

**Individual oppositional loyalty:
Are loyalty and resistance two sides of the same coin?**

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Abstract

Our paper aims at studying individual oppositional loyalty phenomenon. It offers a new reading template of loyalty that introduces a new component borrowed from resistance research. It offers a new interpretation framework for loyalty that has been defined, so far, as a repetitive buying behavior and/or positive attitude. If we rely on the available loyalty definitions, one may picture the scene as a single brand market as there is no mentioning of the competitive brands despite their existence. Oppositional loyalty is defined as the phenomenon where the consumers define themselves by the brand they consume as well as by the brand they do not consume (Muniz and Hamer, 2001). It has only been studied among online brand communities despite the fact that Roux (2007) describes it as individual micro-practices, no research considered oppositional loyalty as such. Thus, we chose to study it among Smartphone brands consumers in France using netnography to explore the nature of this phenomenon and the consumers' different behaviors. Our results show different consumers' profiles that correspond to different level of classical and oppositional loyalty.

Key words: Loyalty, oppositional loyalty, consumer resistance, anti consumption

Introduction

Our research focuses on the phenomenon of individual oppositional loyalty. Loyalty, which has been defined so far as a repetitive buying behavior pattern accompanied by a positive attitude, is acquiring a new component inspired by the literature on resistance. Resistance has been considered as an opposition to a dominant structure (Poster, 1992) and in particular, as an opposition to the marketing force used by companies on the market. Thus, resistance is considered in our research as coexisting with the firm's force and the consumer's reaction to a market full of continuous tension and provocation (Foucault, 1982; Roux, 2007) and is brought into play to better understand oppositional loyalty. It offers a new interpretation framework for loyalty that has been defined, so far, as a repetitive buying behavior (Tucker, 1964) and/or positive attitude (Day, 1969). If we rely on the available definitions, one may picture the scene as a single brand market as there is no mentioning of the competitive brands despite their existence. It is the phenomenon of oppositional loyalty that takes into consideration this missed element, ie, the competition.

Indeed, oppositional loyalty, coined by Muniz and Hamer (2001), is the phenomenon where the consumers define themselves by the brand they consume (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988) as well as by the brand they do not consume (Hogg, 1998). Here, the consumer has a dual behavior: choosing the brand that maintains or improve his self-concept (Sirgy, 1982) and simultaneously avoiding the brand that may add a negative meaning to his life and/or withholding negative emotions towards them (Ogilvie, 1987; Wilk, 1997; White and Dahl, 2006; Hogg et al., 2008). These emotions and behaviors may result of various elements that can be symbolic or functional (Hogg et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008; Romani et al., 2009). Oppositional loyalty phenomenon has only been studied among online brand communities (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). On one hand, Roux (2007) describes oppositional loyalty as individual micro-practices that consist to express a certain resistance to objects, discourse, signs and values, yet no research considered oppositional loyalty as such. On the other hand, its supposed immunity effect against the adoption of competitive brand was found not that effective in online brand community (Thompson and Sinha, 2008) hence our questioning of its motivations. The importance of our research lies in the adopted angle that stresses on the study of the individual dimension of oppositional loyalty without neglecting the overlapping collective

dimension. Our conception of this phenomenon allows giving a clearer vision about how the focus phenomenon emerges out of the interplay of the two competitive brands together with the consumer at the individual and the collective level. This conceptualization of oppositional loyalty allows to better explore the nature of this phenomenon.

Literature Review and the conceptual framework

Since it represents the core element of brand capital, loyalty has been the subject of many studies. In the literature, we identify two main streams of thought: the behaviorist trend (Tucker, 1964) that defines loyalty as an observable behavior of repeated buying, and the cognitive trend (Day, 1969) that defines loyalty based on a positive attitude towards the brand. Behavioral loyalty that can be considered as a simple response to the company's marketing actions is qualified as false loyalty by the cognitivists (Frisou, 2010). The supporters of the cognitive stream believe that loyalty cannot be qualified as true as it does not emanate from the consumer's will to consume the brand. This dichotomy that classified loyalty as true or false was questioned by many studies and generated an eclectic approach (Frisou, 2010). Accordingly, there seems to be a tradeoff between internal dispositions of the consumer (attitude, commitment to the brand) and the external stimulation.

