

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-CONGRUITY WITH SPONSORSHIP, CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Companies have pursued sponsorship as one of the marketing strategies. It has been reported that the development of a customer loyalty is a strategic objective for most companies. Even though customer loyalty becomes the focus in most firms, little has been done in the perspective of event sponsorship. For that reason, the study was undertaken to investigate the impact of self-congruity with sponsorship and customers' involvement towards customer loyalty. 168 respondents were involved in the study. The study found out that there is a positive relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and customer loyalty. Customers with high degree of congruence towards the sponsored event are more likely to involve with the event. As the level of self-image congruity increases, customers are more likely to prefer the sponsoring firm's product. The highly involved customers with a sponsored event portray a high level of loyalty towards the sponsoring firms. This study contributes a significant knowledge to the sponsorship field in the local context.

### **Keywords**

*Self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement, customer loyalty*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the face of these sophisticated and cluttered market conditions, customer loyalty is being pursued as one of the strategies in order to survive in the global marketplace (Duffy, 2005). Customer loyalty is extremely important due to its link with profitability (Reichheld, 2003; McMullan, 2005). The benefits of customer loyalty are not obvious from the non-financial aspects, but still it can be considered as the added value to the firm (Duffy, 2003).

Today, when it comes to the increment of leisure events, the awareness and opportunity for the corporate event sponsorship is at an all time high (Gwinner, 1997). Aaker (1991) mentioned that brand awareness is accomplished by exposing the brand to as many potential consumers as possible. Sponsorship activities provide multiple opportunities for achieving awareness objectives (Gwinner, 1997), and corporations can build public awareness and loyalty by supporting their customers' favourite issues (McDaniel, Lamb & Hair, 2006). Shimp (2003) noted that marketers sponsor events for several purposes such as developing relationships with consumers, enhancing brand equity, and strengthening ties with the trade. Integration of sponsorship, together with other traditional marketing communication techniques such as advertising and sales promotions is vital in maintaining and building competitive advantage (Erdogan & Kitchen, 1998).

Customers experience with product or service of a particular firm will affect the relationship with the firm. Dynamic involvement and interaction between provider and the customer have created the experience (Mascarenhas, Kesavan & Bernacchi, 2006). Duffy (2003) mentioned that in order to increase share of a customer, a marketing program that enhances customer experience is crucial. Mascarenhas et al. (2006) summarized that the higher the interaction (involvement) and its quality, the higher the loyalty.

Even though customer loyalty becomes focus in most firms, lack of research in the perspective of event sponsorship may discourage firms from choosing sponsorship as an approach in fostering loyalty. Study by Thjømmøe, Olson and Brønn, (2002) confirmed that firms are not interested with sponsorship, as their findings indicated one of the reasons for not sponsoring was “lack of effective way to measure results”. Involvement with sponsored event is assumed may promote loyalty, but strong verification that involvement is able to promote loyalty is unavailable. Sponsorship held in the institute of higher education was expected to provide benefits for the sponsoring firms as well as the institute itself. However, do the current sponsorship able to deliver this? Lack of research in this scope may reduce the possibilities for future contract between these two parties, since the outcome is unclear.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***SELF-CONGRUITY WITH SPONSORSHIP***

The previous conducted consumer research has shown that a consumer’s attitude towards a product (and product purchase) is influenced by the matching of the product user image with the consumer’s self-concept (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy et al., 2000). Aaker (1997, cited by Kressman, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber & Lee, 2006) stated that consumers purchase goods that can represent their identity. Consumers attempt to evaluate a brand by matching the brand-user image with their self-concept (Kressman et al., 2006). The greater the match between the product user image and the consumer’s self-concept, the more likely the consumer has a favourable attitude towards that product (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy et al., 2000). Sirgy et al. (2000) referred this matching process to “self-congruity”.

Self-image congruence refers to the match between consumers’ self-concept (actual self, ideal self, etc.) and the user image (or ‘personality’) of a given product, brand, store, etc (Kressman et al., 2006). Rosenberg (1979, cited by Yim, Chan & Hung, 2007) defined self-image as “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object. Bonsjak and Rudolph (2008) stated that in Sirgy’s self-image congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982; 1985; 1986), there are four self-congruity types, which are actual, ideal, social and ideal social. Sirgy et al. (2000) defined the “actual self-congruity” as how consumers see themselves and the “ideal self-congruity” as how consumers would like to see themselves. The “social self-congruity is defined as how consumers believe they are seen by significant others and the “ideal social self-congruity” is defined as how consumers would like to be seen by others (Sirgy et al., 2000).

