

A Sustainable Approach Towards Fostering Brand Loyalty among Mobile Phone Handset Users

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Abstract

In the current highly competitive market, where products and services are subject to intense rivalry based on quality, features, pricing, and performance; consumer demands and expectations are continually evolving. This dynamic landscape creates a critical necessity for companies to prioritize the pursuit of customer satisfaction in order to maintain a competitive edge. Acquiring new customers is generally costlier and resource-intensive than retaining existing ones. Therefore, fostering customer loyalty has become a critical strategic priority for businesses aiming to ensure long-term survival and competitive advantage in today's marketplace. Loyal customers not only contribute to sustained revenue but also enhance brand reputation and stability, making customer retention a key factor in organizational success. This study reveals the importance of brand loyalty for companies, with a focus on identifying the factors that influence customer loyalty, utilizing customer satisfaction as a mediating variable. The study also aims to contribute to the strategic development of companies within the mobile phone handset sector. To achieve this objective, a sample of 604 mobile phone users was randomly selected from various regions of the Patiala district. The findings of the study indicate that all factors considered positively influence the attainment of customer loyalty, primarily through the achievement of customer satisfaction.

Introduction

Mobile phone brands within the telecommunications industry have emerged as a fundamental pillar of the rapidly evolving global landscape, exerting significant influence on individuals' lives across both developing and developed nations. Rapidly increasing mobile usage share has forced the industry marketers to formulate the strategies accordingly to beat competition.¹ With globalization and passion towards information technology, marketers are searching for smarter ways to sustain loyal customers. Loyalty is a synonym for healthy relationship between person's relative attitude and repeated purchase behaviour.² Finding a new prospective customer is more expensive than sustaining an existing one. In the words of Zohra and Ghali, loyalty to brand could be defined as amount of positive view of customer towards a brand or degree of adherence to the said brand and intention to purchase that brand in future.³ Husnain et al. quoted in one of his report that loyalty besides increasing the operating revenues of the business also help in building prosperity.⁴ Stan and his co-workers reported that, an organization success is majorly dependent upon its loyal customers, the reason being it costs less to keep an existing customer than to attract a new one and they sometimes act as active marketers for the organization by spreading positive word of mouth.⁵ However, organisations today face a major dilemma of how to retain the customers with the organisation. Organizations are working to win and satisfy customers for long-term relationship with loyalty towards products among customers.⁶ The key factor in determining company's growth and performance is brand loyalty. A positive relationship between brand loyalty and business performance has been the major focus of many authors. The extant literature has gone through different determinants of brand loyalty and their effect on these determinants fostering brand loyalty.

Elements determining Brand Loyalty

Perceived Product Quality (PPQ): Perceived Product Quality determines how the customer perceives quality of a given product based on knowledge and experiences of the product building a subjective judgement.⁷ It has a great importance in influencing loyalty towards product and brand as it nurtures warm relationship and positive belief among customers.^{8, 9} In context of financial benefit, it enhances the company's profitability with growth in number of satisfied customers.¹⁰ Kan also defined perceived quality as quality of product perceived using available information and purchase experiences on factors, namely, benefits of product, its durability, reliability and also functionality.¹¹

Brand Image (BI): Brand image is significant in shaping purchase intentions. As Mao et al. and Zhang mentioned that brand image impact consumer behaviour and their perceptions during product evaluation process.^{12, 13} Brand image has been an important determinant in defining brand loyalty in terms of smartphone users while purchasing.^{14, 15} For instance, they might prefer an Apple iPhone over a Samsung Galaxy, as the former depict a sense of pride and popularity among brand. Similarly, choosing a mobile carrier, smartphone users look on the corporate image.¹⁶ A favourable brand image leads to favourable attitudes toward the brand, thus repeat purchases.^{17, 18}

Brand Experience (BE): The brand experience is seen as a valuable driving force towards brand loyalty as it manifests a positive emotional state and sentiments of the mind of customers towards brand.¹⁹ A pleasing and memorable experience leaves a positive impression, contributes to the building of brand loyalty.²⁰

Service Quality: In order to gain a competitive edge, companies need to work on their quality of service. In words of Khan and Fasih, when the companies provide better quality services to the customers, their perception on the companies improve. One of important component while purchasing a new smartphone is always the service provided by the smartphones company.²¹

Price: The fairness of smartphone pricing significantly impacts consumers' satisfaction with the device. The loyalty towards a brand correlate with the stigma that price paid for the product is suitable with the benefits derived. Thus, reasonable pricing always caters and sustain customers to a product or brand.

