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Published online: 02 Nov 2017.

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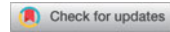
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What are the Building Blocks of Customer Brand Loyalty in Department Stores? A Multi-Level Mediation Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Building customer brand loyalty through branding strategies to sustain competitiveness in the retail industry has gathered momentum among researchers. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of brand personality and consumer brand identification on customer brand loyalty via the mediating variables of perceived service quality, perceived value, brand trust, brand commitment, and word-of-mouth communication among Malaysian department stores' customers. Using a self-structured questionnaire, 381 usable responses are considered for data analysis by applying a covariance-based structural equation modeling approach. The results of exploratory factor analysis show that sincerity, followed by sophistication and competence, are the most significant dimensions used to predict brand personality in department stores. The outcomes also reveal that brand personality indirectly influences customer brand loyalty via consumer brand identification. Furthermore, perceived service quality, perceived value, brand trust, word-of-mouth communication, and brand commitment mediate the effects of consumer brand identification on brand loyalty. Finally, the proposed competing model implies that the indirect impact of brand personality and consumer brand identification is inevitable in building department stores' brand loyalty.

Introduction

The retail environment in Malaysia has exhibited a pronounced and constant evolution over the past few decades. The number of major department stores in Malaysia has increased significantly from only one in 1995 to more than 324 outlets (Chang, 2010). Malaysian department stores have recently turned into a dominant retail format in cities, with 45% to 60% of household customers opting to shop at department stores (Malaysia Exporter Guide Annual, 2010). In line with this trend, a lot of effort has gone into investigating ways to help retailers develop longstanding success in a sustainable retailing atmosphere through brand loyalty. Department stores can support retailers by drawing in customers through cultivating customer brand loyalty

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and offering unique and premium product lines exclusively to their customers (Das, 2014). Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to repurchase or re-patronage a preferred product consistently in the future, despite situational influences" (p. 392).

Building such a relationship depends on the merchandising process, which integrates consumer behavior and business strategy aiming to determine the customers' tastes, habits, and needs (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). Employing tools such as customer brand loyalty (CBL) development applied by competitive retailers is necessary to gain a competitive advantage over other players. A key strategy that is vital in marketing and brand management studies is recognizing the precursor of CBL and the factors that give rise to positive brand evaluation and development. As a result, the use of branding strategy has become a tool for differentiation (De Chernatony, 2010) and competitive gain (Kressmann et al., 2006). Moreover, building and retaining CBL provide retailers with a significant competitive advantage (Jinfeng & Zhilong, 2009).

Therefore, for many years, building CBL has been the ultimate objective of marketing, consumer behavior, and brand management activities in most industries. The topic of CBL had been the subject of extensive research, which primarily focused on examining only a few important marketing antecedents of loyalty, such as customer perceived service quality, perceived value or price (Ha & Janda, 2014), customer satisfaction, brand commitment (Han & Hyun, 2013), brand trust (Fung, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2013), and word-of-mouth communication (Anaza & Rutherford, 2014; Choi & Choi, 2013). Even though the outcomes of these studies contribute considerably to the understanding of CBL, researchers have underestimated the development of CBL from Anthropomorphic and Social Identity Theory perspectives. Therefore, in this study, the roles of both brand personality and, especially, consumer brand identification (CBI) are taken into consideration.

To add on, only a handful of studies have investigated the role of CBI as a current hot topic in brand management and in building CBL (Fung et al., 2013; He, Li, & Harris, 2012). These studies have reported conflicting results. Meanwhile, the direct or indirect effect of CBI on CBL has not yet been fully investigated. The contradictory results of empirical studies have yielded considerable uncertainty about the existence of the relationship between CBI and CBL. For instance, a study conducted on cellular phone brands determined that CBI does not play a critical role in determining CBL (Kim, Magnini, & Singal, 2011). On the contrary, another study revealed that the relationships obtained through CBI among car brand customers generated positive word-of-mouth and repurchase intentions (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). Moreover, in a study of the hotel industry, Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar (2013) found that CBI, through mediating factors of brand trust, service quality, and perceived value, indirectly affected CBL. Indeed, inconsistencies and ambiguities in these studies have left CEOs, brand managers, and policymakers uncertain as to whether brand identification should be incorporated into brand management, consumer behavior, and marketing strategies that can reinforce CBL. Therefore, research is required to investigate the role of CBI in building customer brand loyalty.

Moreover, the identified antecedents of customer brand loyalty in different contexts (i.e., Department Store).

By the same token, the identified antecedents of CBL in different contexts should be reassured. Understanding the driving forces of CBL among department stores' customers requires recognizing brand personality's role in forming brand loyalty. As the role of brand personality in relation to CBI and CBL in the aforesaid industry has not been investigated, this study attempts to bridge these gaps. Moreover, since Southeast Asian countries share similar cultures to a large extent (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017; Warner, 2014), the multicultural facet of the Malaysian context would help in extending the findings of this research to other countries in the region as well.

The remaining parts of the article are in the following order. In the subsequent section, the study reviews literatures pertinent to the study and develops the hypothesis. This is followed by methodology and measurement model development and pre-testing. Finally, we provide the results, along with the conclusions, discussions, implications, direction for future studies, and limitations.

Theoretical background: Anthropomorphic and social identity theory

Several studies have identified the important roles of brand personality on consumer behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention (Wang, Yang, & Liu, 2009), brand loyalty (Das, 2014), and brand trust (Ha & Janda, 2014). Anthropomorphism, as one of the significant theories associated with brand personality, is related to perceiving humanlike characteristics for non-human agents (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008; Freling & Forbes, 2005b). Based on earlier studies, anthropomorphism is believed to invade the way people think through the objects around them that eventually affect the perceptions and behaviors of human (Epley et al., 2008).

In fact, brand personality is developed via anthropomorphism whereby customers tend to attribute human characteristics to their favorite products, services, and stores (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007), and even in expanding their association with the brands they are using (Ha & Janda, 2014). Research has shown that anthropomorphism in an advertisement of a brand increases both brand associations and equity as a result of positive customer reaction (Moradi & Zarei, 2012). Freling and Forbes (2005a) stated that there are three significant reasons as to why human beings evaluate brand by integrating their attributes with human characteristics. First, in terms of familiarity, non-human entities can be seen as more human; second, in terms of comfort, which is due to the reassurance of brand; and finally, as an attempt to reduce risk or uncertainty (Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2011; Kim, Lee, & Suh, 2015). They think that products, services, and stores that have strong brand personalities can usually distinguish themselves from competitors and therefore gain positive response from customers.

