5.1 Hypothesis Related Findings and Discussion

Testing the conceptual model without including involvement resulted in the acceptance of an alternate model where affective commitment \(\rightarrow\) true brand loyalty (H4) is constrained to zero. Thus all hypotheses except H4 were accepted. This proves that brand experience and brand credibility make a significant contribution to the formation of true loyalty. Further, the indirect effect of brand experience on true brand loyalty was found to be much lower than its direct effect.

The conceptual model was further tested for its variation due to involvement. Involvement in this study is operationalized in three ways. First, it is operationalized as between-product-involvement, then as between-subject involvement and finally as a combination of between-product and between-subject. The variations in the conceptual model due to involvement are
obtained using multi-group invariance testing in SEM and are explained below.

The investigation of variations in the model based on between-product involvement (three product-groups) supported the hierarchy-of-effects view. High involvement hierarchy (all hypotheses found significant) was operational for the products-car and mobile phone handset, while low involvement hierarchy ($H_3$ and $H_4$ are insignificant) was observed in toothpaste. Further, it was observed that between-product involvement had a moderating effect on all paths, as depicted in the conceptual model, supporting hypothesis $H_{7a}$.

Variations observed in the model due to between-subject-involvement (low and high groups) do not support the hierarchy-of-effects view. Involvement had a moderating effect only on the brand credibility $\rightarrow$ affective commitment and affective commitment $\rightarrow$ true brand loyalty path. This shows $H_{7b}$ is true only on these two paths.

Investigation of variation in the model due to interaction-effect involvement (six groups) showed moderating effect on all paths, supporting $H_{7c}$. It has also supported the hierarchy-of-effects view. Three patterns of hierarchy have been observed: the first pattern was observed in high-high groups (both product involvement and subject-involvement were high), the second pattern was observed in Low-Low groups (both product and subject involvements were low) and the third pattern among High-Low or Low-High groups. The first pattern supported all stated hypotheses. The second pattern supported all hypotheses except brand credibility $\rightarrow$ affective commitment $\rightarrow$ true brand loyalty ($H_3$ and $H_4$) and the third pattern supported all hypotheses.
except affective commitment $\rightarrow$ true brand loyalty (H$_4$). The first pattern supported a high-involvement hierarchy while the second pattern supported a low-involvement hierarchy while the third pattern lay in between. These results point to the need of having different strategies for each of these groups.

The direct effect of brand experience on true brand loyalty is found to be higher than its indirect effect. This result is consistently observed while testing the conceptual model without involvement as well as in all groups formed out of the three operationalizations of involvement. This shows the important role played by brand experience in the formation of true loyalty. This finding also substantiates the need to focus on brand experience. This result supports the argument of Schmitt (1999) about the present economy which associates high value to the experiences above and beyond the functional features, benefits and quality of the product/service.

5.2 Managerial Implications

In the present market scenario, customers buy a product not only for the functional benefits but also for the experiences associated with it, which could stimulate their senses, hearts and minds (Brakus et al., 2009). Schmitt (2003) has identified the provision of brand experience as an important source through which marketers could provide memorable experiences. Hence, it is necessary to know the sources through which a customer is exposed to these experiences. Schmitt, Brakus and Zarantonello (2014) suggested various settings like advertisements or public relations activities or event marketing which expose a customer to these experiences. Other exposures could happen through direct interaction with the products
displayed during shopping/store visits, through interaction with staff or through the internet or word-of-mouth.

Further, Nysveen and Pedersen (2014) suggested that communication and interaction are a part of co-creation activities that provides stimuli to enhance the brand experience. Rahman (2014) suggested that the strategy of using brands from related or non-related industries along with their own brand (branded branding strategy) will enhance the overall brand experience of the customer. Roswinanto and Strutton (2014) suggested four antecedents for brand experience, on which the marketers could strategize. This includes attitude towards the brand name, connectedness to the celebrity endorser, visual imaging manifested in the advertisement and the extent to which the advertising messages align with the core values. The list mentioned provides sufficient opportunities for marketers to adapt strategies in order to enhance the brand experience. Further, all such strategies adapted for enhancing brand experience must stimulate their senses and touch their minds and hearts at every touch point.

Further, the variations observed with regard to the indirect effect of brand experience will be of great use for marketers. It suggests that, based on involvement, markets could be segmented into three: (1) high in both product involvement and consumer involvement, (2) low in both product involvement and consumer involvement and (3) high in product involvement and low in consumer involvement for the product; or low in product involvement and high in consumer involvement for the product. This segmentation helps the marketers to evolve appropriate strategies to build loyalty for each of these segments, as the hierarchy of effect on true brand loyalty varies across them.
5.2.1 Strategies for High-High Segment

In the first segment, all three concepts - brand experience, brand credibility and affective commitment - contribute to the development of true loyalty. The contribution of affective commitment is what makes this segment different from the other two. Thus the strategies for this segment should also focus on the affective (relationship) commitment. In other words, companies should adopt strategies through their relationship management system, which enables them to differentiate from their competitors and should measure and nurture the relationship constantly in the process (Bendapudi & Leone, 2002; Johnson et al., 2006).