Customer Satisfaction: Arsalan et al. proposed that customer satisfaction and customer value tend to be the primary factors determining the formation of brand loyalty. Customer value is about what customers want and what they get after purchasing and using the product. It has been determined that the value perceived by the customer is more effective than customer satisfaction in the post-purchase behaviour of the customer. However, the satisfaction of a customer after the purchase experience does not always guarantee that the customer will prefer its products.²² The link between satisfaction and loyalty has been robustly established, indicating that satisfied consumers are more inclined to remain loyal to a product or brand.^{23, 24} This relationship is particularly pronounced in the context of smartphones, where satisfaction with the device significantly influences the likelihood of consumer loyalty.^{25, 26, 27}

Review of Literature

The essence of this paper evolves with reviewing the extant research studies conducted on similar grounds. It provides a framework for the study and develops the conceptual idea. The rationale behind the present paper is to identify those sustainable factors that foster brand loyalty among smartphone users. Additionally, determine the influence of customer satisfaction while determining the relationship between brand loyalty and its determinants. The objectives are framed in alignment with the literature studied and its review presented below.

The literature on customer satisfaction and loyalty reveals several key insights. Dick and Basu emphasized that satisfaction is a crucial determinant of loyalty, which enhances sales² and profitability.²⁸ Jahanshahi et al. highlighted that satisfaction and loyalty are distinct constructs, with customers sometimes remaining loyal despite low satisfaction due to limited choices, and that customer satisfaction significantly influences loyalty.²⁹ Vazifeh et al. found that in Iran, functional, experiential and Social dimensions of brand loyalty positively relate to customer satisfaction, while the Symbolic dimension has less impact.³⁰ Lin and Wang explored m-commerce users in Taiwan and found that trust, habit, perceived value and customer satisfaction significantly influence loyalty, with perceived value being a key predictor.³¹ In contrast, Brakus et al. (2009) and Ong et al. (2018) argue that brand experience does not contribute to brand loyalty, even with satisfaction.^{32, 33} Slaba examined factors influencing mobile phone brand loyalty in the Czech Republic, identifying trust, satisfaction, experience, promotion, and perceived quality as essential drivers.¹ Said found that among Nokia users in Malaysia, Brand Loyalty is positively associated with Brand Satisfaction, Perceived Brand Quality, and Brand Equity, while a price increase negatively affects loyalty.³⁴ Ghimire and Karki confirmed the significance of perceived brand quality, customer satisfaction, and brand experience in fostering loyalty among young mobile phone users.³⁵ Additionally, Donny et al. suggested that consumer psychology and service quality positively impact customer value, enhancing loyalty.³⁶ Velnamby and Sivhesan highlighted the importance of cost reduction and quality improvement in

determining customer value in Sri Lanka's mobile service industry.³⁷ Arslan advocated for achieving customer loyalty through satisfaction, emphasizing emotional factors alongside market share and service quality.²²

In the present paper, the inspiration is to examine brand loyalty among customers which largely differ from customer loyalty. Brand loyalty on one hand is perception based that signifies loyalty based on image and experience of product. On the contrary, customer loyalty is benefit based in terms of prices and discounts. Fostering brand loyalty is of grave concern for the Marketeers. Brand loyalty denotes profound commitment to re-buy (re-patronize) a chosen product of a preferred brand consistently in future.³⁸ Loyalty shed a light on the positive aspect by building a trusted relationship between two people or institutions.

