Experiential Brand Loyalty: Towards an Extended Conceptualisation of Consumer Allegiance to Brands

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Abstract
This paper synthesises experiential and meaning-based dimensions of loyalty in order to extend the brand loyalty canon. The experientially loyal consumer is defined as one who is sufficiently invested in a brand to find personal symbolic meanings in the act of consuming that brand and engage around these meanings, individually or within the context of communities of similarly engaged consumers in the pursuit of identity projects. Drawing on a particular type of consumer that epitomises experiential loyalty – the fan, the features of this new conceptualisation are highlighted. The foundations of 'experiential brand loyalty' in consumer research are identified and examined. The concept of experiential brand loyalty is articulated, and set alongside existing research as a complementary position that bridges the gap between brand loyalty and experiential consumption literatures. Implications are drawn for future research and marketing practice.

Introduction
Since Copeland's (1923) inaugural brand loyalty research, the field has evolved from an early singular focus on repeat consumer purchases (Tucker, 1964), to one that also embraces the thoughts and attitudes that drive consumption (e.g. Day, 1969; Jacoby, 1971). Although loyalty research has advanced considerably, behavioural and attitudinal conceptualisations prevail, upheld by a dominant logical empiricist paradigm (Paavola, 2005). Loyalty is a concept that is used in a range of disciplines to mean similar, but slightly different things but marketers have settled on a very particular set of understandings in relation to brands. These reflect the interests of those adopting the term, i.e. if their focus is on people buying a brand, then the frame of behavioural loyalty is adopted. If instead the interest is in what people think of a brand, then attitudinal loyalty prevails.

The nature of the relationship between consumers and the brands to which they are loyal is, however, more wide-reaching than consumers' behaviours and attitudes. It has long been recognised that consumers not only act and think, but that they also experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Brands have been shown to attract highly engaged customers where consumption is anchored in identity and socialisation (e.g. Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). While different types of brands, including product brands, service brands, investor brands, place brands and B2B brands display varying levels of engagement, cultural brands in particular, such as music, attract followers or 'fans' who engage deeply with the brand, integrating it into many aspects of their lives (O'Reilly, 2005; Schroeder, 2009). Acknowledging this, researchers have previously highlighted the need for perspectives that are grounded in the realities of consumer experience (Fournier and Yao, 1997) and that accommodate the deep meanings that frame loyal behaviour (Sherry, 1987). However, where practitioners and scholars are interested in how consumers experience a brand, there is no

equivalent concept in brand research. Thus, the aim of this article is to introduce and develop the concept of 'experiential brand loyalty' and to position it as a useful and much needed extension to the brand loyalty canon.

Looking beyond the marketing management literature, consumer research has addressed a range of topics that can provide the foundations of an experiential perspective on brand loyalty despite not necessarily employing the term. For example, experiences of consumers who are highly engaged with brands have been captured in concepts such as brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). The conceptualisation of 'experiential brand loyalty' developed in this paper synthesises and works the experiential and meaning-based dimensions of consumption into the brand loyalty canon. This perspective departs from the focus on repeat purchases highlighted in the behavioural literature. It is also different from attitudinal loyalty which tends to emphasise psychological preference. Thus, it offers a complementary understanding that bridges the gap between brand loyalty and experiential consumption literatures.

The experiential view of brand loyalty also differs from 'brand experience', which is concerned with "subjective, internal consumer responses…and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus et al., 2009: 53; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). To this end, Schmitt (1999) encourages marketers to produce brand experiences for consumers. Conversely, 'experiential brand loyalty' is interpretive in spirit and focuses on the consumer as an active subject negotiating and transforming market mediated meanings across the whole consumption process.