This study proposes that strong brand personality can lead to favorable strong CBI and therefore brand personality magnifies the impact of CBI directly and indirectly through positive evaluation of a retail store's perceived service quality,

value, brand trust, brand commitment; and through engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication (WOMC), which finally will result in department stores' brand loyalty. Moreover, according to the social identity theory (Tajfel, 2010) and from a consumer perspective, identification is defined as an individual's "perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization" (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995, p. 46). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed that strong customer-company relationships are built upon customers' identification with the companies that assist them in satisfying one or more important self-definitional desires. For instance, customers might consider a brand more interesting if the identity or the personality of the brand that was created by any particular company was similar to their personalities (Nikhashemi, Samsinar Sidin, Haj Paim, & Mohamad, 2014). Such active, selective, and volitional consumer-company identification motivates customers to be involved in either favorable or unfavorable company-related behaviors (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Therefore, it is concluded that if the personality of a product, service, or department store brand is pertinent to the customers' personality, there is a very high possibility of positive evaluation towards the department store (perceived service quality, perceived value, brand trust, and brand commitment) as well as behavioral outcome (i.e., positive WOMC and brand loyalty).

Hypothesis development

Retail store brand personality

Even though the symbolic value of brand has been an interesting area of research in marketing and consumer behavior, used to develop an effective marketing strategy and brand positioning, the concept of brand personality in retailing has been discussed over the last few decades. Martineau (1958) was the first scholar to introduce the term "retail brand personality," within which he defined it as the way consumers position the retail store brand in their mind; this was mostly evaluated based on the functional attributes as well as partly by psychological attributes. As suggested by Das (2014), layout, architecture, atmosphere, advertisement, salesperson, colors, and symbols are the significant sources of brand personality building in retail stores.

Although the term *retail brand personality* was used by Martineau (1958), he implemented and discussed the store image in his article, suggesting that store image defines an overall mental perception which individuals have of retail stores, mostly assessed through the quality of product or service, price, value, etc., whereas retail brand personality refers only to those mental dimensions that correspond with human personality traits (Geuens, Weijters, & De Wulf, 2009; Nikhashemi, Valaei, & Tarofder, 2017). For example, even though the atmosphere and product variety in terms of breadth, length, and depth are very important to formin store image, it is not a personality trait.

Based on the concept of retail brand personality and considering the definition provided by Das, Datta, and Guin (2012), it can be deduced that department store brand personality refers to the overall perception of consumers' personality

attributed to a department store. Department store, in the current study, refers to the stores that sell apparel, electronics, and household products (Das et al., 2012).

Brand loyalty

The concept of brand loyalty has been addressed using three different viewpoints: attitudinal, behavioral, and composite. Attitudinal loyalty involves the psychological component of brand loyalty where a customer's preferential attitude, habits, values, and beliefs are involved (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002). Behavioral loyalty refers to the re-purchase activity as a result of trust and interest (Fung et al., 2013). Compared to attitudinal loyalty, behavioral loyalty results in higher levels of emotional commitment to a brand, product, or service and lower propensity to switch to other competitors (Mattila, 2001). On the other hand, the failure to distinguish between true and spurious loyalty has resulted in the rejection of behavioral measures as the only loyalty index (Odin, Odin, & Valette-Florence, 2001). Therefore, the frequency of purchasing alone does not necessarily indicate a customer's loyalty. In other words, customers' testimonies without emotional commitment to a brand cannot determine their loyalty (Odin et al., 2001). In fact, positive brand attitude does not guarantee genuine purchases. Attitudinal loyalty is sometimes viewed as prerequisite for behavioral loyalty where positive attitudes towards a brand would result in true loyalty among customers (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996). To compensate for the disadvantages of these approaches, Jacoby (1971) recommended a composite approach where both purchasing behavior and attitudes in measuring brand loyalty are considered. Thus, following recommendations from earlier studies on brand loyalty (Li & Petrick, 2008), this study considers the concept of composite loyalty as it grants a comprehensive clarification of the loyalty concept.

Brand personality and CBI

Whatever an individual does in life is the reflection of his or her personality. Personality is simply defined as individualities and distinctive ways of behaving (Freling et al., 2011). Marketing studies carried out all over the world have revealed that customers' perceptions about a brand should be investigated through both functional characteristics and non-functional qualities; i.e., brand personality (BP). Through "BP," marketing researchers attempt to investigate why customers use personality traits when describing their brand; by reinforcing these perceptions, marketers are able to attract more customers to the brand (Freling et al., 2011). Aaker (1997) was the first scholar to define BP as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). Self-congruity theory views consumer behavior as the parallel between the brand's personality or image and the individual's self-concept (Tuškej et al., 2013). From the self-congruity theory perspective (Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008), BP can be defined as mental comparisons in terms of similarity and dissimilarity of the entity or store's personality traits and a customer's own personality. Indeed, one of the most important creations in customer brand loyalty formation is BP (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Li, 2011). Personality is related to brands, and firms

often use it as a method to create a good association with their customers (Aaker, 1997). However, according to the social identity theory, consumers might identify those brands which the feel belong to and fulfill their self-definitional need; therefore, we can hypothesize that consumers may identify with those brands which they associate with in terms of personality:

H1: There is a positive association between brand personality and department store consumer brand identification.
H2: There is a positive association between brand personality and department store brand loyalty.

CBI and customer brand loyalty

In today's economy, we witness an increasingly intense competition, especially among department stores, as an umbrella brand, to differentiate their products from their rivals and at the same time fulfill their customers' needs and wants (Nandan, 2005). Rajagopal (2010) indicated that a successful competition relies on the development of a robust brand and its link with the customers. Keller (2001) acknowledged that a strong brand is built upon achieving four stages: (1) the establishment of an appropriate brand identity; (2) the creation of a proper brand, meaning via robust and exclusive brand relationships; (3) obtaining encouraging brand feedback; and (4) the creation of deep and active loyalty as the result of a strong brand relationship with customers. Meanwhile, Nandan (2005) asserted that brand identity and brand image are two important ingredients of strong brands. According to Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), brand management is more achievable by understanding brand identification rather than focusing on the economic nature of a brand. The way companies want their customers to identify them through their brand is called brand identity. Tuškej et al. (2013) and Fung et al. (2013) identified several components in brand identity; namely, brand culture, brand vision, presentations, relationships, personality, and positioning. Brand culture refers to the values of the brand or the factors that influence consumer behavior in order to identify the value of a particular brand. The "brand vision" is the purpose of brand existence. While "brand presentation" embodies brand promotion to customers, the uniqueness of a brand represents "brand positioning," while the emotional characteristics of a brand determine BP. Kim et al. (2011) proposed that a greater resemblance between the BP and consumer personality would result in customer identification with the brand and loyalty.