To sum up, research on brand loyalty has been in abducted and most of them conducted in developed areas. Moreover, most of the studies focused on examining the consumer behavior towards cellular and telecommunication services. This led to the understanding that there is dearth of examining the underdeveloped and developing areas, including Patiala District, where the marketers could find their loyal customers. Further, mobile phones being the most used media of communication and different day to day activities, the impact of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty towards mobile phone handset industry need adequate research. Only a little evidence is available in this regard. Thus, a significant gap has been identified from the previous studies which warranted the current study.

Based on the literature review conducted, it become imperative to answer to three questions:

- Q1. What are the factors influencing brand loyalty in the smartphone users in different district of Patiala.
- Q2. Is customer satisfaction influential in establishing relationship between sustainable factors and brand loyalty among respondents of Patiala?
- Q3. What suitable strategic program can be framed to enhance brand loyalty among smart phone users?

The primary objectives of this research are twofold. Firstly, the study aims to identify the key factors that influence brand loyalty, particularly focusing on the role of customer satisfaction as a mediator in this relationship. Understanding these dynamics will provide valuable insights into how customer perceptions and experiences impact their loyalty to mobile phone brands. Secondly, based on the findings, the research seeks to develop strategic programs tailored for mobile phone handset companies. These programs will be designed to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately contributing to the firms' competitive advantage and long-term success in the market.

Research Methodology

The study is a descriptive and analytical that aims to examine the effect of various factors on Brand Loyalty. The study is undertaken on 604 respondents from Urban, Semi-urban and Rural areas of Patiala District, chosen by Purposive sampling technique. Involvement was restricted to Primary data which was collected using a self-administered questionnaire on various antecedents of customer value, Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty and secondary data were collected from books, journals and magazine.

The questionnaire was administrated to those who owned a mobile phone of different brand. Questionnaire is prepared with five-point Likert-scaling system. In a way, qualitative data converted into quantitative and then detailed analysis was made with appropriate statistical tools in order to prove the objective. Customer value can be measured through product quality, service quality, price, brand image and brand experience. Statistical analysis is done by SPSS software.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistic:

Table 1.1: Demographic Profile:

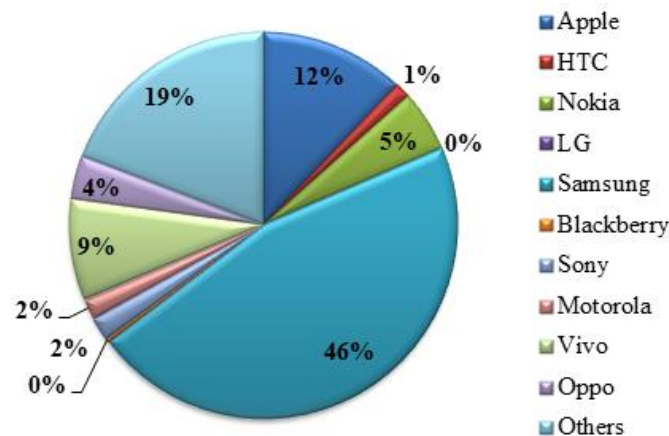
Variables	Frequency	%age
Gender		
Male	331	54.80
Female	273	45.20
Age		
Under 30	403	66.72
30-60	192	31.79
above 60	9	1.49
Marital Status		
Married	260	43.05
Unmarried	344	56.95
Location		
Urban	246	40.73
Semi Urban	80	13.25
Rural	278	46.03

Demographic profile in Table 1.1, presents a demographic presentation on the respondents under study. It shows that based on gender, the information was partially collected from males i.e., 54.80 % and females i.e., 45.20 %. A majority of respondents belong to age group under 30 i.e., 66.7 % followed by those in age group between 30-60 and then above 60 years. Out of the total respondents 260 respondents were married, while 344 respondents were unmarried. Further, majorly the respondents were from rural area i.e., 46.03% followed by urban area (40.73%) and 13.25 % were from semi-urban area.