According to the congruence theory, consumers choose and prefer the brands and the products that have psychological characteristics that are congruent with their own psychological characteristics (Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988). However, if the information emanating from the brand is not coherent with the consumer's self concept, it is less likely that the brand will attract his/her attention (Heath and Scott, 1998). This brand may even be rejected if it is capable of adding an undesirable meaning to the consumer's life (Wilk, 1997; Banister and Hogg, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) or if it reminds the consumer of an undesirable self image (Ogilvie, 1987).

One may notice that, so far, the literature has described loyalty only in terms of the consumer's positive attitude towards the brand and/or in terms of repetitive buying behavior and does not refer to the competing brand that exists in the market just like the chosen brand. Still, the consumer may have a negative attitude towards the competitive brand for a particular reason. In fact, according to Bourdieu (1984), the taste for an option is the distaste of the discarded option for distinction purpose. Thus, the consumer can have a dual behavior: consuming the brand that maintains or enhances his self image while simultaneously avoiding the brand that could add a negative meaning to his life (White and Dahl, 2006; Hogg *et al.*, 2008). This avoidance (Lee *et al.*, 2008) can be accompanied by negative emotions (Romani *et al.*, 2009). These emotions and the corresponding behavior can be the result of several elements like the incongruence between the brand image and the consumer's self concept, a negative evaluation of the product characteristics, a negative experience and/or unacceptable corporate behavior thereof (Wilk, 1997 ; Hogg *et al.*, 2008 ; Romani *et al.*, 2009).

Thus, the classical definition of loyalty that is based on a dyadic relation acquires a third element and becomes, thus, a triadic conception of loyalty that includes the relation between the consumer with his chosen brand, the relation between the consumer and the discarded brand and the relation between the chosen brand and the discarded brand. This last relation may nurture the two first relations. Indeed, according to the Inoculation Theory (McGuire, 1961), the customer's exposure to weaker negative messages related to the chosen brand prepares this individual to defend his brand effectively while given stronger negative arguments against it. We suggest that in addition to the brands' communication, the interaction between the chosen brand and the avoided brand could send positive or negative messages about them and thus, can have an inoculation effect on the consumer behavior and attitude and allow us to have a triadic conception of loyalty.

In addition to the inoculation effect, that is an external source, there is an internal motive for the consumer to opt for a triadic situation of relation. Indeed, according to Heider's balance theory (1958), the individuals seek a certain balance in their relations and makes efforts to find this balance by altering these relations. For instance, if the person likes the brand Carrefour, hates waste and discovers that