The self-image congruity facilitates positive behaviour and attitudes towards products and brands (Sirgy, 1982, 1985, 1991; Ericksen, 1996; Sirgy et al., 1997; Jamal & Goode, 2001). People who seek to maintain consistency with their self-image will select and recall self-conforming information to affirm their self-image, and they also reject products, services or brands that challenge their self-image congruity (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994; Aaker, 1999; Yim et al, 2007). The theory of self-image congruity has been tested across many categories (such as shoes, clothing, cars, cameras, soft drinks, beer, credit cards and so on) (Jamal & Goode, 2001)

and it is positively related to consumer behaviour constructs such as brand attitude, brand preference, brand choice, purchase motivation, purchase intentions, brand purchase, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty (Sirgy et al., 2008).

Sponsorship marketing is one of the tool practices of promoting the interests of a company together with its brands. The process is conducted by associating the company and its brands with a specific event (Shimp, 2003). Sponsorship attempts to improve brand or company perceptions. Meenaghan (1991) defined sponsorship as “an investment, in cash or kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with the activity”.

Self-congruity with a sponsorship event is referring to a degree to which consumers think the image of the sponsored event matches with their own self-image (Sirgy et al., 2008). In other words, self-congruity with sponsorship reveals the level of congruity with consumer’s self-image and the image of the event. Otker (1988; as cited in Ferrand and Pages, 1999) in describing the conditions of an effective sponsorship relationship, outline the perfect marriage as being a good match between “the image which the company wants to promote and the image of the sponsored body”. He observed that success is more likely to happen when a real and logical link between the sponsor and the sport or the event exist (Ferrand & Pages, 1999). This finding is in line with findings by Speed and Thompson (2000), which indicated that response towards a sponsorship is affected by the attitudes that the consumers hold towards the sponsor, event, and by their perception of the sponsor-event fit. Thus, these findings showed that both sponsorship and sponsoring firms must demonstrate the same level of image. The image that a sponsorship and sponsoring firm portrayed must be equivalent thus consumers will perceive that both entities are fit together.

### ***CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT***

There was a widely accepted agreement that the involvement is important to the consumer theory (Rothschild, 1984; Goldsmith & Emmert, 1991). From a consumers’ behaviour perspective, Zaltman and Wallendorf (1983; cited by Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2001) defined involvement as “a motivational state of mind (arousal) that is a goal directed”. Rothschild (1984) defined involvement as an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest. Goldsmith and Emmert (1991) referred customers’ involvement as the feelings of interest and enthusiasm consumers hold towards product categories.

The degree of consumer involvement in a product category has widely been recognized as a major variable relevant to strategy (Vaughn, 1980; Ray, 1982; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Shukla, 2004). Involvement with products has been hypothesized to lead to a greater perception of attribute differences, greater product importance and greater commitment to brand choice (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Shukla, 2004). Some previous research also show that increased levels of customer involvement can increase the levels of customer confidence when making product choices (Bateson & Hui, 1987; Bateson, 1989; Parker and Ward, 2000, Harris et al., 2001; Youngdahl et al., 2003; Howcroft et al., 2007). Goodman et al. (1995) noted that involvement might change customers’ knowledge and familiarity, influencing the evaluation process.

### ***CUSTOMER LOYALTY***

In today’s highly competitive and rapidly changing environment, how to maintain or even enhance customer loyalty has become an important success indicator for companies (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Hsieh & Li, 2008). It is commonly known that there is a positive relationship

between customer loyalty and profitability (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Duffy (2005) embraced the concept that it costs more to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one. Thus, it is vital for organizations to cultivate loyalty among their customers.

A commonly used definition of customer loyalty is adopted from Oliver (1999), which defined as a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service in the future despite there are situational influence and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour (Ndubisi, 2007). Wong and Sohal (2003) defined customer loyalty as repeatedly purchase a good or service over time; and hold favourable attitude towards a good or service, or towards the company supplying the good or service. There are two dimensions to customer loyalty, which are behavioural and attitudinal (Kandampully & Dwi Suhartanto, 2000). Behavioral loyalty is mainly expressed in terms of revealed purchase and usage behaviour, often conditioned on customer satisfaction, and is measured by historical purchasing of one's brand and competing brands (this is divided loyalty or polygamous behaviour) (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Attitudinal loyalty is often expressed as an ongoing relationship to a brand, often conditioned on positive customer preferences towards the brand, and is strongly influenced by significant others (this is strong loyalty or monogamous behaviour) (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Moreover, a customer who has the intention to repurchase and recommend is very likely to remain with the company (Kandampully & Dwi Suhartanto, 2000).

