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How to use brand experience to generate brand loyalty

A case study of theme parks

Johanna Blom, Sixten Nyhlén & Chris Johnson

Seventh Edition

Student Papers

2021

September - October

Strategic Brand Management: Master Paper

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Lund School of Economics and Management

How to use brand experience to generate brand loyalty

A case study of theme parks

Johanna Blom, Sixten Nyhlén & Chris Johnson

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to investigate how firms can use brand experience to generate brand loyalty.

Methodology: case studies and literature review

Findings: The findings in this paper support the findings in previous research that brand loyalty is driven by brand experience, and that brand personality can function as a mediator between them. The main themes that are considered important concerning how companies use a brand experience are emotional bond, attitudinal influences and brand personality.

Managerial implications: The paper can provide firms with the insight that if they can manage to create and use a positive brand experience, it can have a significant effect on brand loyalty.

Academical implications: This study has contributed to the research field of brand experience and brand loyalty.

Keywords: Brand experience, brand loyalty, brand personality, case studies, theme parks

Introduction

In recent years, brand experience has received increased attention, and marketers have realised that an understanding of how consumers experience brands is crucial for developing successful marketing strategies (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). Brand experiences represent a brand's identity and how the user feels when engaging or interacting with the brand. Through brand experiences consumers can relate to the personality that is communicated and develop relationships and strong emotional bonds with the brand (Ramasheshan & Stein, 2014). It is argued that in order for companies to differentiate from its competitors, they should create exciting and positive brand experiences that make consumers remain loyal (Brakus et al., 2009). Although consumers look for value, the right features and associations, they expect something more distinct from brands. They desire something that engages, excites and intrigues them and touches their hearts. They want an experience (Schmitt, 2009).

Theme parks are of particular interest in terms of brand experience since it has become one of the most popular entertainment options. Also, few industries

have managed to integrate the storytelling, brand and customer experience, and brand loyalty better than theme parks. The idea with theme parks is to offer people an escape from reality and an experience that offers them an escape from their everyday life. Theme parks aim to engage all the senses and provide unforgettable memories. Beyond that the parks offer memorable experiences, they must be successful in a way that makes people want to return again (Alton, 2018). As many as 501,2 million people visited the world's top 10 most popular theme parks in 2018 (Themed Entertainment Association, 2018). This paper studies three different cases of theme parks: Disney, Universal Studios and Legoland. Walt Disney Attractions are the most attended theme parks in the world, and consist of Disneyland, Walt Disney World Resorts and Disney Water Parks. Universal Studios is another worldwide theme park giant where people can experience their favorite movies in real life. Further, Lego is the main theme of the Legoland parks and are designed specifically for families with children. The Lego theme park chain currently consists of eight resorts located in various parts of the world (Statista, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how firms can use brand experience to generate brand loyalty. This will be performed by a literature review, followed by three case studies of the above mentioned theme parks. After the analysis, the conclusion and discussion are presented. It will further be discussed how this paper's findings can be applied in a broader perspective and may guide companies to create and use experiences of their own brands.

Literature review

This part of the paper will present the theoretical concepts that are the paper's foundation. Initially, brand experience is presented, followed by brand loyalty, to then proceed with brand personality as a mediator between these.

Brand experience

Brand experience is becoming increasingly relevant in the branding literature since creating an experience of a company's brand for customers can humanize and strengthen it, and by that gain advantage. Brand experience can be defined as a subjective, internal consumer response and behavioral response that represent a brand's identity

and how the user feels when engaging or interacting with the brand. This can be seen in communication, good packaging, service encounter experiences and so forth (Paramita, Chan Nhu, Ngo, Minh Tran & Greogory, 2021). Brand experience is argued to capture the very essence of branding, even more than analytically and cognitively oriented brand concepts such as brand equity, brand attitudes and brand associations. This is because what ultimately matters to consumers is if brands can provide an attractive experience for them (Schmitt, 2009). Moreover, brand experience provides a better understanding of the value proposition a brand offers, and is constructed by both the brand and the consumer (Brakus et al., 2009).

