THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND EQUITY ON CUSTOMERS' LOYALTY THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SATISFACTION (THE CASE OF LEBANESE SMES: CONFECTIONARY TRADE)

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Abstract – *As competition between market players intensifies, customer satisfaction and loyalty are significant organizational concerns. This research aims to study the influence of antecedent variables influencing consumer loyalty. It aims to inspect the effect of brand equity on consumer loyalty, taking consumer satisfaction as a mediating variable. Consumer satisfaction and loyalty are imperative for Lebanese SMEs. The research is an explanatory, descriptive study presenting a theoretical and analytical framework. This research adopted the survey as a research strategy in a cross-sectional time horizon. It adopts the logic of positivism with a quantitative approach based on a questionnaire. The latter supports quantifiable results and statistical analysis. 384 valid questionnaires were collected online from Lebanese consumers of confectionery brands as a field of study. The main objective of this research was to evaluate the influence of brand equity on consumer loyalty through consumer satisfaction as a mediating variable. This study was conducted on Lebanese consumers taking Lebanese confectionary brands as a field of study. The study highlighted that consumer loyalty is highly influenced by brand equity dimensions and consumer satisfaction, respectively. Therefore, Perceived quality, Brand awareness, Brand association, Brand Trust, and Staff behavior affect customer satisfaction on consumers' satisfaction (R^2=0.656). Thus, a 65% variation in customer satisfaction is explained by a unit change in these retained dimensions of brand equity.*
Keywords*: customer loyalty; Consumer satisfaction; brand equity; confectionary brands.*

INTRODUCTION

The current market's complexity (multiplication of needs, sustainable orientation, fierce competition, development of consumer behavior) leads to the weakening of brands. Faced with this situation, loyalty, considered a problem in brand management, becomes a priority objective. Hence to leverage consumers' loyalty (Ahmad et al., 2021) and embrace effective retention of brand-name and organizations, it seems necessary to adopt brand equity dimensions in all its approaches (Safeer et al, 2021). Brands have been transformed over time into a crucial component of the organization's marketing strategy. Consumers are attached to and recognize the advertised brand name, image, and logo without acknowledging the organization name that produces it. Some misunderstandings are related to the brand name, products, and organization despite its essential role for the organization and consumers. Customer loyalty is a significant organizational concern.

1. Problem Statement

Constraints and problems limiting consumers' loyalty are numerous and directly affected by ineffective marketing strategies. First, the risk of consumer saturation due to multiple solicitations from competitive organizations negatively influences consumer loyalty. Besides, the complications in measuring loyalty strategies and their effectiveness are additional problems for marketers (Ahmad et al., 2021). The latter is added to the aged customer base and a constant change in consumer behavior (Kim et al, 2021). Undeniably, retaining loyal customers is cheaper than attracting and captivating new targets. But an excessive loyalty strategy is faced with limitations. Loyalty programs are now similar. Organizations are duplicating strategies. Hence, the majority of these loyalty programs are losing their effectiveness. Consumers are not attracted anymore to these strategies. Loyalty programs are not practical for retaining consumers. There is no assurance that redemption is the consequence of the loyalty action. Therefore, it represents a downside to loyalty and its effectiveness (Ngo et al., 2022).

Organizations often equate customer satisfaction with customer loyalty. However, it is a significant misunderstanding of those concepts. Consumer loyalty is the result of satisfaction (experience) and the outcome of brand equity strategies (consumer beliefs). Satisfaction cannot stand alone, and it is inefficient to build loyalty if the organization's image is corrupt. Consumers associating an organization with a bad experience are far from being loyal. A good image is not enough to build loyalty if satisfaction is low. Loyalty is much harder to maintain than mere satisfaction (Gong et al., 2020).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Theories of loyalty