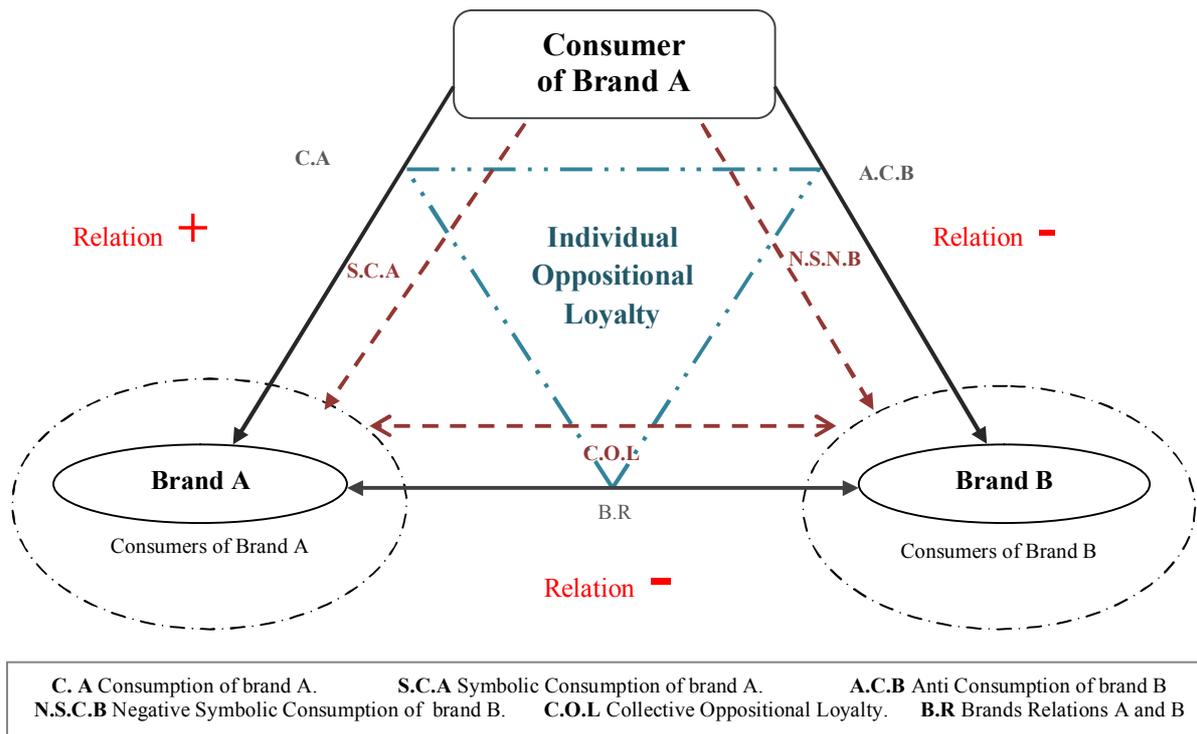
Carrefour throws the products that it cannot sell, he needs to alter either his relation to Carrefour or to waste in order to be in a balanced situation. Indeed, this individual will be in an unbalanced situation, a dissonant situation if he loves Carrefour that holds a characteristic that is hated by this same person. To stay in a harmony with his self, the quest of the balanced situation is required. Knowing that a brand can be an extension of the self (Belk, 1988), the individual will try to reach the balanced situation by defending the brand that is congruent with his self image (Sirgy, 1982) and by hating the competitive brand because: he considers it as a threat on his chosen brand (Hamer and O'Guinn, 2001), he sees in it an incarnation of the signs and the practices he rejects or he does not want to be associated to the social group that represents the rejected brand (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Besides, this triadic model extends Belk's model (1988) and enrich its content as the individual can defend his brand as if he defends himself, considers its success as his and has BIRGing behavior (Basking With Reflected Glory) (Boen et al., 2002) and goes further by attacking the competitive brand and expressing joy when it fails (Schadenfreude).

According to the study by Muniz and Hamer (2001), the phenomenon of oppositional loyalty has been observed among the consumers of Pepsi and CocaCola. Such opposition can be expressed in two ways. First, the consumers of a given product category define themselves by the brand they consume as well as the brand they do not consume. Second, these consumers express their opposition towards the competitive brand by developing an ironic rivalry towards the consumer of the competitive brand. Indeed, they criticize the competitive brand and their consumers and playfully challenge these latter to defend their choice. Thus, such behavior observed online not only expresses loyalty as an observable behavior and positive attitude but also implies also that the consumer can push it further and make his brand a central element for defining who he is as opposed to the definition of how the competitive brand is defined.