Brand experience usually occurs in three various ways: when consumers search for products, when they shop for them and receive service, and when they consume them. Product experiences take place when consumers interact with products. The interaction can either be direct through physical contact with the product, or indirect when a product is presented virtually. A combination of direct and indirect product experiences can affect the consumers' product judgement, attitudes, preferences,

purchase intent, and recall. Shopping and service experiences occur when consumers interact with a store's physical environment, its personnel, policies and practices. Thus, this type of experience includes how salespeople affect the experience in terms of customers' feelings, brand attitude and satisfaction. Lastly, brand experience also takes place when consumers consume the products. Consumption experiences include hedonic dimensions such as feelings, fantasies and fun and often occurs during and after consuming an experience like museums or river rafting (Brakus et al., 2009). Experiential consumption is concerned with getting life experience and is closely related to happiness. Happiness occurs mainly because consumers face more positive feelings after an experiential purchase than after a material one (Gerhard, Melo Pedrosa, Oliveira Mota & Ferreira de Freitas, 2020). However, experiences may not always have a positive impact, it depends on the interaction in the experiences that will determine if it makes people happy or not (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009).

Furthermore, brand experience can be defined through four dimensions: sensations, emotions, cognitions and behaviors (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 2009). Sensations

represent a feeling or emotion that connects individuals' cognition with their senses. Sensations can form perception, image and mental conceptions from products or services. Emotions towards a brand can either be positive or negative, depending on the consumer's experience of it. Positive emotions can lead the consumer to engage with the brand and spread positive word-of-mouth, while negative emotions can lead to unloyalty, complaints and negative word-of-mouth. Moreover, the intellectual aspect of brand experience covers the ability to engage consumers divergent and convergent thinking when interacting with a brand. When interactions with brands can induce interesting cognitive processing, it may generate positive brand evaluation. Lastly, the behavioral aspect of brand experience is defined as the bodily experience of a brand induced by the consumer. In other words, behavioral brand experience can be evoked by both human and functional signals of a brand. An example of an activity aimed to enhance brand experience include product visitor attractions. Such an activity may elevate the perceived brand's image and attitude that subsequently promotes customers' willingness to strengthen their bond with a

brand (Brakus et al., 2009; Paramita et al., 2021).

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is often considered the core of a brand's equity. If customers continue to purchase the brand, despite other competitors with superior qualities, price and convenience, the brand is of significant value. Brand loyalty is a measurement of the attachment that a customer feels towards the brand. It can be used to determine how likely a customer is to switch to another brand in the case of change in for example price or some of its features. Also, brand loyalty provides companies with several advantages, such as reduced costs, increased customer acquisition, and cross-selling (Aaker, 1992). Since products normally satisfy a basic need, the main determinant of the consumer's choice of product is the added value. The aim for marketers is that the added value will lead to preferences among the consumers which eventually will produce brand loyalty. There are several incentives for marketers to pursue high brand loyalty since it enables high profit levels, long term cash-flow and a stable market-share (Melin, 2002).

As emphasized by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014), sustaining and building brand loyalty is even more crucial in today's highly competitive environment where consumers have a wide range of brands to choose from. Customers are, due to constant access to internet and smartphones, more informed, which has resulted in the ability to switch brands frequently. This development is costly and ineffective for firms that rely on the selling power of their brand. Other researchers argue that brand loyalty consists of two independent dimensions: attitudinal brand loyalty and behavioral brand loyalty (Aaker, 1992; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Oliver, 1999). The positive attitude towards the brand ensures that previous purchase behavior will continue. Behavioral brand loyalty consists of repeated purchases of the brand, while attitudinal brand loyalty is the degree of individual commitment related to the unique value associated with the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, the notion that repeated purchases generates brand loyalty, has been criticized for not considering the attitude towards the brand and other aspects such as situational factors, intrinsic factors and socio-cultural factors (Dick & Basu, 1994; Martell, 2007). Dick and Basu (1994) argue that there is a need in marketing research to extend the

concept of brand loyalty to incorporate the attitudinal influences towards the brand and not entirely focus on the effect of repeated purchases.