There has not been much research conducted in retail consumer brand identification, especially in relation to department store environment. Therefore, to provide better understanding, other contexts are taken into account. In the context of sports, a study by Parker (2009) revealed that great identification created a robust and loyal relationship among team fans, regardless of the organization's merits and demerits. In addition, research has provided evidence that identification between consumer and company results in product utilization (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005) and repurchase frequency (Tuškej et al., 2013). In other words, strong consumer

identification with a brand leads to greater preferences and loyalty. A study by Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) acknowledged the positive association of CBI with customer brand loyalty, WOMC, and purchase intention. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H3: There is a positive association between CBI and a department store's customer brand loyalty.

CBI and perceived service quality

A customer's strong perception of quality can be created through that customer's identification with a brand or product. Service quality is regarded as "a global value judgment in many ways similar to an attitude" (Hall & Elliott, 1993, p. 27). Zeithaml (1988) defined service quality as "the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority." Researchers have mentioned that features like the physical amenities of the service atmosphere could encourage consumers to enhance their social identification (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). On the other hand, researchers have argued that identification can affect the development of psychological factors such as product ratings, positive reactions, and encouraging product assessments (Ahearne et al., 2005). Moreover, customers who are able to identify the brand strongly tend to demonstrate satisfaction towards the brand (Donavan, Janda, & Suh, 2006). In other words, brand identification can contribute to the growth of the customer's image in social groups, creating feelings of belongingness and pride within a social group that would eventually result in higher customer satisfaction (Ekinci, 2011; Fung et al., 2013). This relationship is empirically supported in hospitality and tourism studies (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ekinci, 2011), as well as the wide-ranging business domains (He et al., 2012).

Interestingly, in reviewing the literature, perceived service quality has been considered as both antecedent and consequence of consumer brand identification. It is argued that perceiving the brand as having high quality leads customers to strongly identify with the brand (Ahearne & Schillewaert, 2010; He & Li, 2011). As a result, it is hypothesized that:

> H4: There is a positive association between CBI and a department store customer's perceived service quality.

While service quality can be considered as an antecedent in enhancing consumer brand identification, it appears that consumer brand identification can greatly affect initial evaluative judgments (Fung et al., 2013). In other words, customers' perceptions of service quality will influence the consumer's evaluation about "a product's overall superiority" based on their initial identification prior to purchase (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, customer's brand loyalty can be determined by customer's perceived service quality (Aydin & Özer, 2005). The association can be elucidated using the Model of the Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996), which states that great evaluation of service quality would most likely affect customers' satisfactory behavioral goals, such as loyalty. This effect

arises as a result of enriched service quality, which assists in promoting satisfaction and positive attitude among customers towards a service supplier; accordingly, this can potentially develop loyalty among customers (So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2013). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H5: There is a positive association between perceived service quality and department store customers' brand loyalty.

CBI and perceived value

Perceived value reflects the value perception of the brand in a consumer's mind, which is generated by the customer's consumption experiences based on customer value concept (De Chernatony, 2010). Existing studies suggest that price (Brodie, Whittome, & Brush, 2009) and quality (Kim et al., 2015; Nikhashemi et al., 2014) can determine a customer's perceived value through increased customer identification. Many researchers in organizational literature have argued that an individual's support can be enhanced through their identification with the producing organization (Ashforth et al., 2008). The customer is more likely to be contented with a product when there is a greater identification with the brand or an organization (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). He et al. (2012) indicated that a customer's interest in a brand is characterized by CBI, and the value exchange connection with a favorite brand would more likely be favorable when greater levels of identification are induced among customers. In light of these studies, it is hypothesized that:

> H6: There is a positive association between CBI and department store customers' perceived value.

To date, there is no consensus among researchers on the definition, dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of customer perceived value (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic & Zabkar, 2015). However, it is mostly defined as a customer's overall evaluation of a product or brand pertaining to what is expected and what is received. Customer perceived value can affect satisfaction (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002), purchase intention (Tuškej et al., 2013), commitment, and customer brand loyalty (Chen, Chiou, Yeh, & Lai, 2012). Hence, the seventh hypothesis of this study is proposed:

> H7: There is a positive association between perceived value and department store customers' brand loyalty.

CBI and brand trust

CBI and brand trust concepts are theoretically attached. As self-esteem and self-definition are more likely enriched by the customers' identification of truthful organizations or brands (Keh & Xie, 2009), the current study suggests that trust is one of the noteworthy antecedents of an identified relationship. In contrast, brand identification can be regarded as a platform for the development of brand trust (Tuškej et al., 2013). Delgado-Ballester (2004) defined brand trust as "the confident expectations about the brand's reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer" (p. 586).

Contrary to consumer science researchers who claim that past experience with a particular brand promotes trust development (Delgado & Munuera, 2003), scholars in consumer behavior literature have argued that an individual's identification with the social entity creates "identification-based trust" (Stokburger Ratneshwar, 2012). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggested that when customers perceive a brand or company as trustworthy, they will easily respond to it and form a close and long-standing connection.

While the direct effect of consumer brand identification (CBI) on trust has not been recognized in previous studies, the studies on the association between image congruence and trust can be useful to support this relationship. For instance, the results of a study conducted by Han and Hyun (2013) showed that customers of luxury restaurants tend to trust the firm when they perceived high social image congruence. Similarly, such a relationship might be related to the practice of CBI. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H8: There is a positive association between CBI and brand trust.

Customer brand loyalty and commitment can be built upon the customer values which are created by trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In other words, loyalty and commitment are developed based on the significant relationship created by trust (Stokburger Ratneshwar, 2012). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

> H9: There is a positive association between brand trust and department store customers' brand loyalty.

CBI and brand commitment

The degree to which a brand is favored as the only right option is reflected in the consumer's emotional and psychological commitment (Avis, 2012). Contrary to identification, commitment exhibits an optimistic attitude towards the brand (Ashforth et al., 2008). It appears that brand commitment and customer brand loyalty are the same concepts. However, while customer brand loyalty ascribes to the behavioral standpoint and reflection of repetitive purchase of a specific brand (Avis, 2012), and also the consumers' need to ease their struggles and decision-making procedures (Warrington & Shim, 2000), brand commitment, as an attitudinal factor, is the better index of customer contentment with brand selection (Warrington & Shim, 2000). Brand commitment refers to attitudinal loyalty (Ajzen, 2001). Some scholars have described attitudinal loyalty as commitment loyalty which incorporates attitudinal preference and commitment towards the brand (Ajzen, 2001; Härtel & Russell-Bennett, 2010).