Banister et al., (2005) studied a particularly salient case of oppositional loyalty: football fans, a case in which the dimension of rejection is particularly remarkable. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) studied three online communities in three different product categories and they identified different kinds of oppositional loyalty among online brand communities. According to researchers, this categorization is supposed to help having more immunity against competition. However, a study by Thompson and Sinha (2008) showed that such immunity is not that strong when the consumer joins several online communities. Thus, oppositional loyalty in online communities can be a behavior resulting from a feeling of belonging and honesty towards the other members of the same community and apparently it is this collective dimension, more than the individual dimension that has been studied. Yet, Roux (2007) describes oppositional loyalty as individual micro-practices that consist in expressing a certain resistance to objects, discourse, signs and values and no research has studied oppositional loyalty as such so far.

The literature summarized heretofore allowed us to propose the following graph that portrays the conceptualization of the individual oppositional loyalty that is of interest to us.

Figure1 Individual Oppositional Loyalty



We are aware that in oppositional loyalty the individual and collective dimensions intertwine. We are interested in the consumer's behavior as a unity of analysis and not in community behavior. As a consequence, our research question is:

What is individual oppositional loyalty and how is it manifested?

Methodology

From the literature review, we adopt for the moment the description of the oppositional loyalty phenomenon brought to light by Muniz and Hamer (2001) and which has not been fully defined. Our research aims at exploring the nature of the concept of individual oppositional loyalty, a concept that has not been investigated enough in the literature, which makes it inevitable to use the qualitative method in the first stage. In order to understand how the Smartphone consumers express their loyalty to their brands, we could have thought of observing their behaviors in everyday social contexts. This task would be unrealistic as it is not possible to be present all the time with the consumers waiting for them to exchange with the consumers of the competitive brands about the Smartphones. Thus, we decided to study their behaviors in a naturalistic and non obtrusive context where the individuals can talk easily about their emotions (Buechel and Berger, 2012), that is an online context. To this end, we adopted netnography method (Kozinets, 2010) and we analyzed the traces of the consumers' behaviors online. These traces are a reaction (internauts' comments) to a stimulus (posted statistics about the studied brands). We chose to study Smartphone brands for the visibility of their consumption and, thus, their social symbolism. The Smartphone market has been rapidly expanding in Europe: 48% per year according to the International Data Corporation report in 2011¹. The leading position that Apple has had for years is now threatened by its competitor Samsung. According to Hamer and O'Guinn (2001), oppositional loyalty was seen among consumers of brands which have the largest market share. This explains our choice.

¹ IDC European Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, Aout 2011
<http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUK23024911>

Results

In this paper we present the results of the netnography we carried to analyze the comments (66) left by internautes (29 people) as a reaction to an article² published on the website by LeFigaro-www.lefigaro.fr- in November 2011. The article mentions statistics concerning the market share of different Smartphone brands. It was the occasion for the internautes to side with their brand and to compare it (or not) with the competitive brand (oppositional loyalty).

The comments are cut into units of meaning (that are the theme in our case). They were, then, assembled into categories according to the principle of homogeneity and mutual exclusion (Bardin, 2001). We build up a synthesis grid where categories are on the horizontal and the individuals on the vertical axis. This allowed us to carry out two types of analysis: a vertical analysis that permitted us to process intra comments i.e.: How the individual reacts, and a horizontal analysis that permitted to see how the theme was addressed by the individuals. Then we suggested individual profiling.

Levels of comparison

There are different levels of comparison that we identified and which can be: between the product-brands (eg : iPhone, Samsung Galaxy), between corporate-brands (eg : Apple Vs Samsung), between products (eg : iPhone 4s, Nixus Galaxy2), between operating systems (eg : Android Vs iOS) and between groups of users (eg : iPhone users and Samsung users).

It was noted that Smartphone brand consumers use different kinds of arguments to defend their brand as well as to attack the rival brand. These arguments can be at a) the product/brand level: it can vary from the hardware elements (eg: ergonomic aspects, interface) to the software level (operating system, applications) as well as at b) the corporate level (eg: strategy, financial situation, market share, ethics, transparency).