This conceptual paper proceeds by reviewing the literature on brand loyalty. Drawing on a particular type of consumer that epitomises experiential loyalty – the fan, the features of this new conceptualisation are then highlighted. As noted by Seregina and Schouten (2017: 111), fandom is an excellent context for studying affect-laden forms of consumption that are intertwined with identity because it "is tightly bounded and well-defined". They also call upon Jenkin's (2007, 2014) suggestion that fandom is a prototype for consumer-brand interactions in contemporary culture. Subsequently, the foundations of 'experiential brand loyalty' in consumer research are identified and examined. The concept of experiential brand loyalty is then articulated, and set alongside existing perspectives as a complementary position. Finally, implications of this extended perspective are drawn for future research and marketing practice.

The Nature of Brand Loyalty
Current research defines brand loyalty in either behavioural terms, or as a two-dimensional model comprising behavioural and attitudinal elements (Rundle-Thiele and Bennet, 2001).

Behavioural Brand Loyalty
Behavioural loyalty refers to "the pattern of past purchases with only secondary regard to underlying consumer motivations or commitment to the brand" (Uncles et al., 2003:7). Repeat purchase of a particular brand is itself considered full and sufficient evidence of loyalty, thus no consideration is given to what the subject thinks or feels (Tucker, 1964). Behavioural brand loyalty is also called the stochastic approach (Odin et al., 2001; Tucker, 1964), because of the measures that are typically employed in observing "the sequence of purchases and/or the proportion of purchases, in the event that the customer is satisfied with the brand purchase and repeats it in a relatively short period of time" (Uslu and Cam,

2014:586). Common measures include brand share, purchase frequency and repeat buying within a given period (Uncles et al., 2003), although a broad range exists. Indeed, Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) identify 33 measures of behavioural loyalty, captured within five main groups and which are still evident in current research. These focus on: proportion of purchases of a given brand (e.g. Copeland, 1923; Cunningham, 1956) the sequence in which brands are purchased (e.g. Brody and Cunningham, 1968; McConnell, 1968); probability of purchase (e.g. Grover and Srinivasan, 1987; 1992); two or more of these measures (Sheth, 1968; Carman, 1970); and, finally, miscellaneous measures (Farley, 1964).

In essence, the aim of the literature on behavioural loyalty is to make sense of repeat purchase patterns. The advantage of this approach is that it is based on actual purchases, which directly impact the performance of an organisation (Mellens et al., 1995). On the other hand, because they are founded on the assumption that the act of purchase is itself a manifestation of loyalty, these models lack explanatory power. The probability that a consumer purchases an album from the Irish rock band, U2, for instance, provides no indication of the tenor of loyalty towards the brand, particularly when it is considered that the value provided by art and cultural products is not always utilitarian. Such value in relation to art products may typically be gleaned more from use than from the singular act of purchase. Purchases might be made out of curiosity or as a status symbol, rather than for enjoyment. Conversely, a consumer who purchases U2 albums, engages on an online forum focused on the band and attends every concert, taps into a dimension of loyalty that would be difficult to represent through purchase alone. Thus, while the behavioural notion of loyalty aligns with a traditional view in marketing of a consumer who is a rational, information processing, decision maker, the focus on purchase does not encapsulate all aspects of consumption. Consumption is widely understood to involve "individuals or groups acquiring, using, and/ or disposing of goods, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and wants (Arnould et al., 2004) and therefore includes much more than purchase alone. This definition identifies how through acquisition, use and disposal, consumption ensues. Arguably, loyalty can manifest at each of these stages of consumption and through a variety of practices. One can therefore be loyal even without purchase, as loyalty can ensue through use, as well as disposal, for example by passing on a precious record collection as an heirloom to the next generation.

Behavioural measures provide minimal cues in terms of understanding what influences purchases (e.g. convenience or brand availability) and drives repeat purchases (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). Day (1969) argues that 'spuriously loyal customers' lack attachments to brand attributes and so can easily be attracted by brands offering better deals. Moreover, apparent behavioural loyalty might actually be an instance of the 'lock-in' effect where consumers become dependent on a single vendor and are unable to switch without incurring substantial costs (Eurich and Burtscher, 2014). Although desirable to firms because it secures recurrent revenues, the lock-in effect puts consumers at a disadvantage by restricting their ability to end a relationship that is no longer beneficial (Zauberman, 2003; Farrel and Klemperer., 2007). At a societal level, the ability of large multi-national brands like Coca-Cola, McDonalds and Nike to lock in consumers has attracted criticism with regards to the smothering of local businesses, paying of exploitative wages and cultural imperialism (Holt et al., 2004).