The link in between

There are several studies that have demonstrated that brand loyalty is driven by brand experience. According to Ramaseshan and Stein (2014), a mediator and catalyst in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty is brand personality. When consumers encounter positive experiences with a brand, they form positive brand personality judgements (Aaker, 1997). These judgments are then used to evaluate a brand through the concept of self-congruity (Sirgy, 1982) which has a significant impact on brand loyalty (Sirgy & Samli, 1985). Additionally, Brakus et al. (2009) suggests that brand experience functioned as a useful driver for brand personality as well as brand personality having a mediating effect in the connection between brand experience and brand loyalty. It is further argued that employees are a key aspect of brand personality, and a crucial part in creating brand loyalty (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). While disagreements exist on definitions, there is a broad consensus about the effect of brand personality. Several studies have

indicated positive effects based on brand personality, such as influencing preference among consumers (Sirgy, 1982), playing a role in the attitudes and associations towards a brand (Freling & Forbes, 2005) as well as establishing a foundation for product differentiation (Aaker, 1992).

Furthermore, it is argued that positive brand experiences lead to pleasurable outcomes which makes consumers want to repeat these positive experiences. Consequently, positive brand experiences are more likely to generate purchases of the brand again (behavioral brand loyalty), as well as recommending it to other consumers (attitudinal brand loyalty) (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brands that are capable of delivering a superior brand experience can gain not just differentiation, but preference over other brands and build brand loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009). This falls in line with Aaker's (1992) argument concerning that it is the perceived added value among the consumers that eventually leads to brand loyalty. Brands that are operating in developed and mature markets endures fierce competition, which complicates the ability to obtain a stable market position. In this competitive and diverse environment, differentiating a brand is dependent on a

firm's ability to create a superior consumer experience that engages consumers in a long term relationship (Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2010).

Another aspect of how brand loyalty is driven by brand experience is pointed out by Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007). They argue that positive customer experience could lead to the creation of an emotional tie between a firm's brand and its customers, that in turn increases customer loyalty. The more experiential dimensions a brand generates, the greater the experience for the consumer, and the more likely it is for the consumer to repeat the experience over again, thus being loyal towards the brand (Gentile et al., 2007). Further, Sahin, Zehir and Kitapçı (2011) argues that creating a favorable brand experience is of great importance within brand relationship management since it significantly increases brand loyalty. In addition, Morrison and Crane (2007) argue that brand experience can generate emotional connections through a compelling and consistent context to encourage brand loyalty.

Methodology

The foundation of this study is constituted by a comprehensive literature review of the phenomena of brand experience and brand loyalty, as well as brand personality as the connection and mediating link between them. The main purpose of the literature review was to attain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena as well as an overview of previous research.

In order to assess how brand experience can generate brand loyalty, we have applied a multiple case study, using three case studies of theme parks. These theme parks were chosen since they are among the biggest in the world as well as they all offer a full-day theme park experience of a well-known established brand. Since this paper strives to do in-depth examinations of several cases to test an already existing theoretical framework, this research takes on a qualitative approach (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2016). A multiple case study design is necessary when the researcher aims to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases and provides researchers with an in-depth insight into the cases (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Stake, 1995). Further, Leonard Barton (1990) argues that applying a multicase approach is a measure

to increase the generalizability. Another advantage of using a multiple case method is that it grants the researcher with a triangulation of evidence, which increases the reliability and validity of the research results (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Leonard Barton (1990) argues that the case study approach is especially useful for responding to why and how questions about a contemporary set of events, which aligns with the purpose of this paper: to investigate how firms can use brand experience to generate brand loyalty by case studies of theme parks. In this paper's analysis, we used the collected research literature as qualitative data as well as non-scientific contemporary articles as secondary data concerning the three cases.

Case studies

As outlined above, this paper has Disney, Universal Studios and Legoland as case studies to analyse how these companies use brand experience to generate brand loyalty.