Coexistence of consumption, anti-consumption and resistance

Whatever the chosen brand (except for Apple) the users of the brands show the same mechanism: they show their preference for their brand while describing Apple / iPhone as a common enemy (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001): « *what I don't like about the Apple system, is that they make the user captive of their system ... it is not true in Android world* ». This enemy seems to take on the role of an agent representing the rejected mercantile system: « *This company ... they decided to ... trap the user in a commercial and intellectual bubble where they can be shaped by the company that exploits them.* ». Apple can be considered as a brand that is part of the anti-choice set (Hogg, 1998): « *Yes, dear ifansboys, some (people) do not want Apple by choice* ».

Moreover, user groups of brands (other than Apple) attribute nick names to iPhone users (like *iFanboys* or *AppleAddict*) and qualify them as a sect to put them in a category apart or distinguish them from the rest « *The Apple worship sect and their arguments make me laugh.* ». However, we noticed that there are no critical remarks exchanged between the users of the brand Samsung, Nokia and SonyEricsson.

Negative symbolic consumption

It has been noted in the interactions between Smartphone brands users that they make reference to the consumers of the rival brand by criticizing and denigrating them. In fact, they question their common sense: « *Oh dear, my God, marketing and rumors ... washed your brain.* », their intellectual capacity: « *dreaming to have an iPhone rather than another brand, you must be simple-minded ...* » and they joke

² <http://www.lefigaro.fr/hightech/2011/10/28/01007-20111028ARTFIG00472-samsung-fait-mieux-que-l-iphone-dans-les-smartphones.php>

about their enthusiasm. These remarks echo the stereotypical level of negative symbolic consumption identified by Banister et al. (2005) where the consumers of the chosen brand have a negative perception of the rival brand (iPhone/Apple).

The users of the chosen brand can express even more ideas with negative connotations: *“to give phony arguments to back up phonier behavior, you must be an idiot”*. This behavior recalls the discriminatory level of negative symbolic consumption identified among football team supporters in the study by Banister et al. (2005). This way, the users describe and criticize the rival brand typical user's image and his/her users group to be distinguish themselves from them. The description takes into consideration his/her intellectual capacity and perception of the world. It happens that the description of the user of the avoided brand is similar to the avoided brand's portrayal: Samsung copies Apple => Samsung users hack (jailbreak) Apple's applications.

Consumer resistance as a result of the brands' strategies and communication

The brands' force is actually part of the consumers' discourse. It is already felt in the brand's communication *« Samsung has several types of Smartphone and that is good. We are not OBLIGED to have a GS2... »*. This user, even if he reproaches Samsung with over-advertizing about the GS2, has opted for another Samsung sub brand that makes him feel free in his choice. Thus, through this choice, he sees an opportunity to avoid being influenced by strong brands and to feel freer (Holt, 2002). The choice of another brand than the one exerting pressure on the public is another possibility of evasion *“ (talking about Apple) I've had enough that they want to force me to stay in the same store to buy, not what I want, but what they want to sell me”*.

Brand strategy can also be considered as a pressure exerted on the consumer and lead him to resist this brand and probably adopt another brand. For example, iPhone/Apple's strategy opting for a closed system is seen as an attempt at manipulation: *« what I do not like in Apple's system is that they make the user captive of their system. »*.

Resistance to persuasion

The exchange between the chosen brands users and the avoided brand users are mainly related to information given in the article or its comments. In order to attack or counter attack, the users use different strategies (Fishbein and Azjen, 1981; Ahluwalia, 2000). They question the provided information. They can also give less weight to the arguments directed against their chosen brand: *« quantity (criterion in favor of the rival brand) is not a criterion of quality »*. When the information is in favor of the chosen brand, it is highlighted.

Identified profiles

Through analyses of the comments in the article in LeFigaro, we could identify three types of profiles. The first type concerns individuals with a dual relation i.e. they emphasize their preference for their brand and oppose the competitive brand. We notice that this preference is accompanied by different degrees of opposition against the competitive brand. The second type is individuals whose relation is revealed in terms of oppositions for a given brand, without necessarily expressing a preference for another brand. The third type is individuals whose discourse is neutral and who act as observers without showing any preference/antagonism towards a brand. These people question the market and its practices and see the *war* between the brands as manipulatory and they distance themselves from it.