From an interpretive standpoint, categorising consumers as loyal or disloyal based on purchase alone masks the full range of meanings and values that might exist in these consumer-brand relationships (Hammond et al., 1996, Odin et al., 2001). In recognising these limitations, some scholars have moved towards an attitudinal approach.

Attitudinal Brand Loyalty

Six necessary conditions of brand loyalty are identified by Jacoby and Kyner (1973) in their critique of a unidimensional behavioural approach to brand loyalty. These are "that brand loyalty is (1) the biased (i.e., non-random), (2) behavioral response (i.e., purchase), (3) expressed overtime, (4) by some decision-making unit, (5) with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and (6) is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) processes" (p.2). This eliminates random purchases from consideration, and provides a conception of loyalty which accounts for the underlying cognitive and emotional dynamics of loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty highlights the psychological commitment of the consumer to a brand purchase (Bennett and Rundle-Thiele, 2002), without necessarily taking purchase behaviour into account (Odin et al., 2001). Understanding the attitude of the consumer is thus considered a pre-requisite for predicting purchase and repeat patronage. For example, the expression of positive feelings of preference, commitment and emotional attachment towards U2, compared to, say, British rock band, Coldplay, might serve as an indicator of loyalty to U2, irrespective of purchase decisions.

Attitudinal loyalty may be measured by enquiring into how much people express a liking for the brand, feel committed to it, will recommend it to others, and have positive beliefs and feelings about it – relative to competing brands (Uncles et al., 2002). These measures, however, rely on consumer declarations rather than on observed behaviour (Odin et al., 2001). Additionally, attempts to measure consumer preference, which is the crux of the attitudinal brand loyalty (Mellens et al., 1995; Pritchard et al., 1999), have not gone far enough in capturing the symbolic and experiential dimensions of loyalty which are so central to contemporary consumption (Fournier and Yao, 1997). For example, no attempt has been made to delve into the types and sources of affect that may constitute or differentiate loyalty responses.

In an effort to address this limitation, Oliver (1997) proposes a multidimensional construct of brand loyalty which manifests as a continuum of phases. First is the cognitive phase, in which information about a brand is assessed in relation to available alternatives and a preference identified based on performance. Loyalty at this stage is of a superficial nature. If use of the brand repeatedly produces feelings of satisfaction, then loyalty begins to take on an affective nature which indicates positive emotions towards the brand. Loyalty here remains susceptible to switching on the part of the consumer. At the conative phase, there is a strong intention to purchase the brand, and finally at the action phase, these good intentions towards the brand are converted into action by way of purchase. Although this sequential view of loyalty has gained wide acceptance (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006) it has met with criticism for being too restrictive in its assumption of a universal linear process (Hinson et al., 2016).

As a further critique of attitudinal loyalty, it may also be argued that a focus on positive attitudes of loyal consumers ignores conditions under which large corporates deploy their market power and resources to erect entry barriers against smaller companies (Chioveanu, 2008; Schmalensee, 1974). For instance, because Google is so popular, consumers are less likely to make use of other search engines, even when they might function better than Google. Additionally, Google's exceptional profits mean that the company has the funds to be dynamically efficient and has less of an incentive to accommodate the price needs of consumers. Developing brand loyalty by establishing a strong brand image also means that a new firm would have to spend significant amounts on advertising (Chioveanu, 2008).

