support the purchase of the data requested.

The research team consists of **Professor Tiffany White** and **doctoral student Aaron Barnes**. Tiffany Barnett White is Associate Professor of Business Administration and Advertising and Bruce and Anne Strohm Faculty Fellow at the University of Illinois, College of Business. She joined the faculty at Illinois in 1999 and received a Ph.D. in marketing from Duke University in 2000. Professor White holds M.S. and B.S. degrees in advertising from the University of Illinois. Her teaching and research interests are in the area of consumer psychology. Her research addresses affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of consumer-brand relationships and has been published in major marketing journals, including the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Consumer Psychology and Psychology & Marketing. Professor White has been invited to present on the topic of branding and brand management to national and international audiences. Her research on the "Brand Connected Consumer" is a featured TEDx presentation (available for viewing on youtube.com).

Aaron Barnes is a third year Ph.D. student in Marketing at the University of Illinois College of Business. In general, his research investigates the implications of culture and consumer–brand relationships on consumer behavior. Prior to coming to Illinois, Aaron earned his B.S. with honors in Marketing from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business and pursued the M.A. in Social and Consumer Psychology at New York University.

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