Type of brands

Table 1.2 Types of Smartphone Brands

Brand	Frequency	%age
Apple	73	12.10%
HTC	8	1.30%
Nokia	31	5.10%
LG	0	0.00%
Samsung	279	46.30%
Blackberry	2	0.30%
Sony	12	2.00%
Motorola	10	1.70%
Vivo	51	8.50%
Oppo	22	3.60%
Others	116	19.20%
Total	604	100%



Source: Computed through survey

As per above table, it could be interpreted that Samsung is the highest selling brand among respondent of Patiala having 46.30% users followed by Apple brand (12.10%) and Vivo Brand (8.50%). Further, Blackberry is the lowest selling brand while 19.20% market is captured by other brands.

Determination of the brand loyalty:

The determinants of brand loyalty are studied using Structural equation modelling where brand loyalty is the dependent variable and customer satisfaction is a mediator between determinants of brand loyalty and dependent variable 'Brand Loyalty'. Before going through the model, diagnostic tests have been conducted on the data to test the reliability and validity of the data scale. These are discussed below:

Reliability Test: Testing the reliability of scale is crucial before application of statistical tools to derive fruitful and accurate results. Two significant tests were conducted:

- The internal reliability of the items has been tested by computing the Cronbach's alpha values (as per Nunnally, 1978) which was estimated to be 0.757.³⁹ As suggested that a minimum alpha of 0.6 sufficed for early stage of research, the constructs developed were deemed to have adequate reliability for further analysis.
- The composite reliability values as shown in Table varied from 0.8158 to 0.8997. According to the values of rho Joreskog i.e. composite reliability, satisfactory results have been found. This is indicating that the scales used in the study are reliable and consistent. Thus, the internal consistency is good for each variable.

Validity Test: Validity refers to whether a study measures or examines what it claims to measure or examine. Content credit of this questionnaire has been justified by guide professors and also initial distribution of questionnaire among number of experts, scholars and considering their corrective comments, it has the necessary credibility.

Convergent Validity, measured using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), captures the variance in the measurement error estimated by the indicators.⁴⁰ An AVE exceeding 0.50 demonstrates the validity of construct which occurred due to the indicators while not from measurement error. In the above table, the AVE reported to be above the recommended cut-off level of 50 %, which confirmed that all constructs determine satisfactory convergent validity.

Looking at the outer loadings of the indicators, it is found that they range between 0.65 and 0.85. According to Hair et al. a variable is counted in the measurement model as an indicator⁴¹, when the minimum loading is greater than 0.30, while loadings greater than 0.50 are more important, and are very significant.⁴²

Table 1.3: Discriminant validity by Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Latent Variable	AVE	CR
Perceived Product Quality (PPQ)	0.632	0.8727
Brand Image (BI)	0.5315	0.8191
Brand Experience (BE)	0.5579	0.863
Service quality (SQ)	0.5603	0.8348
Price (PR)	0.5478	0.8286
Customer satisfaction (CS)	0.5185	0.8658
Customer loyalty (CL)	0.5293	0.8997

Table 1.3 represents the discriminant validity by Fornell-Larcker criterion. The approach, in absolute terms, says that if the top value in any factor column is higher than the values (correlations) below it, there is an existence of discriminate validity. The test is a measure of degree of distinction between constructs i.e., to which a given construct is distinct from other constructs. Looking at the table, the diagonal values shown are the values of AVE of the construct which indicates a higher AVE of construct when compared horizontally and vertically with their corresponding inter-construct squared correlation coefficients. this shows a good discriminant validity.

Table 1.4: Fornell Larcker criterion for testing Discriminant Validity

Construct	PQ	BI	BE	SQ	P	SC	CL
PQ	0.6320						
BI	0.3210	0.5315					
BE	0.5324	0.3399	0.5579				
SQ	0.2165	0.1603	0.2199	0.5603			
Pr	0.1117	0.0477	0.1089	0.1413	0.5478		
CS	0.2260	0.1590	0.2462	0.2134	0.2301	0.5185	
CL	0.1884	0.1646	0.2533	0.1520	0.1445	0.4229	0.5293

Squared correlation; AVE in the diagonal

All the determinants in the table represent customer value. The direct and indirect effect along with total effect of these determinants on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty respectively has been observed using path analysis and shown using coefficient values as in the table. Path analysis is a form of multiple regression statistical analysis that is used to evaluate causal models by examining the relationships between a dependent variable and two or more independent variables.