Disney

The Walt Disney Company and its theme parks have been at the forefront of family entertainment for nearly 80 years. The company has focused on creating

exceptional entertainment experiences for its fans to build affinity and trust for the corporate brand, its sub-brands and characters (The Walt Disney Company, 2021). Disney's core brand promise is, coined by Walt Disney himself, *to create happiness through magical experiences*, and has been their core promise since the launch of the company 1923 (Adamson, 2014).

The Disney experience takes place in various ways. To start with, the experience often begins months before visiting the parks. By using the planning app 'My Disney Experience', that aims to facilitate customers' visit to the theme parks, customers can explore the attractions before arriving (Disney World, 2021). This is where the product experience begins, since a product experience also can be presented virtually (Brakus et al., 2009). The product, service and consumption experience (Brakus et al., 2009) of the brand further take place while visiting the parks. At the parks, customers can get in physical touch with all of the characters in different ways. Besides the attractions, Disney has created character meet and greet locations and meals named after different characters to simplify for visitors to interact with their favorite characters (Adamson, 2014). Disney has

also created other locations, such as stores, to make it possible for customers to interact with the characters. An example is the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, where customers can get a princess makeover and meet all the famous Disney princesses (Bennett & Schweitzer, 2014). This can be seen as a life experience that is closely related to happiness (Gerard et al., 2020) since customers get to psychically interact with the Disney princesses, and not only buy a toy format to take home. Brand experience can also occur after consuming an experience (Brakus et al., 2009). The Disney experience does continue after the visit as Disney uses information from customers to suggest future deals, inviting them to return for their next trip (Disney World, 2021), which can trigger behavioral loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Another aspect of the Disney experience is how the company works with nostalgia. As previously pointed out, the more experiential dimensions a brand generates, the greater the experience for the consumer (Gentile et al., 2007). Also, nostalgia is a cognitive bias, and brand experience can be determined by cognitions. When interactions with a brand induce cognitive processing, it may generate positive experience of the brand (Brakus et

al., 2009; Paramita et al., 2021). For example, a part of the experience is the value of music. Disney music is argued to link current Disney experiences to experiences of the past through nostalgia. Another way of working with nostalgia, Disney constructs and speaks to elements of children's lived experiences, while providing adults with nostalgic fantasies about their own past. However, it is reasoned that in order for Disney to succeed with the given brand experience, customer's willingness to participate in the illusions is crucial – the customers must want to believe. Thus, the customer agrees to believe the Disney version of the experience, as long as Disney continues to present it as believable (Carson, 2004). This strengthens the fact that brand experience is constructed by both parts (Brakus et al., 2009).

To return to Disney's brand promise, Disney delivers on its brand promise mainly through storytelling, innovation and service with the purpose to build a friendship with the customers. Customers come to Disney theme parks as welcomed guests, and leave as cherished friends (James, 2013). Disney is one of the best storytelling brands there is, since they create a world that immerse consumers and make their fantasies and

imaginations come to life. From bringing in products to life, to helping customers connect with the brand's promise, Disney opine that every element of today's customers' experience of a brand is being driven by story. They mean that great stories touch the customers' hearts and take them on unforgettable journeys. A great experience is argued by researchers to lead to an emotional tie between a brand and a customer, which in turn can generate a willingness of being loyal towards the brand (Morrison & Crane, 2007; Sahin et al., 2011). Thus, Disney's goal is to create an engaging experience that makes the customers become emotionally invested, which in turn will lead to a transformative experience with the purpose to deepen brand loyalty (Alton, 2018).

The successful execution of Disney's brand experience further depends on the employees, primarily because they live and breathe Disney's values. They are the ones who spend time with customers, assist, guide and interact with them (Labriola, 2020). Salespeople are a part of a company's service experience, and affect the experience in terms of customers' feelings, brand attitude and satisfaction (Brakus et al., 2009). Employees of a company are also

important for the brand personality, which reinforces that employees are an important part of the brand experience to make customers become and remain loyal (Ramasheshan & Stein, 2014). Disney matches this and considers the relationship that the customers build with the employees to be central to establishing a connection to its brand. The employees are further one of Disney's most important assets because if they are happy and satisfied at work, they will be more productive, which leads to exceptional service. This will in turn result in that Disney's customers are likely to remain loyal to the brand and become repeat visitors. They often cite Disney's superior customer experience as their reason for returning (James, 2013).