To better understand loyalty as a concept, researchers focused on individual behavior. The objective explored critical reasons for a brand choice over another. Hence, a regular product acquisition explains the emergence of repeat purchases. Prentice et al. (2020) evoked the first fundamental measure of behavior through a critical study of the purchase proportion of a given brand in a household. Loyalty accordingly causes repeat purchase behavior. This notion of consumer behavior explains the analysis of actions in terms of purchases to better understand commitment (Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021). Therefore, the theory of repeated purchase is essential for consumer loyalty. The appropriate measure for this theory is purchase frequency (Shin et al., 2020). Brand loyalty starts when the purchase of a specific brand is repeated more than once. The repeat purchase is associated with the economic purpose in time and effort sought by the consumers' transaction. Consumers are not preoccupied with information searches (Aksoy et al., 2015).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Among all organization types, small and medium enterprises seek to retain consumers because loyal consumers are profitable. Marketing practitioners and researchers agree that 5% more loyal consumers can increase profits by up to 80% and that maintaining consumers is less expensive than acquiring new ones (Putra & Sin, 2020). Brand identity is a set of associations that brand strategists aspire to create or maintain. These associations imply a promise – a value proposition – made by the organization to its consumers (Hendrata, Tinaprilla, & Safari, 2021). The brand identity is aspirational: it is, in a way, how managers would like it to be perceived. The image corresponds to how the brand is perceived.

Recently, (Rifi & Mostafa, 2022) showed a significant positive link between brand personality and the emotional dimension of consumers towards it. In addition, the considerable influence of brand personality (or personality traits) on consumers' attitude towards this brand and their intentions for future behavior. Consumers' attitude toward a brand directly affects the value of that organization's products. It is true even when the physical product is not radically different from its competitors. When consumers like a brand, they are loyal to its effects. Therefore, an organization that successfully retains its consumers feels less imperative to recruit new ones, significantly impacting its marketing budget constantly. One of the significant assets for a brand is consumer feedback. Consumer reviews are the best advertisement. They ensure long-term loyalty and encourage prospects to take the plunge. In the digital age, the consumer experience must be highlighted in any good brand strategy. The following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: brand equity influence consumers' loyalty positively.

Companies should consider brand equity as a tool to enable them to achieve their objective of consumer satisfaction. Marín-García et al (2021) highlighted a significant favorable influence of congruence between brand equity dimensions and (real) human personality on the level of consumer satisfaction. Butt et al. (2018) suggested that brand equity would significantly impact consumer loyalty via their level of satisfaction with the brand. A brand is an exciting, pleasing, and satisfying feeling consumers experience when using a specific product (Kurniawati, 2020). Satisfaction is essentially the result of improving quality, the latter being a primary concern for the consumer. On the consumer's side, the brand affirms its primary function, commitment; the buyer knows he is not buying just anything. The brand embodies intangible, qualitative, or ethical values that guarantee specific exchange methods and generate satisfaction. The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2: brand equity influence consumers' satisfaction positively.

The existing literature has repeatedly emphasized in this field that consumer satisfaction with a brand significantly influences their level of brand loyalty. Thus, ***loyalty*** can be considered a consequence of consumer satisfaction. Many empirical studies have highlighted a significant positive link between consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Different approaches to brand loyalty exist. The first is purely behavioral (Delima et al 2019). Loyal consumers repeatedly choose the same product or brand in preference to one or more of the offers considered substitutable and from competing companies. However, this approach has flaws, mainly because it does not consider the attitudinal component of loyalty (Hayati et al, 2020). This research considers consumer loyalty a one-dimensional variable (Zahra et al, 2021). The third research hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 3: Consumer satisfaction influences consumer loyalty positively.

Consumers are subject to a positive effect on a product. Their loyalty will necessarily increase. Accordingly, if a brand brings joy and satisfaction to a consumer, it will undoubtedly help promote brand loyalty. According to Andrianto & Santoso (2019) trust is a variable that participates in the learning process. For Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh (2021), trust is associated with information processing processes that lead to decision-making. It represents the degree of certainty the buyer considers his evaluative judgment correct. To this effect, Kurniawati & Kodrat (2021) find that perceived value positively and considerably impacts trust. They also suggest that perceived value is significantly affected by trust; the weight of a product will lead not only to consumer satisfaction with a brand but also to adopting a preference and, therefore, to trust the brand. These same authors also identify trust and the value the consumer perceives as driving forces of loyalty. Olaleye et al (2021) adopted, on the other hand, intermediary and loyalty procedure points to present a correlation structure from pre-purchase, satisfaction, and trust leading to loyalty. The following hypotheses are based on these reasons.

Hypothesis 4: consumer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand equity and consumer loyalty.

4. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is an essential phase of an empirical study to collect information that will be analyzed to confirm (or not) initial hypotheses and respond to a problem. The questionnaire is the most efficient method of collecting primary data for this research. It also offers the possibility of standardization and comparability of measurement. Finally, it helps preserve the anonymity of data sources. In companies where e-mail is one of the most used means of communication, e-mail seems to be a good solution due to the speed and low cost of this process. It may be appropriate to distribute the questionnaires in paper format, in addition to e-mail, if some respondents do not feel comfortable with the electronic form. Still, the advantages of the questionnaire by e-mail are canceled because the latter method is very costly in terms of time and money. A questionnaire makes it possible to question Lebanese citizens directly. It is a primary data collection tool well suited to quantitative research since it allows large samples to be processed and statistical relationships or numerical comparisons to be established. Three main stages punctuate the collection of data by questionnaire. First, the initial construction of the questionnaire with the choice of measurement scales. The second stage is grounded on pre-tests to check the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument and its administration.

Demographic Statistics

Data were collected from 384 Lebanese consumers from March 20, 2023, to April 23, 2023. The questionnaire embraced statements evaluating customer satisfaction and loyalty. Respondents assessed the brand equity dimension using the Aaker scale. The descriptive analysis draws a profile of the sample studied in the context of this research.

Table (1): Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	174	45.3	45.3	45.3
	Male	210	54.7	54.7	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

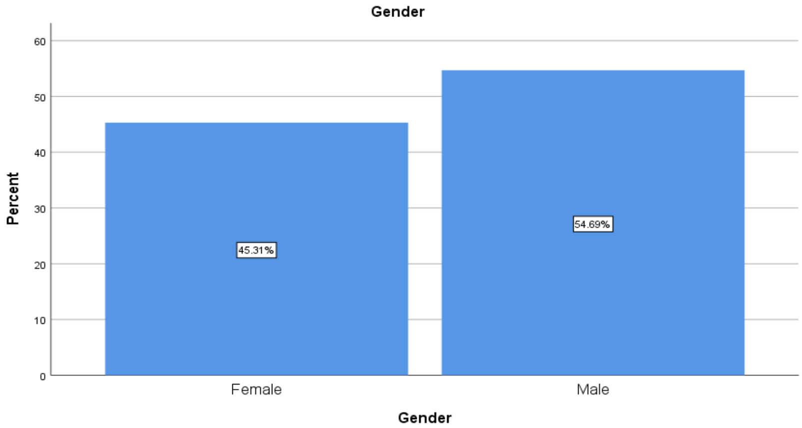

Figure 1 Gender

384 valid questionnaires formed the statistical base of this research. Figure (4) shows that respondents are predominantly female, with 54.7% of respondents (210 female), compared to 45.3% of male respondents (174 male).

Table 2 Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Between 18-28 years	134	34.9	34.9	34.9
	Between 29-39 years	174	45.3	45.3	80.2
	Between 40-49 years	51	13.3	13.3	93.5
	Between 50-59 years	19	4.9	4.9	98.4
	Older than 60 years	6	1.6	1.6	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

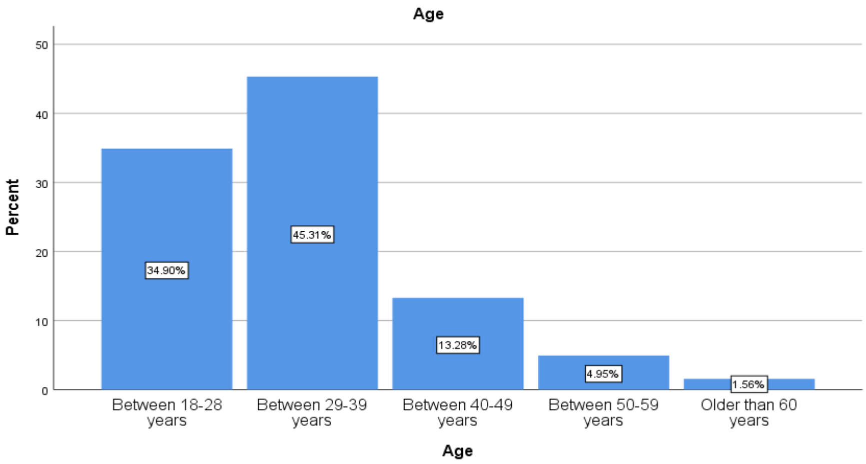

Figure 2. Age

Figure (2) identified the sample as adults whose age falls within the 29-39 age bracket with a percentage of 45.3%. Then, the age group between 18 and 28 years with a share of 34.9%. Adults aged between 40 and 49 years represented 13.3% of the total sample. Finally, respondents aged between 50 and 59 represent only 4.9%. Therefore, it can be concluded that the sample studied consists mainly of young adults and adults aged 29 to 39.