Effect	Beta (Direct Effect)	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Cohen's f ²
PPQ -> CS	0.0511		0.0511	0.0022
PPQ-> CL	-0.0488	0.0182	-0.0306	0.0022
BI-> CS	0.0948		0.0948	0.0108
BI -> CL	0.0964	0.0338	0.1302	0.0122

BE -> CS	0.0991		0.0991	0.0079
BE -> CL	0.1485	0.0353	0.1838	0.0194
SQ -> CS	0.0911		0.0911	0.0106
SQ-> CL	-0.0382	0.0325	-0.0057	0.0020
Pr -> CS	0.2176		0.2176	0.0710
Pr -> CL	0.0208	0.0776	0.0983	0.0007
CS -> CL	0.3564		0.3564	0.1405

Observing the direct effect of factors on customer loyalty, it is found that the most influential factor is found to be customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.3564$, $p < 0.01$). Among the other factors, brand experience ($\beta = 0.1485$, $p < 0.01$) and brand image ($\beta = 0.964$, $p < 0.01$) have significant direct impact on customer Loyalty. The table showed that the direct and total effect of perceived product quality (PPQ) on customer satisfaction is 0.0511. However, the total effect of perceived product quality (PPQ) on customer loyalty (CL) is -0.0306. This implies that, perceived product quality (PPQ), despite showing a positive direct effect on customer satisfaction, showed a negative total effect on customer loyalty. This implied that perceived product quality (PPQ) has been a significant determinant in determining customer satisfaction of mobile phone handset users. The total effect of brand image (BI) on customer satisfaction is reported to be 0.0948 and on customer loyalty i.e., 0.1302. This implies that brand image (BI) has been also a significant factor in determining both customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty of mobile phone users. Similarly, the results showed that brand experience (BE) has a significant direct impact on customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty. Where service quality has a positive direct effect on customer satisfaction (0.0911), while negative total effect on customer loyalty (-0.0057). It implied that service quality has been a significant determinant of customer satisfaction for mobile phone users. Price has been another significant determinant of customer satisfaction along with customer loyalty, though it's total effect on customer satisfaction (0.2176) is higher than that on customer loyalty (0.0983). Customer satisfaction reporting a total direct effect of 0.3564 on customer loyalty implied that customer satisfaction has been a strong determinant of customer loyalty for mobile phone users.

The result showed that in relation to customer loyalty, perceived product quality and service quality failed to explain the variation in loyalty among customers. Perceived product quality showed a negative relationship with customer loyalty with beta value -0.0306. Similarly, service quality also reported negative relation with customer loyalty with beta value -0.0057. Thus, the study showed that brand image, brand experience and price are the significant factors affecting customer loyalty.

The results proved that significant indirect relationship is found of brand image (BI), brand experience (BE), service quality (SQ) and price (PR) with customer loyalty (CL) with customer satisfaction (CS) playing a mediating role. It is noted that service quality and price could not build a direct relationship with customer loyalty but have indirect effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. Further, customer satisfaction also played a substantial mediator role in enhancing the relationship of brand image and brand experience with customer loyalty.

Strategic plan of action

Customer loyalty programs are generally framed to reward the customers who constantly buy a particular brand's products. Loyalty strategies are designed to change attach a clamp to customers by strengthening their loyalty to the business or the brands of the business.⁴³ Such plan of actions helps those customers to attain the profitability for showing loyalty to a particular product or brand who generally do not evaluate variety of options available to them and always choose the same brand or the business over the others. The main benefit of such plan of actions for the company's is to increase the sales revenues and to establish a close link between the brands of the business and the existing customers. Arslan proposed that there are two strategies that businesses can follow to avoid

competition: creating a selective advantage for its customers and protecting their customers from competitive pressures.²² Some contributions to the companies for formulating a suitable plan of action are as:

1. As far as mobile phones are concerned, it is important for the companies to set an appropriate technical standard complexity, keep on updating the current technical standards from time to time and focus on upgrading them so as to provide quality products to the customers. Too much hike in technical complexity will also increase the difficulty level of usage for the customers.