As outlined above, Disney strives to construct a brand experience in various ways to create brand loyalty and has long been recognized for its ability to attract and retain customers. Disney Institute (2018) explains that brand loyalty is defined by some companies as simply having repeat customers, but they mean that brand loyalty has a broader meaning. At Disney, "true brand loyalty is based on creating something special so that customers interact with the brand, an emotional connection is built, and

the foundation for a long term relationship is formed” (Disney Institute, 2018). This is consistent with the fact that brand loyalty includes more than just repeated purchases (Aaker, 1992; Dick & Basu, 1994). It is also consistent with the arguments that outline that an emotional connection towards a brand is crucial for the experience and the possibilities to become loyal (Gentile et al., 2007; Iglesias et al., 2010; Morrison & Crane, 2007; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Disney wants to build this emotional connection with each visitor since they think that if customers believe that every person of the company cares about them, they will remain loyal to the brand (James, 2013). Disney further explains that in order to build successful loyalty, a company must make a meaningful brand promise, and then deliver on that promise over and over again (Disney Institute, 2018). By continually reaching out to customers, Disney increases the probability that customers will keep introducing the brand to others, explained as attitudinal brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). By that, Disney will keep thriving for many years to come (James, 2013).

Universal Studios

Universal Studios is one of the biggest media brands in the world (Comparably, 2021). Production of movies is their main business area, but they run several theme parks across the world as well (The Universal Studios Hollywood, 2021). The Universal Studios Hollywood was their first theme park and was established 1964, and is now one of the most popular theme park attractions in the world, with over 9 million visitors in 2018 (Themed Entertainment Association, 2018). A visit includes a full day experience of a movie-based theme park, with attractions such as the Jurassic World ride, King Kong 360 3D and a guide of the studio tour, which is still in use for movie production (The Universal Studios Hollywood, 2021).

The company views the purpose of the theme park as a way to deliver an experience of a themed land that is translated to real-life interpretation of their iconic movies (The Universal Studios Hollywood, 2021). This can be related to the experience that one customer enjoyed when visiting Universal Studios Orlando, pointing out that the magical experience of actually walking and even standing in line within a physical version of Hogwarts, was a dream come

true, and that they definitely would visit again (Orlandoformer, 2021). This reassembles with the findings in Gentile et al. (2007) article, that the creation of a positive experience can evoke a positive attitude or emotional tie to the brand, which in a later stage increases brand loyalty.

The importance and advantages of creating an environment that can provide customers with a positive brand experience is something that is recognised even within the top management of Universal Studios. The CEO of all the Universal Studios theme parks, Thomas L Williams, emphasises the importance of designing a story in a way that creates an unforgettable experience that generates a desire among the consumer to visit more than once. "It is not a matter of how fast you can go or how high you can drop. It is more about telling the story in a way that immerses the visitor in the experience and gives them a desire to do it again and again. There are a lot of repeat visits" (Anstey, 2019). This quote indicates that the firm views the theme park, not only as an amusement park of adrenaline-boosting roller coasters, but as a platform that provides the opportunity to offer an experience that both satisfies the customer and generates repeated visits. This

corresponds with Dick and Basu's (2003) critique towards the view of brand loyalty incorporating only repeated purchases, and excluding the attitudinal influences towards the brand. Attitudinal influences is important to consider since a positive brand experience can lead to positive brand personality judgements, hence a positive attitude towards the brand - which has a significant impact on brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Universal Studios as a brand manages to create a connection between their movies and the theme park attractions, elevating the emotional and attitudinal feelings towards the firm's products through the attraction experience. One example is a customer who discusses the ET-attraction:

I love the story, I love everything that makes E.T what it is and the choked up feeling you get when you fly in front of that moon is unbelievable. Yes the ride itself could do with some updating as it is reflecting a film from 30 years ago... But please Universal, don't touch it! It provides us thirty somethings with a bit of nostalgia and this is why I come back to this attraction every time I visit (Orlandoformer, 2021).