Category 1 : Individuals nurturing a dual relation	Category 2 : Individuals nurturing a relation of antagonism	Category 3 : The observer/commenter
<p>Profile1: <i>The absolute oppositional loyal</i> Discourse : comparative Conclusion : the superiority of the chosen brand If putting into question the superiority of his brand => Reaction: hostile, aggressive He may have had a negative experience with the avoided brand</p>	<p>Profile 5: <i>The critic</i> Discourse: denigrating a given brand No mention of the chosen brand</p>	<p>Profile 7: <i>The resistant observer</i> Discourse: skeptical towards the system + Irony towards the ‘war’ between the brands. Arguments: ‘objective’ to analyze the brands (eg: strategy, financial situation ...etc)</p>
<p>Profile 2: <i>The hidden oppositional loyal</i> Discourse: arguments in favor of the chosen brand + neutral arguments concerning the rival brand. If criticizing the chosen brand => Reaction: tone changing: sarcasm and hostility towards the rival brand and to users.</p>	<p>Profile 6 : <i>The resistant</i> Discourse: skeptical towards the system + negative attitude towards the brand that embodies it.</p>	
<p>Profile 3: <i>The defender</i> Discourse: arguments in favor of the chosen brand + a call to respect the choice of others. After having his brand attacked/criticized => Reaction: Hostility towards the critics maker.</p>		
<p>Profile 4: <i>The skeptical loyal</i> Discourse: defends his choice of the less marketed brand. Irony towards the brands ‘war’</p>		

Conclusion

Our paper attempts to clarify the phenomenon of oppositional loyalty and to shed light on the different concepts and theories that may explain its emergence. Indeed, when moving from the classical definition of loyalty to the concept of oppositional loyalty, theories such as: congruence theory, the inoculation theory, Heider's balance theory and cognitive dissonance theory can explain the consumer's need to have a third part in his brands configuration and to manifest an oppositional loyalty. Moreover, the pressure felt by the consumer can lead to his resistance to the competitive brand and to look for a brand that allows him to escape it. It is this third dimension, ie, the negative attitude towards the avoided brand that allows us to move from a dyadic form of loyalty to a triadic form of loyalty that is fed by the positive attitude as well as by the negative attitude towards the competitive brand.

Our results came to shed light on the way the positive and negative attitude intertwines to engender oppositional loyalty behaviors. Different profiles were identified through our netnography where different degrees of loyalty and resistance were entwining. We suggest that future research should go further by interviewing different consumers with different profiles in order to categorize the different motivations and antecedents behind their behaviors. For example, one of the '*Absolute Oppositional Loyal*' had a negative experience with the brand he is opposed to today. It is interesting to see what pushes the other '*Absolute Oppositional Loyal*' who have the same profile to be such, what pushes the '*Hidden Oppositional Loyal*' to be different from the '*Absolute Oppositional Loyal*'.

Theoretical and managerial implications

In terms of theoretical implications, our study allows to propose a clarification of a concept that has been scantily studied in online brand communities while ignoring the individual who can have his own motivations that are distinct from the group interest to which he belongs. Despite the fact that individual oppositional loyalty is in the intersection of several streams of research, it has not received the conceptual attention that supports it, hence the importance of our research.

In terms of managerial implications, our research allows the company to better understand the motivation behind the opposition of their client to the competitive brand and to benefit from the situation on the offer level as well as the communication level. Our study gives an insight into the 'real' reasons that explain their clients' loyalty. The contribution of our research could be beneficial to the companies acting in a market with a high level of brand switching or a high rate of multibrand consumers. In all these cases, our study offers new strategies for the companies to keep their clients and to embrace the multibrand consumers.

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