2. There are several tools available today to measure Customer Loyalty and Customer Satisfaction which the companies should use on regular basis.^{44, 45} International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9000: 2000 states *"As one of the measurements of the performance of the Quality Management System, the organizations shall monitor information relating to customer perception as to whether the organization has met customer requirements. The methods for obtaining and using this information shall be determined."*⁴⁶

3. The extra efforts to build communication with their loyal customers by connecting them on social media, sending greeting Cards, sending e-mails and newsletters etc. will help developing a strong corporate image.

4. Brand image acts as a strong influencer to enhance Customer Satisfaction and loyalty and lack of its proper utilization can lead to loss of company's customers.⁴⁷ Thus, marketing managers should frame their strategies and activities in the light and sight of it, and should be used as a benchmark for every step the company takes to strengthen brand image in customer's mind.

5. Customer Satisfaction and loyalty can be increased by increasing brand image in the mobile phone market.⁴⁸ So, it is advisable for mobile phone companies to focus on creating, maintaining and enhancing the image of their brand in the mind of consumers. A simple logo or a symbol, a unique ringtone, and stylish look can help the companies build a strong lasting image in the minds of consumers.

6. As per results, Service Quality is one of the important determinants of Customer Satisfaction and employees are the reflection of a company. A company's reputation is at stake when employees represent themselves on company's behalf. Employees should be well trained and challenged for their role play. They should understand their role and keep their attitude humble and respectful towards their present and prospective customers, as this builds image of the company in return.

7. Creating a Brand Experience in the mind of customers is another key concern for companies.⁴⁹ It is suggested that solving the customer grievances and discrepancies should be taken up on priority basis because experiences are always remembered. A business need to adopt the strategy of 'Customer is always right' and value their suggestions in order to gain their loyalty.⁵⁰ The customer interest and his suggestions are always in best interest of the company.

8. Efforts should be made to make the customers delighted leading to word-of-mouth marketing.⁵¹ There can be many ways in which a delightful experience can be given to the customers such as remembering the name of customer, wishing them on special occasions, providing after sale services and warranties, special discounts on special events etc. proving an extra value of money to the customers will make them loyal towards the company.

9. In such a highly competitive market, companies should find ways to add value to their customers by enhancing their product and Service Quality.⁵² Marketers need to focus upon building and maintaining customer relationship quality so that they feel belongingness towards the firm. Companies can provide some extra features as value added options to differentiate themselves from other companies with standard features.

10. Price is a significant contributor to Customer Satisfaction and loyalty. The companies should consider valuing their products, as per their quality attributes, compatibility, and competitiveness. If the customer receives the value equal or more than the paid value, he/she becomes loyal towards the brand, which leads to repeated purchase. Suitability of the price with the benefits obtained is an important indicator of the impact of price on Loyalty.⁵³

11. In order to increase Customer Loyalty, companies have to understand the needs of their customers. A strong feedback system should be formulated to look forward to Customer's grievances, expectations and satisfaction level of customers.

12. As the study confirms that product quality is one of the contributors in Customer Satisfaction in Patiala District, mobile phone companies, in particular, should focus on their advertising strategies towards convincing the customers that they are getting high quality from the firm.

Conclusion

In recent years, marketing has shifted from merely maximizing transactions to enhancing real customer value, emphasizing the importance of customer loyalty. Establishing long-term, personalized relationships with customers is crucial, especially in a competitive global market. Key strategies include fostering a customer-oriented culture, building trust, offering tailored products, and implementing loyalty programs to increase retention. Research using PLS-SEM analysis indicates that brand image, brand experience, and pricing significantly impact customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction acting as a crucial intermediary. In the highly competitive mobile phone industry, companies must focus on both acquiring new customers and retaining existing ones, as retaining customers is generally less costly. Ultimately, identifying the key factors that drive customer satisfaction and evaluating performance in these areas are essential for achieving a competitive advantage.

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