This can be linked to that the customer experiences nostalgia, which is a cognitive bias, and Brakus et al. (2009) point out that cognitions can be a determining factor of brand experiences. Therefore, it might be a strong incentive to use such biases in order to provide customers with a positive experience. It can also be related to Ramaseshan and Stein's (2014) argument that brand personality works as a catalyst and mediate in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. If brand experience leads to positive brand personality judgments, which in this case arguably is that the customer associates the brand with providing a magical nostalgic experience, that will have a significant impact on brand loyalty.

Another example of Universal Studios' effort in creating their brand experience, is their vision for one of their most popular attractions "Studio Tour", as a way for customers to get behind-the-scenes-looks of their favorite movies and watch Blockbuster movies come to life (The Universal Studios Hollywood, 2021). Even when building some of the tour facilities, the firm took creative consultation from Steven Spielberg, an American film director, producer, and screenwriter, who was also invited to guide

the tour at one occasion (Dow, 2021). It is arguably that this guided tour aligns with the behavioral aspect, described by Brakus et al. (2009), as the bodily experience of a brand. Brakus et al. (2009) further point out that brands that initiate activities, such as visitor attractions, can elevate the perceived brand image that subsequently increases the customers' willingness to enhance their relationship to the brand. A guided tour could be such an activity.

Another important factor in creating a positive brand experience for their customers is the role of the service employees at the theme parks. The chief administration officer of all universal parks and resorts John Sprouls, discusses the importance of having the right personnel when being interviewed concerning the park's reopening after being closed during the pandemic: "We know a great guest experience begins with our team members - and we will continue to provide the best work experience we can" (Parker, 2021). This is consistent with Brakus et al. (2009), among others, argument that the employees have an important role in the experience through affecting the customer's feelings, brand attitude and satisfaction.

Legoland

In 1932, a master carpenter named Ole Kirk Kristiansen was finding himself in a tough situation. Due to a global economic crisis, his small carpentry business was threatened with bankruptcy. But as seen before, the overhanging threat of a crisis spur into a path of innovation, a path which leads the master carpenter into the world of toy making. At first, he created wooden ducks and fire trucks and later turned the production towards the interlocking bricks of plastic, known as Lego (Lego Group, 2021a). Lego is now considered one of the strongest brands in the world (Brand Finance, 2021). Already in the middle of 1960's, Lego was the talk of the town and were having 20,000 curious visitors a year flocking to their factory to watch the Lego Group's exhibition of finished models. However, the small factory in Billund, Denmark, was not able to cope with the number of visitors. This led to the idea of an outdoor exhibition of Lego models, which turned into the theme park that today is known as Legoland (Lego Group, 2021b).

Back in 2004, an interview was conducted with Mads Ryder, who at the time was head of Legoland in Billund as well as head of the Legoland Business Unit overseeing

Legoland parks in the United Kingdom, United States and Germany. In the interview, Ryder explains that the Legoland parks have two distinct objectives. Firstly, they must make a profit, which indicates that the Legoland parks are not considered a marketing expenditure, but rather a stand-alone business unit. Secondly, the Legoland parks must “act as a ‘brand house’ for Lego, providing a means of exhibiting the product and the values attached to that product” (Reynolds, 2004). The values attached to the products have Lego summed up as their brand promise, that they have chosen to call ‘play promise’, which is *Joy of Building, Pride of Creation* (Riis-Carstensen, 2014). Furthermore, Lego has been explicit in the way they work with their brand and has created a publicly available piece of graphic that illustrates their brand framework including their belief, mission, vision, idea, values, promises and spirit (Lego, 2021a).

Lego has further translated their values and promise into a brand personality named “My Lego Friend”. The personality traits are explained the following way:

My Lego friend has a vivid imagination, is curious and likes to try out new things, is always positive and optimistic

and fun to be around. [My Lego Friend] is friendly and approachable and cares for others. [My Lego Friend] does not get bothered by the little things and can comfortably adapt to play different roles (Riis-Carstensen, 2014).