Although the evidence for the positive effect of identification on commitment has been broadly construed in the organizational context (Keh & Xie, 2009), the marketing literature also suggest the positive effect of consumer brand identification on customer brand loyalty and brand commitment (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). Studies show that brand consumption experience and also satisfaction, which is rooted in brand identification, attach the customer emotionally to the

brand (Fullerton, 2003). In addition, it is suggested that psychological attachment towards the organization is the result of brand identification through which people make a emotional commitment to achieve the organization's goals (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brown et al., 2005). As mentioned earlier, based on social identity theory, customers would most likely identify strongly with those brands which fulfill their self-definitional needs; therefore, based on the previous argument, it is hypothesized that:

H10: There is a positive association between CBI and brand commitment.
H11: There is a positive association between brand commitment and department store customers' brand loyalty.

CBI and WOMC

Consumers can simply make assumptions about the quality of a brand based on information obtained from friends, families, or work colleagues (Söderlund, 1998). Positive WOMC is considered one of the earliest form of marketing communication (Ennew, Banerjee, & Li, 2000). It is also regarded as an indicator of judgment and selection of a new product or service (Fung et al., 2013; Oliver, 1999), as well as the most effective method of advertising (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008) and selling unknown products (Dye, 2000). WOMC is described as a positive or negative oral communication among people regarding a product or service (Ennew et al., 2000). Likewise, Westbrook (1987) defined WOMC as "informal communication directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods/services/store" (p. 261). Previous studies attempted to place more focus on the outcomes of WOMC; hence, in this study, we have given careful consideration to it. Since word of mouth is regarded as one of the strongest marketing strategies, managers are encouraged to learn more about its effect to acquire and sustain customer brand loyalty (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007).

CBI not only positively contributes to customers' positive WOMC, it further positively affects customer brand loyalty. WOMC is an important antecedent to loyalty, as it mirrors the customers' willingness to express their appreciation towards a brand and encourage other friends to use that brand or product, and also simultaneously establish a psychological attachment to a brand (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007).

In previous studies, positive WOMC has been considered an outcome of loyalty. However, Tuškej et al. (2013) argued that positive WOMC can also be considered an outcome of CBI. The effect of "identification with a brand" on positive WOMC is thus more complex, because the impact of CBI on customer brand loyalty can be mediated by WOMC, which led us to formulate the fourteenth and fifteenth hypotheses. Figure 1 schematically shows the hypothesized relationships between constructs.

H12: There is a positive association between CBI and positive WOMC.
H13: There is a positive association between positive WOMC and department store customers' brand loyalty.
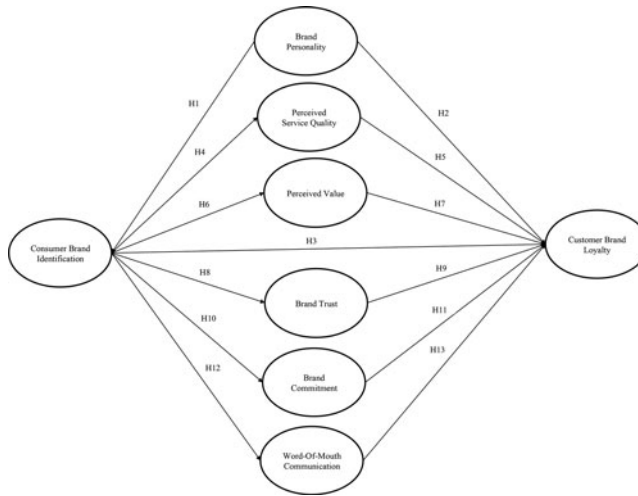
Figure 1. Research model.

Methodology and instrument development

Sampling and data collection approach

An explorative method was carried out during the early phase of the current study to identify and determine the characteristics of customer brand loyalty. A self-administered questionnaire survey was conducted because it offers an objective means of collecting information about department stores' customers' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior and is suitable to be used in this study. In addition, the self-administered questionnaire in this research will serve as a tool to translate the research objectives into a set of questions. The survey instrument of the current study was adopted from previous studies, which have already generated high Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability (see Table 1). Moreover, a list of top department stores was prepared and respondents were requested to select only one department store from the provided list in terms of familiarity and popularity. The popularity of the department stores was assessed during a pilot test using a 7-point Likert scale (1: not at all popular through 7: very popular), and finally, via mean analysis, the top two highest-ranking department stores were selected for this study (Metrojaya, 6.01, Parkson, 5.96).

A pilot test was carried out to avoid having any vague, potentially double-barrelled or misleading questions before the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents. The existing scale of the current study ensured the validity as well as reliability of the measurement model. Table 1 presents the description and the source of the current study's scale.

The respondents of the survey questionnaire were Malaysian retail shoppers aged 18 and above. The data were collected from those residing in metropolitan cities, namely Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Melaka. Convenience sampling technique was used to obtain units or people who were conveniently available. A total of 460 questionnaires were distributed. However, only 413 completed questionnaires were

Table 1. Measurement model results.