5.2.2 Strategies for Low-Low Segment

In the second segment, both between-product involvement and between-subject involvement are low. These groups have insignificant paths connecting brand credibility → affective commitment → true brand loyalty. This makes it different from the first segment, as affective commitment does not have any role in the formation of true brand loyalty. Instead, brand credibility and brand experience contribute to loyalty. Thus, the strategies adapted for this segment should focus on the enhancement of both brand experience and brand credibility.

The marketers who are engaged in the process of enhancing experience should also be consistent and truthful while communicating with the customers. This is since, Erdem and Swait (1998) found that a satisfactory usage experience with the product/brand, which is consistent with firm’s product claims, has the ability to increase the credibility of the brand. So, marketers also need to take special effort to reduce the gap between promised and actual offerings in order to enhance the credibility.
5.2.3 Strategies for High-Low or Low-High Segment

Marketers need to be extra cautious while deciding on the strategies for the third segment. In this segment the consumer perception of involvement and the product involvement are not consistent. This inconsistency has resulted in two subgroups within the third segment. The first group is where a high involvement product is perceived as low in involvement by the consumer (as in car-low) and second group where a low involvement product is perceived as high by the customer (as in toothpaste-high). Of these two, the latter scenario is much more supportive to marketers than the former. This is because a high-involved consumer pays higher levels of attention as his motivations levels are high and so the processing is done out of volition (Heath, 2001). So any effort taken to provide memorable brand experience and developing credibility would be well accepted, processed, stored and retrieved. Conversely, the former group puts the marketer in an unfavourable situation as the low-involved consumer pays a low level of attention as his motivation is low and so the processing of information is done automatically (Heath, 2001). In such cases, repeated efforts may be necessary to achieve the objectives. This could possibly explain why efforts taken by the organisation to manage the relationship sometimes does not contribute to true loyalty. It is highly difficult for marketers to reach low involved customers. They should repeatedly provide memorable experiences and maintain the credibility image, with a sufficient level of consistency. An alternate possible strategy for this group could be to work on increasing consumer involvement with the product and convert it to a high-high item. This could be achieved by working on the antecedents of involvement namely consumer’s risk perception of product, product’s hedonic value, product familiarity, brand awareness, dissimilarity, etc. (Jain & Sharma, 2000).
After brand experience, brand credibility is found to be contributing the maximum to the true loyalty. This effect of brand credibility on loyalty is consistent with Erdem and Swait (1998), which states that if the consumers have satisfactory usage experience with the product and if the usage experience is consistent with firm’s product claims, the ability of the brand to signal credibility increases, leading to the formation of loyalty. They have also found that any brand investment made by the company will have a direct effect on its credibility. This would happen when consumers see brand as an information source for them (i.e. under information asymmetry). So any communication from the firm regarding the product needs to be consistent and truthful. The efforts taken by the marketers to improve brand experience will have its effects on the brands signalling capability (Erdem & Swait, 1998).

5.3 Theoretical Implications

Even after selecting a highly homogenous group of respondents (A1 and A2) with respect to socio-economic-classification (SEC), the result showed differences in the formation of true brand loyalty because of differences in involvement, supporting the hierarchy of effects. The differences observed in the effect on true brand loyalty followed certain patterns. The pattern in hierarchy became clearer as we moved across the groups within the sample. The pattern observed within the product was found to vary when individual differences in involvement were considered. These differences observed show that involvement was not a product based or consumer based phenomenon alone, rather it is based on a combination of product and consumer. These results supported the contention of Hornik (1982), which advocates that ‘neither individual differences nor situational factors are major contributors to the variance in consumer behaviour. Instead,
consumers are expected to react differently to a given situation, it is the person-within-a-situation interaction that is expected to contribute most to the variance’ (Quester & Smart, 1998).

The direct effect of brand experience on true brand loyalty was found to be greater than its indirect effect across the pooled data as well as in all involvement groups. Thus the contribution of brand experience is more than brand credibility and affective commitment. Similar findings were also reported by Brakus et al. (2009). They found brand experience as a stronger predictor of loyalty than brand personality and satisfaction. They substantiated this finding based on the arguments of Aaker (1999) which says ‘the result is related to the very nature of experience. If a brand stimulates the senses, makes the person feel good, and engages the mind and body, a stimulation seeking organism may strive to receive such stimulation again. In contrast, the private nature of experiences may make them less malleable and less subject to situational influences....’