Table 3. Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	155	40.4	40.4	40.4
	Married	184	47.9	47.9	88.3
	Divorced	44	11.5	11.5	99.7
	Widowed	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

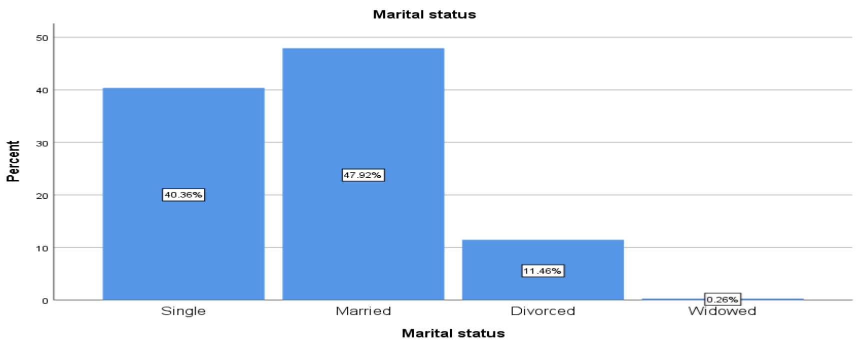

Figure 3. Marital Status

Figure (3) shows that 40.4% are single, 47.9% are married, 11.5% are divorced, and 0.3% are widowed. In other words, the highest percentage is represented by married consumers, followed by single and divorced consumers.

Table 4. Level of Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Primary/secondary school	86	22.4	22.4	22.4
	2 University degree	177	46.1	46.1	68.5
	3 Technical degree	121	31.5	31.5	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

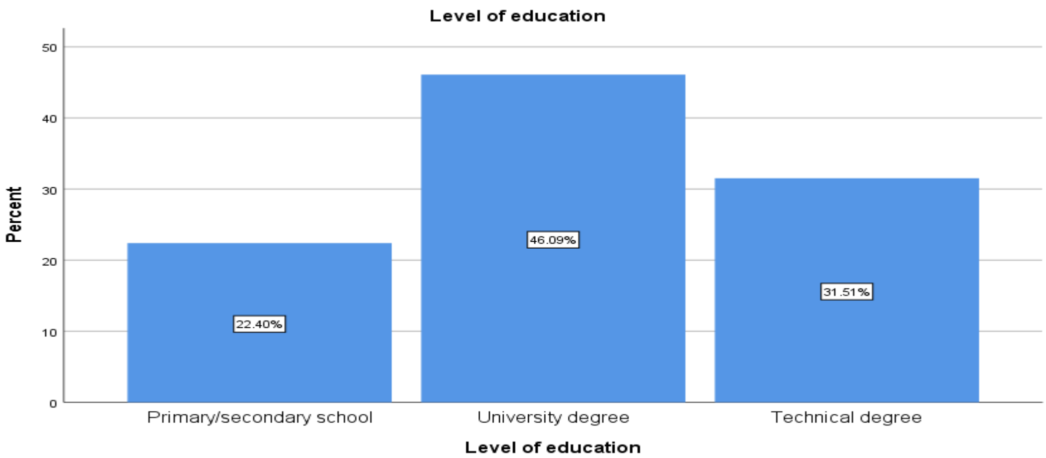

Figure 4. Level of Education

Figure (4) shows that the sample is educated. The majority of respondents declared having a university. 177 out of 384 hold a university degree, 86 out of 384 have a primary/secondary education, and 121 out of 384 hold a technical degree. To know the frequency distribution of these variables, descriptive statistics of measurement of central tendency and dispersion are used. Thus, for each consumer, celebrity and brand personality measurement model, the variables were analyzed using the following statistics: mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, asymmetry (Skewness), and flattening (Kurtosis). The objective here will be to calculate some descriptive statistical tests aimed at estimating the scores recorded by each of our research variables. The table below shows the main results obtained after analyzing the data collected.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
BA Brand awareness	384	-.483	.125	.328	.248
BL brand loyalty	384	-.944	.125	.691	.248
CS Customer Satisfaction	384	-.502	.125	-.208	.248
PT Brand Trust	384	-.358	.125	-.390	.248
BAS Brand association	384	-.469	.125	-.155	.248
SB Staff behavior	384	-.706	.125	.154	.248
PQ Perceived quality	384	-.915	.125	.274	.248
Valid N (listwise)	384				