Lego is striving to project its brand values and personality traits into the experience customers get when visiting Legoland, and by that deliver on the brand promise. This is done through rides, shows, events and interaction with members of staff. By creating a positive brand experience, Lego can form positive brand personality judgments in the customers' minds, as argued by Aaker (1997). A positive brand experience can also, as aforementioned, create an emotional tie between the brand and the customer, that in turn leads to brand loyalty (Gentile et al., 2007). Common for all rides and activities at Legoland is that they are Lego themed and submerges the Legoland visitors into the different Lego universes, hence creating a life-size world of Lego for the visitor to experience. For example, one of these life-size experiences is created through "Lego NinjaGo – The Ride", a ride where the visitor through an interactive 5D experience is helping the characters of the NinjaGo Universe fighting off "The Great Devourer" - an archnemesi

of the beloved Lego characters (Legoland, 2021).

Another example is to be found through a visit to Miniland, where customers can experience the whole world in miniature. They can find famous edifices such as the Statue of Liberty and the Acropolis, all built in small Lego bricks (Lego, 2021b). Both visualizing the *Joy of Building, Pride of Creation*, as well as creating what Brakus et al. (2009) call a product and consumption experience. Miniland, in particular, holds a special place in the hearts of older visitors who are part of earlier generations who, now being adults and parents, are recalling the fond memories they have from when visiting Legoland as children. This can be seen in a range of interviews conducted with Legoland visitors, one quote states the following: "Everything looks just like when I was a child. You can see that some of the roof tiles in Miniland have developed a patina, because they are 20 years old" (Johns & Gyimóthy, 2002). This articulation of nostalgia correlates with earlier research, since nostalgia is considered a cognitive bias and as described by Brakus et al. (2009), cognitions are one of the key players when creating a brand experience.

When visitors are participating in the activities at Legoland, they will be met by the Lego members of staff. One of the staff's main functions is to create an engaging environment for the Legoland visitors. This is for instance done through the trade of Lego minifigures between staff and visitors. Any visitors can throughout their visit approach an Legoland employee and trade a Lego minifigure to the one that an employee carries on their name tag, free or charge, this is used as a way to enhance the Legoland experience (Cancialosi, 2017). Due to the clearly articulated brand values and brand personality, is it possible for the members of staff to embody "My Lego Friend" and promote a positive relationship between the visitor and Lego (Riis-Carstensen, 2014), and thereby adding to the service encounter experience. Also, they enhance the perception of the brand personality through positive staff encounters. As mentioned, employees are an important aspect of brand experience and brand personality in order to generate brand loyalty (Paramita et al., 2021; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

The view on Legoland as an actual hub for the brand experience is something that is recognised within the company as well. The former CEO of all Legoland theme parks

John Jacobsen stated in an interview that he views the Legoland theme park as a "Brand Club House". He also discusses the customer perception of the experience at Legoland, and points out that a positive experience likely leads to a desire to build more lego. "If you are a fan of Lego for example you want to visit Legoland, not just because it is a theme park, but because it is kind of the Club House of the Lego Brand. And if you visit a Legoland Park you are certainly stimulated to go home and make some LEGO creations" (Read, 2011). This is consistent with Gentile et al. (2007) reasoning, that a positive brand experience could lead to emotional bond to the brand which can increase brand loyalty. Jacobsen further emphasizes Legoland offering themed hotel-resorts as a way to extend the experience to be more than just a theme park, and bring a experiential dimension to the overnight-stay as well (Read, 2011). This aligns with Gentile et a. (2007) argument that the more experiential dimensions the brand manages to present to the customer, the greater the experience is for the customer, and the more likely that the customer remains loyal to the brand.