Constructs	Indicators	SL	CR	SR	AVE
Brand Personality (BP)	Adapted from Aaker (1997)				
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: (Second-order model of BP): $X^2 = 164.7$ ($p < .05$, df = 51), X^2/df = 3.229, GFI = .93, AGFI = .92, CFI = .93, and RMSEA = .07					
Sincerity				.911	.55
	This department store chain's staff members are friendly	.79	13.313		
	I have a lot in common with other people who are using this department store	.70	NA		
	This department store chain is original	.72	14.506		
	This department store chain is honest (trustworthy)	.75	11.708		
Competence				.855	.69
	This department store chain is hard working	.72	NA		
	This department store chain is reliable	.93	10.809		
	This department store chain is secure	.89	11.755		
	This department store chain is successful	.79	11.803		
Sophistication				.845	.53
	This department store chain is upper-class	.84	NA		
	This department store chain is glamorous	.68	11.906		
	This department store chain is attractive	.71	10.706		
	This department store chain is a leader	.69	13.743		
Consumer Brand Identification (CBI	Adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and So et al., (2013)			.894	.61
	This department store's success is my success	.68	15.511		
	When I talk about this department store, I usually say we, rather than they	.73	NA	.861	
	I am very interested in what others think about this department store	.81	13.106		
	This department store has a great deal of personal meaning for me	.88	13.335		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 114.7$ ($p < .05$, df = 41), X^2/df = 3.137, GFI = .95, AGFI = .96, CFI = .97, and RMSEA = .06					
Perceived Service Quality (PSQ)	Adapted from Tuškej et al. (2013)			.891	.55
	This department store's staff members are competent in performing their task	.61	NA		
	This department store's staff members show a sincere interest in solving the problem I have	.68	9.982		
	This department store offers very good after-sale service	.85	10.208		
	The department store staff handles customers' complaints effectively	.81	8.122		
	This department store offers very good customer service	.73	9.207		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 127.4$ ($p < .05$, df = 43), X^2/df = 3.164, GFI = .98, AGFI = .94, CFI = .97, and RMSEA = .07					
Customer Perceived Value (CPV)	Adapted from So et al. (2013)			.880	.58
	When I purchase my product from this department store, I feel I am getting my money's worth	.88	NA	.	
	I think this department store is capable of satisfying customers' needs	.67	9.184		
	This department store has creative decoration	.71	10.292		
	In this department store, shopping tasks can be completed quickly	.69	10.277		
	The environment of this department store is joyful and enjoyable	.83	10.660		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 77.4$ ($p < .05$, df = 43), X^2/df = 1.930, GFI = .99, AGFI = .96, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .05					

(*Continued on next page*)

Table 1. (Continued)

Constructs	Indicators	SL	CR	SR	AVE
Brand Trust (BT)	Adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and So et al. (2013)			.877	.63
	This is an honest brand	.73	NA		
	This department store brand is safe	.76	15.246		
	Overall, I trust the product when I shop in this department store	.83	11.913		
	I like to shop regularly at this department store because of its trustworthy brand	.86	13.209		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 124.1$ ($p < .05$, df $= 39$), X^2/df $= 2.447$, GFI $= .97$, AGFI $= .96$, CFI $= .99$, and RMSEA $= .06$					
Positive word-of-mouth communica-tion (WOMC)	Adapted from Tuškej et al. (2013)			.816	.57
	I transmit my personal experience from this department store to other people who I know	.68	NA		
	I recommend this department store to people who I know	.88	11.296		
	I talk about this department store to people who I am familiar with because it offers good-quality products	.69	12.478		
	I talked directly about my experience with this department store with them	.75	10.093		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 15.4$ ($p < .05$, df $= 6$), X^2/df $= 2.522$, GFI $= .97$, AGFI $= .96$, CFI $= .95$, and RMSEA $= .06$					
Brand Commitment (BCOMM)	Adapted from Tuškej et al. (2013)			.865	.64
	I am very committed to this department store	.74	NA		
	I feel rewarded when I purchase a product from this department store	.89	11.354		
	I feel excited when I think of buying my product from this department store	.79	11.273		
	The good things about buying products from this department store are that I can talk to my family and friends about it	.78	11.378		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 14.02$ ($p < .05$, df $= 2$), X^2/df $= 2.015$, GFI $= .97$, AGFI $= .95$, CFI $= .97$, and RMSEA $= .05$					
Customer Brand Loyalty (CBL)	Zeithaml et al. (1996) and self-administered			.905	.68
	I am emotionally attached to this department store	.78	NA		
	I consider myself to be very loyal to this department store	.94	13.024		
	I will continue to shop at this department store	.80	9.539		
	I feel good about this department store	.76	12.758		
	I am willing to buy more products from this department store	.84	9.078		
Goodness-of-Fit Indices: $X^2 = 18.2$ ($p < .05$, df $= 6$), X^2/df $= 1.222$, GFI $= .99$, AGFI $= .96$, CFI $= .99$, and RMSEA $= .04$					

Note: SL represents standardized loading, CR represents critical ratio, SR represents scale reliability, and AVE represents the average variance extracted of latent constructs.

returned, yielding the response rate of 89.7%. In fact, out of the 413 completed questionnaires, data from only 381 completed questionnaires were used for the final analysis.

Findings

As demonstrated in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (79.0%) were married, with a gender distribution of 55.4% men and 44.6% women. Further, Table 2 shows that most of the respondents (78.7%) were 19–35 years old, 12.6% were 36–49, and only 2.1% of them were older than 50. As the data show, the findings of this study will most likely be influenced by married male and female respondents who are between 19 and 35 years of age. In terms of educational level, slightly more

Table 2. Summary of individual demographic backgrounds.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	211	55.4
Female	170	44.6
Age		
19–35	325	85.3
36–49	48	12.6
50–64	8	2.1
Marital Status		
Single	80	21.0
Married	301	79.0
Ethnic Background		
Malay	155	40.7
Chinese	106	27.8
Indian	62	16.3
Others	58	15.2
Educational Qualification		
SPM and below	205	53.8
Undergraduate	77	22.2
Master's degree	48	12.6
Ph.D.	51	13.4
Monthly Income		
≤ 2000	113	29.7
2001–4000	202	53.0
4001–8000	44	11.5
8001–12000	22	5.8

than half of the respondents (53.8%) have SPM qualifications. Regarding the educational qualification of the respondents, Table 2 demonstrates a decline in response rate as the level of education climbs. Based on the obtained data, 22.2%, 12.6%, and 13.4% of respondents were bachelor degrees, master's degrees, and Ph.D. holders, respectively. Most of the respondents were Malay (40.7%), followed by Chinese (27.8%), Indian (16.3%), and other ethnicities (15.2%). The data on the percentage distribution of respondents based on monthly income clearly revealed that most of the respondents (53.0%) had a monthly income between RM2001 and RM4000, followed by less than RM2000 monthly (29.7%), while 11.5% of respondents earned between RM4001 and RM8000; only 5.8% of them earned between RM8001 and RM12000, the highest monthly income category. To avoid bias results, the current study attempted to have equal male and female respondents, since the perceptions of males and females might be different in terms of brand loyalty evaluation.

Factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis

Both factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were employed as an appropriate approach to assess the performance of the measurement models. Exploratory Factor Analysis has been used to ensure that the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure with the support of SPSS 21. The outcome of exploratory factor analysis is reported in detail for all variables. As a result, factor analysis was carried out on all statements in order to examine the dimensionality and to ensure

that the questionnaires were able to measure the proposed factors adequately. In order to establish an item in its particular variable, the minimum factor loading is required. If its loading is equal or greater than 0.30, then it can be considered as minimum factor loading (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2008). The most significant factor loading is greater than 0.50, but 0.40 is considered important (Hair et al., 2008). Therefore, items which generated factor loadings greater than 0.50 are accepted as the general requirement for this study. Based on the factor analyses results, all of the factors have been loaded except for two dimensions of BP, which are excitement and ruggedness. According to past studies, even though Aaker's (1997) framework of BP has been widely used by many researchers (Das, 2014; Freling et al., 2011), the reliability of this scale is also questioned, specifically the "ruggedness" dimension, as it is suggested that this dimension has several meanings, depending on the cultural varieties of different countries (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2001). However, the three dimensions of BP which were extracted from past studies to be analyzed in the present study (sincerity, competence, sophistication) seem to be more pertinent to the retail industry (department store).

CFA was employed to confirm and evaluate the suitability of the proposed measurement model. CFA was run with the support of SEM (AMOS) via maximum likelihood estimation, through which the normality of the data distribution can be examined (CFA was ran for each construct separately; as a result, the factor loading is slightly different when the entire structural model was ran). The normality of the data can be assured by judging the severity of skewness and kurtosis (Byrne et al., 2016). The scholars have different views on the skewness and kurtosis ranges. For instance, according to Hair et al. (2008), a dataset can be considered as normal if skewness and kurtosis are within the range of ±1; whereas, according to Churchill & Iacobucci (2006), skewness between −2 and +2 is considered to indicate normally distributed data. In the present study, we considered the cut-off point value of ±2 in order to check the normality of the data set. The results of the present study showed that all of the values for skewness and kurtosis fall within the suggested range of ±2.

Finally, through convergent validity (AVE) and discriminant validity, the validity of the constructs were verified (refer to Tables 1 and 3). As suggested by Byrne (2016), the minimum cut-off point for convergent validity is 0.50. Moreover, discriminant validity will be achieved if the correlation among the variables does not exceed the cut-off point of .85 (Byrne, 2016). The CFA for each construct was run

Table 3. Correlation among variables.

Variables	M	SD	BP	CBI	PSQ	PV	BT	WOMC	BCOMM	CBL
BP	4.83	1.46	1							
CBI	4.13	1.45	.381[**]	1						
P.SQ	5.09	1.09	.546[**]	.368[**]	1					
PV	5.31	1.43	.546[**]	.264[**]	.577[**]	1				
BT	5.17	1.34	.570[**]	.337[**]	.569[**]	.540[**]	1			
WOMC	5.08	1.53	.501[**]	.467[**]	.491[**]	.587[**]	.620[**]	1		
BCOMM	4.63	1.58	.383[**]	.479[**]	.492[**]	.596[**]	.646[**]	.733[**]	1	
CBL	4.19	1.28	.406[**]	.456[**]	.410[**]	.545[**]	.635[**]	.665[**]	.759**	1

Table 4. Structural model output.

Endogenous Variable		Exogenous Variables	Hypothesis	Beta	Result
CBI	←	BP	H1	.49**	Sig
CBL	←	BP	H2	.10	NS
CBL	←	CBI	H3	.11	NS
P.SQ	←	CBI	H4	.54**	Sig
P.V	←	CBI	H5	.56**	Sig
BT	←	CBI	H6	.27**	Sig
BCOMM	←	CBI	H7	.47**	Sig
WOMC	←	CBI	H8	.42**	Sig
CBL	←	P.SQ	H9	.44**	Sig
CBL	←	PV	H10	.48**	Sig
CBL	←	BT	H11	.47**	Sig
CBL	←	BCOMM	H12	.70***	Sig
CBL	←	WOMC	H13	.55**	Sig

Goodness-of-fit indices: ($X^2 = 2567.542$, $p < .05$, df $= 800$, X^2/df $= 3.119$, GFI $= .994$, CFI $= .955$, IFI $= .991$, TLI $= .987$, and RMSEA $= .055$).
*Significance $p < 0.05$.
**Significance $p < 0.01$.
***Significance $p < 0.001$.

separately and all constructs demonstrated a satisfactory goodness-of-fit (Table 1). Nevertheless, as suggested in the literature (Awang, 2012; Byrne, 2016), items with loadings of less than 0.60 and R^2 less than 0.40 should be dropped from the construct. However, researchers can keep the items if they have valid reasons (Byrne, 2016).

Structural model and hypothesis testing

SEM was used to verify the hypothesized relationships between the constructs. As demonstrated in (Table 4 and Figure 2), the entire model has achieved a satisfactory model fit. ($X^2 = 2567.542$, $p < .05$, df $= 800$, X^2/df $= 3.119$, GFI $= .994$, CFI $= .955$, IFI $= .991$, TLI $= .987$, and RMSEA $= .055$). The outcome reveals that out of 13 established hypothesized paths, only two paths turned out to be not significant (i.e., H3: CBI→ CBL and H2: BP→ CBL). Consequently, without considering H2 and H3, the rest are supported.

Mediation test

To test the mediating effects of customer perceived service quality (PSQ), customer perceived value (PV), brand trust (BT), brand commitment (BCOMM), and positive WOMC on the relationship between CBI (exogenous variable) and CBL (endogenous variable), four different conditions of the structural model should be examined (Grace & Weaven, 2011). As suggested by Byrne (2016), the multiple relationships among the constructs were analyzed simultaneously by SEM. To examine the mediating effects, the first condition must be satisfied if it is an exogenous variable; i.e., CBI directly influences the endogenous variable (i.e., CBL) without the presence of mediators. The second condition will be fulfilled if the exogenous
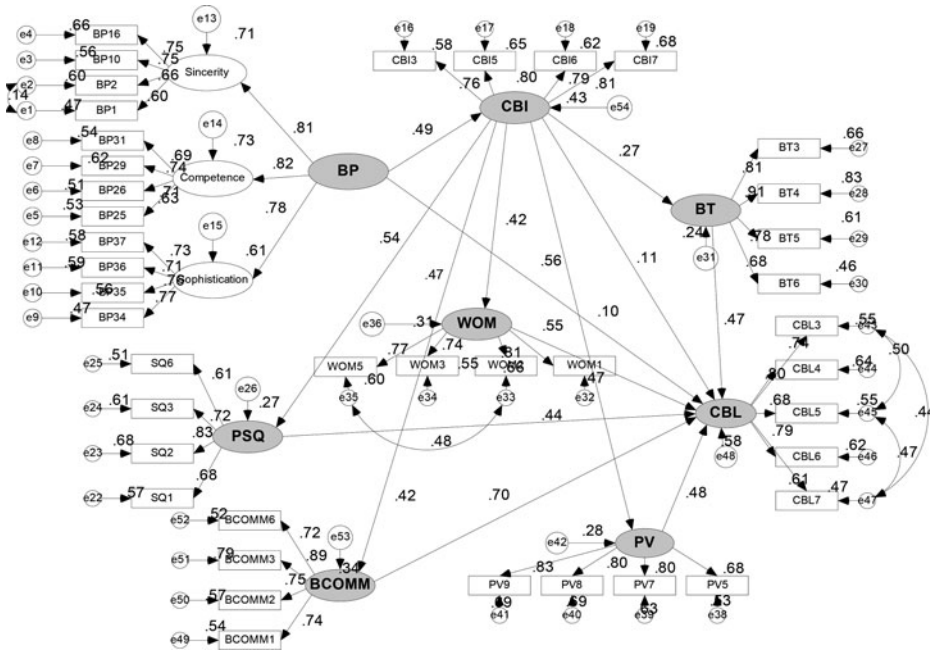
Figure 2. Results of structural model.