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The research was conducted at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Sintok Campus. The researcher had chosen members of Kelab Keusahawanan UUM as the respondents in the study because this club is operating the Celcom kiosk, located in College of Business building. The Celcom kiosk was sponsored by Celcom (Malaysia) Berhad. Furthermore, the members of Kelab Keusahawanan UUM have been selected as the respondents in this study because the researcher is interested in investigating the level of involvement in event sponsorship and its impact towards loyalty.

The study adopted a simple random sampling method. A total of 290 students are listed in the list of club member. There were 200 questionnaires distributed to respondents and 168 questionnaires were valid for analysis. The rest of the questionnaires were unacceptable; and the main reason was missing data. The returned questionnaires representing a response rate of 84 percent of the total questionnaires distributed.

The questions have been adopted from various authors. Items for self-congruity with sponsorship are adopted from Sirgy et al. (2008), and Chon (1992) and Sirgy et al. (1997), which is available in Yim et al. (2007). Items for customer involvement are adopted from Laurent and Kapferer (1985) Customer Involvement Profile (CIP). Items for customer loyalty are adopted from de Ruyter et al. (1998). Each variable was measured using five-point Likert scale; from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability values fall within 0.700 to 0.943 range.

## **STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The study involved 168 respondents from Kelab Keusahawanan UUM. There are 61 male students and 107 female students. From the demographic profile, 125 (74.4%) respondents are Malay, 36 (21.4%) respondents are Chinese, 6 (3.6%) of respondents are Indian and 1 respondent is considered as others. The study involved 96 (57.1%) respondents aged between

19 and 21 years; 67 (39.9%) respondents aged between 22 and 24 years; and 5 (3.0%) respondents aged 25 and 27 years.

Correlation analysis was conducted in order to find out the correlation between self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and customer loyalty using the Pearson product-moment correlation. The procedure was subjected to a two-tailed test for statistical significance at two different levels:  $p < 0.01$  and  $p < 0.05$ . Table I below shows the correlation analysis results between the three variables. The results indicated that self-congruity with sponsorship and customer involvement was significant. There was a medium and positive relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship and customer involvement ( $r = 0.466$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The result also indicated that self-congruity with sponsorship and customer loyalty was significant. There was a medium and positive relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship and customer loyalty ( $r = 0.341$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There was a strong and positive relationship between customer involvement and customer loyalty ( $r = 0.508$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thus involvement and customer loyalty was significant.

Table 1: Correlations amongst variables in study

	Self-congruity with sponsorship	Customer involvement	Customer loyalty
Self-congruity with sponsorship	1.000	.466**	.341**
Customer involvement	.466**	1.000	.508**
Customer loyalty	.341**	.508**	1.000

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship and customer loyalty, and customer involvement and customer loyalty. From the results shown in Table II, the  $R^2$  is 0.116, which means the model is jointly explained with 11.6 percent of the variance of customer loyalty. The model was significant at 1 percent level, F-values (21.884). Table II also shows that both self-congruity with sponsorship variables had a positive effect on customer loyalty. The regression results indicated that both actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity accounts for 20.9 percent variance in customer loyalty.

Table 2: Regression results between self-congruity with sponsorship and customer loyalty

Independent variables	Standardized beta
Actual self-congruity	.209**
Ideal self-congruity	.209**
$R^2$	.116
Adjusted $R^2$	.111
F value	21.884**

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$

Based on Table 3, the results demonstrated that the  $R^2$  is 0.258, which means the model is jointly explained with 25.8 percent of the variance of customer loyalty. The model was significant at 1 percent level, F-values (57.604). Of the five independent variables, three of them were found to have statistically significant association with customer loyalty. The variables were interest, which accounts for 28.6 percent variance in customer loyalty, pleasure accounts for 23.5 percent of variance in customer loyalty and risk importance accounts 16.5 percent of variance in customer loyalty. Sign value and probability of risk were not significant.

Table 3: Regression results between customer involvement and customer loyalty

Independent variables	Standardized beta
Interest	.286**
Pleasure	.235**
Sign value	.014
Risk importance	.165**
Probability of risk	.045
R <sup>2</sup>	.258
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.253
F value	57.604**

Note: \*\*p<0.01

Multiple regressions analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the three variables, self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and customer loyalty. From the result shows in Table IV, the R<sup>2</sup> is 0.272, which means model is jointly explained with 27.2 percent of the variance of customer loyalty. The model was significant at 1 percent level, F-values (30.775). Table IV also signifies that both variables were found statistically significant with customer loyalty. Customer involvement was found to contribute the higher variance by explaining 44.5 percent of customer loyalty variance while self-congruity with sponsorship only accounts for 13.4 percent variance in customer loyalty.