Drawing upon the logic deriving from this paper's literature review, it is apparent that

Lego is conveying their brand values, promises and personality through activities in Legoland, facilitated by Lego members of staff. Through the activities, visitors are exposed to product, service and consumption experiences by interacting with Lego products, staff and attractions.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how firms can use brand experience to generate brand loyalty. In order to fulfill the purpose, three case studies of theme parks were analysed through a literature review to test the existing theoretical framework concerning how brand experience can generate brand loyalty. The findings in this paper support the findings in previous research that brand loyalty is driven by brand experience, and that brand personality can function as a mediator between them. The findings regarding the main themes that are considered important concerning how companies create a positive brand experience, follows below.

Initially, after studying the cases one recurring theme is to make an experience that makes customers feel an emotional bond towards the brand. Legoland creates an

emotional bond to the customers mainly by their brand personality “My Lego Friend”. In the cases of Disney and Universal Studios, creating an experience that provides a connection between the movie-world and the theme park experience is something that creates an emotional bond to the brand as well as the desire to purchase again. That is, the most essential aspect of the brand experience is to arouse emotions and feelings that influences the attitude towards the brand, this significantly increases brand loyalty which is in accordance with the findings in already existing research.

Another theme of the usage of brand experience is that in all three cases, a positive brand experience seems to affect the attitude and relationship towards the brand. This aligns with the previous research that argues that the attitudinal influences of brand experience have a significant impact on brand loyalty. An additional finding was that in all three cases of theme parks, evoking nostalgia seemed to be an important dimension in order for the brand experience to be perceived as positive. This can be viewed in terms of nostalgia as a cognition, which can determine the brand experience and could therefore be important to consider

if a firm aims to offer a positive brand experience for the customer.

A third theme that was continually brought to attention was how the theme parks work with their brand personality. In all of the case studies, it is uncovered that when exposed to positive brand experiences, theme park visitors are more likely to judge the brand personality as positive. This will in turn lead to a higher possibility of recommending the brand to others, which supports earlier research findings. In all three cases, there were strong indications that the theme park personnel had an important role in creating a positive brand experience, since they affect the consumer's feelings as well as the attitude towards the brand. The employees had an impact on how the theme park visitors perceived brand personality as well, and thereby the service encounter experience, which also underpin earlier findings.

Lastly, even though both Universal Studios and Disney are media-companies with movie-producing as their main business area, there are several similarities to Legoland. This indicates that using a brand experience to generate brand loyalty through theme parks is not only limited to the

entertainment industry. However, the notion of bringing the intangible magical experience of a movie to life in physical form seems to be a main theme in the brand experience of the Universal Studios and Disney theme parks. Legoland on the other hand, seems to be emphasizing the magic and creative nature of Lego, as a place where imagination comes alive. Thus, there are differences in how to attain a positive brand experience, but if a brand manages to create a positive brand experience it does generate brand loyalty.

Managerial implications

This paper can provide firms with the insight that if they can manage to create and use a brand experience that is positively perceived by customers, it can have a significant effect on brand loyalty. In this context, the theme parks in all cases not only generate direct profit, but in the meantime increase brand loyalty, which is an important determinant of long term profit, stable market share and consistent cash flow. In other words, there are incentives for companies to create a positive brand experience for the customer since it strengthens the relationship towards the brand and generates profit.

Academical implications

To contribute to the research field of brand experience and brand loyalty, we tested the existing theoretical framework, in order to generalise theory. The findings in this paper supports the findings in earlier research and the existing theory, namely that using brand experience can generate brand loyalty. The paper has also contributed to a new research area of theme parks as brand experiences, which have not been studied before.

Limitations and further research

With regard to that this paper only uses sources that are published online for the case studies, the empirical material could be seen as insufficient. Interviewing executives or employees from each theme park, and interviewing customers, would have

enriched this study by giving a deeper perspective. Due to the limitations of this paper, it has only been possible to present indications and signs of the findings and a suggestion would therefore be that future research should include a larger sample of theme parks, or other companies, in order to widen the scope of evidence. Additionally, this paper has solely investigated the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty in relation to theme parks, a suggestion is therefore that future research should broaden the scope to include other types of brand experience vehicles such as corporate museums or factory visits in order to shed light on possible differences or similarities.

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