variable (CBI) influences mediators (PSQ, PV, BT, BCOMM, and WOMC). The third condition is met if the mediators directly influence the endogenous variable, CBL. The fourth condition is met after including the path from the exogenous variable (CBI) to the endogenous variable (CBL) with the existence of all mediators (PSQ, PV, BT, BCOMM, and WOMC). However, if the direct relationship (path) from the exogenous variable (CBI) to the endogenous variable (CBL) becomes non-significant, the relationship is considered a full mediation; if strength is reduced but is still significant, it is considered a partial mediation. Table 5 exhibits the significance of the direct effect of CBI to CBL (Condition 1), which reduced from

Table 5. Standard regression.

Hypothesis	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
CBL ← CBI	.234***	—	—	.114
PSQ ← CBI	—	.694***	—	.536***
PV ← CBI	—	.552***	—	.562**
BT ← CBI	—	.630***	—	.272**
WOMC ← CBI	—	749***	—	.423***
BCOMM ← CBI	—	.703***	—	.474***
CBL ← PSQ	—	—	.145*	.445***
CBL ← PV	—	—	.180**	.485***
CBL ← BT	—	—	.190***	.469***
CBL ← WOMC	—	—	263***	.555***
CBL ← BCOMM	—	—	.595***	.704***

*$P < 0.05$,
**$P < 0.01$,
***$P < 0.001$.

0.234 to .114 (Condition 4), thus the mediating variables are found to fully mediate the relationship.

Testing competing models

Previous studies (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2008) recommended that researchers should compare the hypothesized model with a competing (also called rival) model. The main benefit and advantage of testing the competing model is in ensuring the best available model (Hair et al., 2008). To formulate a substitute model, the model should be guided by substitute theoretical as well as empirical considerations, and it must be meaningfully practical (Byrne, 2016). The partial disaggregation approach was applied in the present study. This helps to create two or more composite variables for each construct (Byrne, 2016). Hoe (2008) recommended that "partial disaggregation can be used as a technique to reduce the number of parameters in order to increase the reliability when the sun-scales items get summed" (p. 81). Ultimately, this method was applied where all of the indicators of BP latent construct were summed. The results reveal that the model achieves satisfactory fit level (X^2/df = 3.164, CFI = 0.982, GFI = 0.986, RMSEA = 0.76, TLI = 0.956). However, summaries of both the hypothesized model (Model 4) and the model using a partial disaggregation approach, shown in Table 6, demonstrate that the hypothesized model, with items indicating the construct sincerity, competence, and sophistication, performs better than the model using summated scales (refer to Appendix A using summated scale for BP dimensions). It is important to clarify that applying the summated scale technique only contributes to the justification relating to the path-coefficient of each construct. It was found that competence was considered a very important part of the BP in the retail industry as perceived by customers ($\beta = 0.82$), compared to sincerity ($\beta = 0.81$) and sophistication ($\beta = 0.78$). Therefore, the hypothesized model with indicators of each construct is brought forward for verification towards a parsimonious model.

Moreover, in the interest of parsimony, non-significant paths from the hypothesized model were removed in order to reestimate a final mode (see Figure 3). Two parameters based on the result of the hypothesized model, as illustrated in Table 4 (the direct effect of CBI to CBL and BP to CBL dramatically decreases and becomes a non-significant path once mediating factors are introduced to the model), were eliminated. This method was suggested by Byrne (2016), who stated that keeping a non-significant path in a structural model does not result in a better model fit;

Table 6. Summarized model fits: Hypothesized model versus disaggregation model.

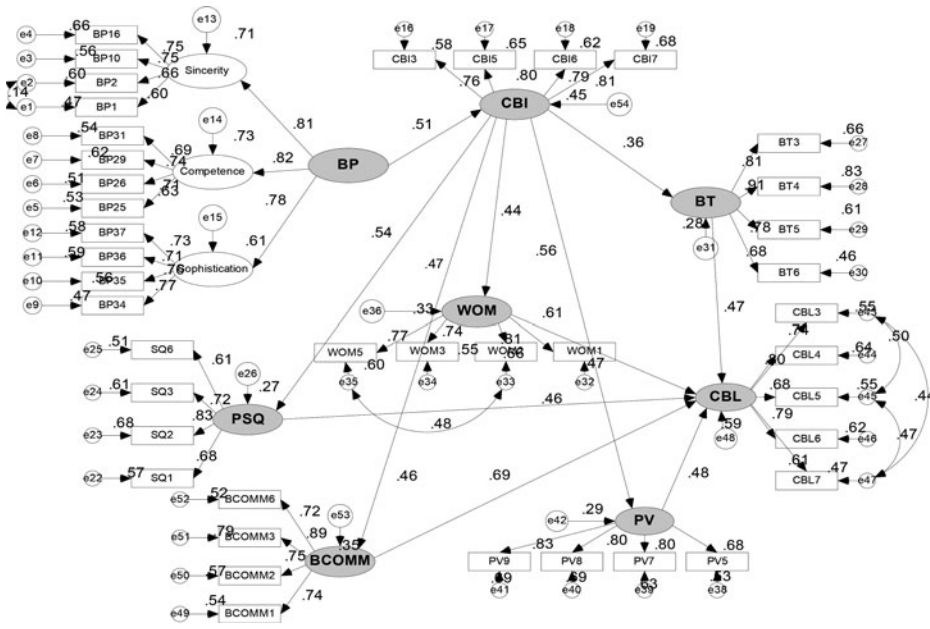| Model	Chi-square/df	CFI	GFI	TLI	RMSEA
Items as individual indicators	3.119	.955	.994	.987	.055
Summated scale	3.164	.982	.986	.956	.076

Figure 3. Final model after removing the non-significant paths.

consequently, it is better to eliminate it from the structural model. Accordingly, to improve the model, the non-significant paths were removed. However, to compare the hypothesized model with an alternative model (a model with the direct effects of BP to CBL and CBI to CBL removed), the study followed the suggestion of Grace and Weaven (2011) to look at both the hypothesized model and alternative model by scrutinizing the values of GFI, CFI, IFI, RMR, PCFI (parsimony competitive index), and ECVI (expected cross-validations index). As suggested by Grace and Weaven (2011), the model with lower ECVI value can be considered as the most suitable and stable model.