The kurtosis coefficient evaluates the dispersion of "extreme" values concerning the normal law. The Skewness coefficient estimates the lack of symmetry of a distribution. It is zero for a symmetric distribution (for example, a normal distribution or a binomial distribution with p=0.5). It is favorable for a "right-spread" distribution. These values close to 1 show that the data is usually distributed.

Table 6. Collinearity Statistics

	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
CS Customer Satisfaction	.903	1.107
BA Brand awareness	.842	1.187
BAS Brand association	.963	1.039
PQ Perceived quality	.936	1.068
SB Staff behavior	.939	1.065
PT Brand Trust	.955	1.047

A strong presence of collinearity between the independent variables or the indicators can affect the stability of the coefficient of the indicator. The statistic measuring the presence of multicollinearity is the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Thus, a value of the VIF close to 1 means that the given explanatory variable is independent of the other explanatory variables. It is generally recognized that a VIF > 10 indicates high multicollinearity. As demonstrated in the previous table, the tolerances and the variance inflation factor (VIF) satisfy the required multicollinearity conditions as well as the values recommended (tolerance >0.3 and VIF<3). The model does not have any collinearity problem.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
BA Brand awareness	384	1.86	5.00	3.8237	.55289
BL brand loyalty	384	2.00	5.00	3.8418	.61857
CS Customer Satisfaction	384	1.71	5.00	3.8702	.64112
PT Brand Trust	384	2.25	4.88	3.8796	.52715
BAS Brand association	384	2.00	5.00	3.9092	.57157
SB Staff behavior	384	1.83	5.00	3.9366	.60594
PQ Perceived quality	384	1.86	5.00	4.1775	.61830
Valid N (listwise)	384				

Variables must, by definition, show some variation in the responses of individuals to the questions asked. In this sense, a significant standard deviation and an average close to the middle of the measurement scale (for example, an average of 2.5 for a scale with four categories) are good indices of the quality of the variable's information. The item scores are close to the minimum (1), and the standard deviations are average. Observations show that the seven variables recorded an average exceeding 3.5. The standard deviation of a statistical series tells us about the dispersion around the mean of the values of this series. The larger the standard deviation, the more the values are dispersed around the norm; the smaller the standard deviation, the more the values are concentrated around the mean.

Table (8): Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.406	.396		11.140	0.000
	Perceived quality	.758	.054	.755	1.080	0.000
	Brand awareness	.769	.060	.745	2.787	0.000
	Brand association	.754	.036	.777	1.492	0.000
	Brand Trust	.656	.033	.688	1.728	0.000
	Staff behavior	.616	.047	.624	2.462	0.000
2	(Constant)	3.059	.420		7.286	0.000
	Perceived quality	.746	.051	.794	.916	0.000
	Brand awareness	.715	.057	.785	3.745	0.000
	Brand association	.768	.034	.778	1.999	0.000
	Brand Trust	.664	.031	.600	2.079	0.000
	Staff behavior	.614	.044	.622	2.579	0.000
	Customer Satisfaction	.666	.053	.633	6.970	0.000
a. Dependent Variable: brand loyalty						

The analysis of the significant results in Table (29) tests four hypotheses relating to the dependent and independent variables making up the research model. The link between brand equity, consumer satisfaction, and loyalty is positive and significant. The structural parameters (regression coefficients greater than 0.50 for all cases and p= 0.000) are adequate for the three banking brands. The resulting observations lead to the following explanations:

Influence of Brand Equity on Consumers' Loyalty

The influence of brand equity dimensions on consumer loyalty is significant. This influence is confirmed by the multiple linear regression performed. With a significance of p=0.000 <0.05, hypothesis H1 is therefore validated.

Hypothesis 1: brand equity influence consumers' loyalty positively.