The products’ car and mobile phone handset belong to high involvement product groups, and both are technology-driven products. Once the technology becomes accepted, the product differentiation through brand experience, relationship commitment and credibility becomes important. Apart from this, traditionally brand managers have focused mainly on the functional attributes and its consistent delivery, which otherwise could lead to dissatisfaction (Mosley, 2007; Shaw & Ivens, 2002). Lately marketing has shifted its focus to relationship management and then to customer experience management. These practices enabled them to differentiate their product, as it was found that the emotions produced during the consumption have a longer impact on the memory (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Thus this study reiterates that a brand
needs to stimulate the senses, keeping the mind and body engaged by producing superior brand experience consistently and credibly at all its touch points with the consumer. This deliberate attempt to enhance the relationship with the consumer can also succeed in differentiating the products and in gaining consumer preference and loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2011).

5.4 Contributions of the Study

5.4.1 Contributions to Research/Academia

This study provides various theoretical and managerial inputs to marketing practitioners as well as researchers. In order to understand the underlying process of true brand loyalty formation, the study considered the effect of brand experience, brand credibility and affective commitment. In addition to this, the hierarchy-of-effects of brand experience, brand credibility and affective commitment under different level of involvements was looked into. For this purpose involvement was operationalized in three ways. These three operationalizations allowed the researcher to explore the variation in hierarchy further. The first two operationalizations (i.e. product based and subject based approach in involvement) have been commonly researched in involvement studies, and are shown to have distinct hierarchy-of-effects on true brand loyalty. Further, following the interactionist approach of considering subject (i.e. customers) within the different context (i.e. product) in the operationalization of involvement, differences in the hierarchy among its groups have been noticed. These differences point to the need of considering involvement as a combination of customer within the context. This interactionist approach of involvement, which is rare in literature, has added substantially to the understanding of the hierarchy phenomenon. There
is very little research regarding such an approach in involvement in brand loyalty studies. The study also emphasizes the important role of brand experience among the customer and product dimensions in the formation of true loyalty.

Further, the investigation into the variation in a conceptual model across distinct groups (moderation effects) has been elaborated in the context of involvement through this research. This is done using multi-group-invariance-testing procedure in Structural Equations Modelling. This could be useful to researchers as a framework to test moderation.

5.4.2 Contributions to Practice

An important managerial implication is that the advertisers need to identify the role of affective commitment (an attitude) under high and low involvement conditions, in leading experience and credibility (a cognition) of consumers into a consistent behaviour of true loyalty. By understanding this, advertisers and marketers in general, would be able to develop persuasion strategies, which focus on relationship management. This is because the findings of this study show that the role of affective commitment, brand credibility and brand experience are significant for high involvement. In the case of low involvement, the role of affective commitment is replaced by brand credibility and brand experience. Thus the persuasion strategies developed should be different, addressing the specific groups in involvement in order to make their consumers truly loyal. Moreover, the effect of brand experience is found to be higher than that of brand credibility and affective commitment. This directs marketers to focus on the strategies which will enable the organization to consistently provide superior brand experience. This
investigation will be a key input in developing the communication strategy, especially for a new brand which normally requires a long period of time to make consumers truly brand loyal. The product category classification scheme (i.e. high and low categories based on involvement for each product) used in this research can be a basis for segmentation. This strategic research process will become critical in light of the wide practice of integrated marketing communications, whose ultimate goal is to build brand value, which is based on strong and long-term consumer support, i.e., true brand loyalty.

5.5 Limitations

As it is true for any empirical research, the current study also has its limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal inferences because such studies aim at understanding the causal processes that occur at the here-and-now time period. Second, the measurement of brand experience using a quantitative scale may be seen as a limitation. The post-experience measure of brand experience resembles an outcome-oriented satisfaction measure whereas experience is defined as process oriented (Nysveen et al., 2013). Third, moderation and mediation effects are verified by the multi-group invariance method in Structural Equations Modelling (SEM). It was found that the data does not strictly follow the distributional assumptions of MLE. But, Chou & Bentler, (1995) suggested that ‘MLE estimators are quite robust to violation of normality. That is, the estimates are good estimates, even when the data are not normally distributed’. However, using multiple methods for the verification of moderation and mediation might have improved the validity of findings. Fourth, the research has included three products reflecting different levels of involvement and hence the generalizability may be limited to the product classes they represent. Fifth, the research has
included target respondents across gender, Socio-Economic groups (SEC) and age groups. Also, the study did not control the brands (included multiple brands) of products selected. These approaches have made the sample homogeneous and might have adversely affected the measurement invariance. Also, using multiple methods for distribution of questionnaires to the target respondents can also be a source which affected the measurement invariance adversely.

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