Despite revealing layers of nuance in brand-consumer engagement previously unaccounted for under behavioural conceptualisations, it is clear that attitudinal loyalty has not evaded criticism. Contextual peculiarities which could potentially shape the tone and tenor of loyalty are largely ignored. The dynamic and evolutionary aspects of loyalty, as well as its manifestation within an interactive landscape, are barely captured under attitudinal conceptions. As a result, the meaning dimension, which is likely to increase in relevance with proximity to contextually bound consumers, is glossed over. Consumer research in the experiential and cultural tradition can provide greater depth and insight into the nature of the relationships that exist between individuals and the brands with which they engage.

Towards an Experiential Perspective on Brand Loyalty
To the extent that the experiential dimension has been related to loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Meyer and Schwager, 2007) in marketing and consumer research, it has been done so by way of 'brand experience' and from the perspective of management, rather than from the grounded experience of the consumer. Foremost in this area, Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the idea of the 'experience economy' in which they argued that creating, or staging customer experiences was fundamental for any business. They proposed that experiences are captured within four realms (education, entertainment, escapism and aesthetics) that are evident across two dimensions: (1) active versus passive customer participation, and (2) connection/environmental relationship uniting customers with the happening. However, with the proliferation of the experience economy concept in practice, consumers are moving away from the more 'staged' experiences and are seeking greater authenticity. This requires a more co-creative approach to consumer experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) that in turn necessitates an understanding from the consumers' own perspective. This notwithstanding, the consumers' experience is yet to be incorporated into the brand loyalty research domain.

Looking to consumer research, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) ushered in the experiential view which pays particular attention to the subjective aspects of consumption, emotions, experience and the subconscious. This laid the groundwork for consumer culture research that addresses the socio-cultural, experiential symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). While loyal-like consumer-brand bonds have been captured in passing, through related concepts such as brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), the experiential perspective has yet to be developed and embedded explicitly into the core brand loyalty literature.

An experiential perspective on brand loyalty highlights the sort of consumer-brand engagement that is driven by intense emotions, such as those noted by Fournier (1998) and Oliver (1999). Batra et al. (2012) conceptualise this state as 'brand love', which is less about the sensual component than aspects of adoration and unfailing commitment. They note that brands that are loved go beyond the satisfaction of needs and wants to evoke excitement, thrills and passion, or to embody a sense of who consumers believe they are or want to be – i.e. these brands engage with a consumer's sense of identity. Expressions of object love could also include engrossing, transcendent experiences with the object; sacrifices for the love object (e.g. the cost of acquisition); spirituality (i.e. the love object is connected to significant existential meanings and personal values); or be understood within the context of a relationship (Fournier, 1998).

Any brand could be the object of brand love; however cultural brands, such as arts and sports, have often evoked the most intense relationships with consumers; or their 'fans' as such consumers are known in the cultural sector (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Cultural brands serve as resources for consumers to direct their investment of affect and reveal their 'mattering maps' through their consumption choices (Grossberg, 1992). Mattering maps are like "investment portfolios marked out by different practices, pleasures, meanings, fantasies, desires, relations and so on… Fans give these texts [brands] authority to speak on their behalf. Fans let these things on which affect have been invested organise their emotional and narrative lives and identities." (Grossberg, 1992:57). As a particularly intense and engaged form of consumption, fandom is a prototypical example of an experiential notion of loyalty, because it goes far beyond behaviour and attitude; and taps into the symbolic and meaning-based aspects of consumption. The notion of fandom is therefore an illuminating resource for conceptualising an experiential perspective.

Duffet (2013:2) presents fandom as "the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture". Most attempts at conceptualising fandom evoke a person who has a special relationship with the object of their affection that is characterised by intense levels of commitment, passion and involvement (Ferris and Harris, 2011; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992a). O'Reilly et al. (2013) suggest that being a fan far exceeds the simple act of purchasing. A fan displays broad knowledge about the object of their affection, exhibits a strong emotional attachment to it, and expresses their devotion, even in banal situations, as a consistent, religious-like allegiance (Lobert, 2012). Fans weave their passion for the object into their daily lives in a much stronger and more visible way than is the case with ordinary objects. Thus, while fans are similar to other types of loyal consumers with regard to behaviour and attitudes, what sets fans apart are the degree and nature of their engagement.