Table 4: Regression results between self-congruity, customer involvement and customer loyalty

Independent variables	Standardized beta
Self-congruity with sponsorship	.134**
Customer involvement	.445**
R <sup>2</sup>	.272
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.263
F value	30.775**

Note: \*\*p<0.01

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study seeks to examine the relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and customer loyalty. The study found out that there is a positive relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and customer loyalty. The results signify that when customers are highly involved with a sponsored event, they develop more self-congruence feelings towards the sponsoring firms. It is also noted that consumers might prefer event that have images compatible with their perceptions of self (Jamal and Goode, 2001). That is, consumers are more likely to involve with event which portray images that did not conflicting with their self images. The positive relationship between self-congruity and involvement suggesting that involvement might be able to develop image congruence between consumers and the sponsored event, as well as to the sponsoring firm. Consumers who feel involved with a sponsored event are likely to experience a bond with the event, following with the sponsoring firm.

The results of the study also signify, in general, the level of self-image congruence affected the intentions to be loyal to a particular firm or choosing over alternative firms. If consumers' degrees of self-image congruence are low to the sponsored event, they are more likely to choose alternative firms. As the level of self-image congruity increases, customers are less likely to consider other alternatives. The consequence is in line with the results by Yim et al. (2007), which indicate that in general, the negative effect of alternative attractiveness becomes weaker as the level of self-image congruity increases. As long as consumers are able to realize a good match between their self-image and the sponsored event, they are less likely to choose other alternative service providers.

Results of the study pointed out that involvement does portray a degree of relationship with loyalty. That is, when consumers are involved with a sponsored event, they will be more likely to be loyal to that sponsoring firm. The results also indicated that the involvement in sponsored event is highly significant with loyalty. This finding is consistent with findings by Sirgy et al. (2008), which noted that there is a positive influence on loyalty when customer involvement with the event is high. Since the results indicated that the involvement and loyalty are highly significant, frequency of involvement may affect the level of loyalty. That is, consumers who involved more than once with a sponsored event may portray different level of loyalty compared to consumers whom only involved once. One possible explanation for this is that for those consumers involving with the same sponsored event more than once, the relational bonds are developing at quicker pace than those consumers who visit only once. The study did find similarities with the findings of Shukla (2004), who mentioned that highly loyal people tended to exhibit high levels of involvement. That is, loyal consumers of the sponsoring firm are more likely to join the activities conducted at the sponsored event.

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the most contributory explanatory variables among two independent variables that best predict customer loyalty. The study indicates that the relationship between self-congruity with sponsorship and customer loyalty is considered as weak, since self-congruity with sponsorship only explained 13.4 percent of the variance in customer loyalty. The study found out that customer involvement is the most contributory explanatory variable that explains 44.5 percent of the variance in customer loyalty. Therefore, the study suggested that the marketing communication campaign i.e. sponsorship should be developed to increase involvement of customers. That is, lots of activities should be incorporated into the events, which is hope might draw attention from the audience. Significant rewards may help in increasing the frequency of customer involvement at the event. The results of the study also suggest that by fostering deeper involvement from customers towards the event, the management may realize more positive attitudes of loyalty from its customers.

Given the findings, organization that used sponsorship must manage it carefully to guarantee their effectiveness. If managers want sponsorship communication to enable firm to gain a competitive edge against their competitors, they require proper planning and execution. It is also vital to link the sponsorship with the marketing communication activities, especially with advertising. The findings regarding the effect of self-image congruence encourage managers to focus on the level which the event's image fits with the characteristics of the target market. If managers are able to place their campaign to enhance the self-congruity with the target buyers, they are likely to thrive in attracting these customers to their event. More, managers also have to make sure that there is a degree of similarity between the event and the firm. This is to help in increasing the level of self-congruity among the target consumers.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies to examine the changes of customer loyalty before and after the event sponsorship, since this study only captures the perceptions of respondents at a point of time. The study also suggests that future research should consider real world consumers since students are bound to certain limit to provide

meaningful information regarding the aspect of self-congruity with sponsorship, customer involvement and loyalty. In addition, future research can be carried out in the context of other types of event, such as sports and arts. It also may take into account of using highly dedicated customers towards one particular event as respondents, such as sport fans.

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