Influence of Brand Equity on Consumers Satisfaction

The analysis of the results of hypothesis H2 reveals the existence of a significant influence of brand equity dimensions and customers satisfaction. This hypothesis is therefore validated ($p=0.000<0.05$). Perceived quality appears in this study as the first variable (Beta=0.794) influencing the consumer satisfaction of respondents. This reflects that the greater the perceived quality and brand awareness have the greatest influence on consumer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: brand equity influence consumers' satisfaction positively.

Influence of Consumers Satisfaction on Consumers Loyalty

The results of the multiple linear regression study highlight the significant influence of consumer satisfaction on consumer loyalty. This influence is considered positive. Indeed, the Beta score (0.633) of the effect of the influence variable. Therefore, the satisfaction variable significantly influences the loyalty of the consumers surveyed. Hypothesis H3 is therefore validated ($p=0.000<0.05$).

Hypothesis 3: Consumer satisfaction influences consumer loyalty positively.

Mediating Role of Consumers Satisfaction

The tests carried out on hypothesis H4 highlight the significant mediating role of consumer satisfaction. The latter mediates the relationship between brand equity dimensions and consumer loyalty. Hence, the hypothesis is validated ($p=0.000<0.05$). This mediating influence is validated further in the path analysis.

Hypothesis 4: consumer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand equity and consumer loyalty.

5. FINDINGS

The main objective of this research was to evaluate the influence of brand equity on consumer loyalty through consumer satisfaction as a mediating variable. This study was conducted on Lebanese consumers taking Lebanese confectionary brands as a field of study. The study highlighted that consumer loyalty is highly influenced by brand equity dimensions and consumer satisfaction, respectively. Therefore, Perceived quality, Brand awareness, Brand association, Brand Trust, and Staff behavior affect customer satisfaction on consumers' satisfaction ($R2=0.656$). Thus, a 65% variation in customer satisfaction is explained by a unit change in these retained dimensions of brand equity. Besides, this research verified that Perceived quality, Brand awareness, Brand association, Brand Trust, and Staff behavior influence customer satisfaction on customer loyalty surveyed ($R2=0.795$). Therefore, a 79% variation in customer loyalty is explained by a unit change in these retained dimensions of brand equity.

CONCLUSION

Through its antecedents and consequences, this research shed light on the loyalty theory according to its object (brand equity dimensions and consumer satisfaction). On the one hand, the study verified that brand equity dimensions (Perceived quality, Brand awareness, Brand association, Brand Trust, and Staff behavior) and consumer satisfaction are two critical antecedents of loyalty to the brand. It revealed that satisfaction is a new mediating variable in their relationship. On the other hand, the study of the antecedents of loyalty identified a new conceptual model. Finally, the conceptual model relating to the loyalty program has made it possible to understand better the mechanisms of operation and efficiency of brand loyalty. From a conceptual point of view, it made it possible to present the possibility of applying the concept of human personality to the field of brands. From a theoretical point of view, this exploratory research leads to prospects for conceptualizing the role of perceived stereotypes in the consumer's decision-making process concerning responsible consumption behavior. In theories of identity, the idea that one has of a group and the relationship that one has to this group strongly influence the perception of one's own identity.

Choosing a proper definition of consumer loyalty was the first limitation. The abundance of items causes this difficulty, which could create confusion between the different forms of loyalty (consumer, brand, and product loyalty). Therefore, it was necessary to decide to identify the literature on elements characterizing loyalty.

Besides, the time limitation was among the difficulties encountered during the realization of this research. The time limitation was encountered during data collection. The response rate concerning Lebanese consumers was low in the absence of official data verifying the number of Lebanese consumers, namely those shopping from Lebanese confectionaries. Therefore, convenience sampling procedures were followed to collect Lebanese respondents. Besides, the cross-sectional nature of this study limited the data collection. The questionnaire was available online for three weeks, and correctly filled questionnaires reached 384 respondents. This number showed excellent reliability and validity. However, this sampling procedure limited data generalization to the studied field. A third constraint encountered was the approach. This research was limited to the quantitative approach only, considering Lebanese consumers' opinions in a structured questionnaire based on close-ended questions. This limitation could be reduced by adopting a mixed method and incorporating a qualitative approach using direct interviews with owners of Lebanese confectionaries operating in SMEs and noted after analyzing the results. As part of this work, the factor analysis of satisfaction and loyalty allowed us to extract one factor. Therefore, it is recommended to introduce dimensions into these constructs.

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