As shown in Table 7, based on the comparisons between parsimony and initial hypothesized model, the values of model fit remained slightly unchanged except for PCFI and ECVL, which were slightly different. PCFI and ECVL, both in the model of parsimony, show a lower value compared to the initial hypothesized model.

Table 7. Comparison of goodness-of-fit measurement for hypothesized and alternative models.

	Proposed Model of Study	Non-Significant Paths Excluded from the Model (Parsimony Model)
Chi-square	2567.542	2572.447
Degree of freedom	800	803
P-value	.000	.000
Chi-square/df (x^2)	3.119	3.110
RMR	0.165	0.165
CFI	0.955	0.955
GFI	0.994	0.994
IFI	0.937	0.937
RMSEA	0.055	0.055
PCFI	0.928	0.923
ECVI	5.758	5.747

Moreover, the structural model indicates that the path coefficients were improved after the elimination of non-significant paths. For instance, the effect of BP on CBI increased from .49 to .51, PSQ to CBL increased from .44 to .46, and CBI to brand trust appreciated from .27 to .36. Consequently, the parsimony model is found to be the most suitable and stable model which can be implemented in the Malaysian retail industry (department store) to build up greater customer brand loyalty (Table 7 and Figure 2).

Discussion, conclusion and implications

The success of integrating the concept of BP and CBI in marketing research and brand management has indeed led to calls for further studies. Specifically, studies on the concept of BP and CBI in the context of department store brand loyalty (CBL) are scarce. This research comprehensively reviewed studies concerning CBL within the context of the retail industry. In addition, since several studies have merely considered the role of CBI in creating customer brand loyalty in different contexts, such as the hotel industry (Tuškej et al., 2013) and the car industry (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), this research modified those models, which have overlooked the inevitable factors (i.e., BP being a concept for enhancing CBI level), and developed a comprehensive research framework which can be applied for further studies. The finding of the current study shows that BP indirectly affects CBL via consumer brand identification; at the same time, CBI also has a strong indirect effect on CBL through a customer's judgment of PSQ, PV, BT, BCOMM, and positive WOMC. The findings suggest that brand can be strongly identified if the personality of the brand is more congruent with the customer. Accordingly, strong CBI contributes to favorable positive judgment about brand service excellence (service quality), overall evaluation of utility (PV), higher level of inclination to rely on that brand (i.e., BT and BCOMM), and finally, recommending the department store's brand to others (i.e., positive WOMC). Consequently, this positive outcome will definitely determine the level of CBL. Despite the fact that other factors, such as location, variety of product, and price, can affect a customer's judgments about the department store's brand, the results of this study clearly demonstrate that CBI also boosts the positive evaluation of customers towards the brand, as the self-definitional needs were already met due to having a personality which resembles that of the department store's brand.

Moreover, the results of this study provide proof that BP in the retail industry embodies only sincerity, competence, and sophistication. This finding contradicts some studies' findings (Kim et al., 2011; Aaker, 1997) in which excitement and ruggedness were considered as other dimensions of BP. The findings of the study resonate with those of Davies et al. (2001), in which they asserted that the five-dimension scale proposed by Aaker (1997) suffered from lack of reliability, especially with the dimensions "ruggedness," due to the cultural dissimilarities when this scale is used in different contexts. This study also expands the understanding that not only does BP have a direct impact on CBL, but by testing a competing model, it is

also acknowledged that BP has the most significant impact through the mediating effect of CBI. Moreover, the rival model revealed that the influence of CBI would be enhanced through the mediating effect of consumer PSQ, PV, BT, BCOMM, and positive WOMC in establishing CBL. Apart from contributing to the theory, this study proposes valid measures by evaluating the hypothesized structural model. While the new measures for all variables are constructed based on the department store context and validated by following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) suggestions through CFA, the reliability of the items, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and content validity are carefully verified. Moreover, the current study demonstrates that BCOMM, positive WOMC, PV, and PSQ are the most important consequences of CBI as well as antecedents of CBL in a department store's brand loyalty building. The findings of the study will be very useful due to the multicultural facet of Malaysia, which can help in extending the findings of this research to other countries in the region.

Limitations and directions for future research

Apart from making a substantial contribution to research on consumer behavior, this study suffers from some limitations. To support our findings, only a handful of journals and articles pertaining to the role of BP, CBI, and CBL related to department stores were available for review. As such, most of the literature for this study was adopted from other contexts. Second, since this study is exploratory in its nature, the results cannot be generalized to other contexts or across all department chain stores. Furthermore, while the questionnaire items aim to determine how customers perceive the eight constructs in relation to brand loyalty, some customers might have problems in differentiating between the brand and the property levels. Additionally, the financial status of the customers can be considered a factor which can result in different perceptions and judgments about customer brand loyalty, as it might affect BP and level of CBI.

Several possible venues and directions for further research can be obtained from the findings of this study. First, although the results of this study have provided evidence that department stores with high BP are more likely to generate CBI and bring about stronger CBL, it would be interesting to verify the findings by conducting qualitative research. Likewise, a focus group interview targeting department stores' customers may identify a clear differentiation between identified and less identified customers' assessments of the department stores' brand. Second, it would be very interesting if future research examined the impact of BP and CBI on various brand loyalty aspects (i.e., affective, conative, cognitive, and action-oriented) in order to provide a clear vision of the effects of BP and CBI on various aspects of the loyalty construct. It would also be very stimulating if the impact of BP was examined on BCOMM, BT, PV, and PSQ. Finally, male and female customers might hold different perspectives towards building brand loyalty. Therefore, future research could investigate the roles of BP and CBI on building CBL from the male and female perspectives.

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Appendix A. Hypothesized structure (using summated scale for BP dimensions)