There are two features of fan engagement that are particularly informative for developing a notion of experiential brand loyalty. First, although fans can and do enjoy consuming individually, fandom takes on a more powerful form as a collective experience (Harris and Alexander, 1998). Loyal fans typically seek out other similarly highly engaged and passionate fans and congregate within communities online and offline to share consumption experiences (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Fan communities provide structures for collectiveness, centred on the object of their shared admiration. Second, fans engage in semiotic and material productivity (O'Reilly et al., 2013). Fans do not simply receive cultural texts as handed down in a producer-consumer exchange relationship, but rather they co-create them (Alvermann and Hargood, 2000). Depending on the intensity of their engagement, fans are materially productive, reworking and repurposing cultural texts which they share with other fans, thus contributing to the pool of symbolic resources available. They are what Fiske (1992) calls excessive readers, who are not content to simply consume a brand. Instead "fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate" (Jenkins, 1992a:214). They find meaning in cultural texts, drawing on these texts as resources for expressing the self.

The use of the frame 'fan' however, comes with some challenges. Fandom has also often been described and represented in pathological terms (Jenson, 1992), particularly in relation to the inconsistent use of the term and some of its offshoots. Fanaticism and fanatics, for instance are often presented with negative associations (e.g. Doran, 2002; Neale, 2010). Displays of passion and obsession have also traditionally served as fodder for critiques of mass culture that, Duffet (2013:1) argues, presented fans as "passive consumers separated

from cultural production: a tribe of infantilized, alienated, celebrity-following individuals". Nevertheless, according to Gray et al. (2007), this contemptuous understanding of fans as deviant has gradually given way to a celebration of fandom as a normal form of cultural behaviour that comprises a diversity of rich experiences (O'Reilly, et al., 2013). Fans have been repositioned as creatively and politically active (Jenkins 1992b); and where "critics had previously assumed fans to be uncritical, fawning and reverential, fan studies scholarship argued and demonstrated clearly that fans were active, and regularly responded, retorted, poached" (Gray et al., 2017:3). Thus, the use of the term 'fan' is often used to highlight enthusiasm and passion for a target object (Chung et al., 2018), elements which are central to an experiential brand loyalty.

In the next section, the foundations of an experiential perspective on brand loyalty in consumer research are identified and examined.

The Foundations of Experiential Loyalty
We have thus established that, viewed through the lens of fandom, experiential loyalty is a highly engaged and intense form of consumption, embodying the more social and cultural dimensions of consumer-brand interactions, and symbolic and meaning-based aspects. We now explore the central foundations of experiential loyalty in consumer research that distinguish it from other kinds of loyalty. These foundations serve as indicators of the presence of experiential loyalty even though they have not yet been framed in this way. The foundational features are: (1) the centrality of identity (2) the community/socialisation dimension of interaction (3) sacralisation and reverence and (4) consumer-brand relationships.

The Centrality of Identity
Consumer culture theory (CCT), which examines consumption from a social and cultural perspective (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), has been particularly adept at revealing how the marketplace serves as a field of symbolic resources from which consumers, in collaboration with marketers, can shape meaning, and constitute and reconstitute their identity narratives (e.g. Belk, 2004; Kozinets, 2001; McCracken, 1986). McCracken (1986) explicitly highlights a link between identity and brand loyalty, noting that consumers are attracted to brands with appealing and powerful cultural meanings. In contrast, weak brands give off meanings that are inconsistent, unexciting or fragile.

Consumers utilise these brand meanings and discourses in the construction of individual identities (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998) These meanings may be consistent with the intentions of marketers, but individuals can also rework and reconstitute meanings towards their own personal identity goals. In keeping with this logic, the greater the alignment between the consumer's self-identity and the brand's meanings, the more likely it is that the consumer will think the brand will enhance their identity, and, by extension, the greater the extent of their loyalty. In this vein, Kozinets (2001) shows how Star Trek fans co-opt brand meanings and practices to construct a utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised, and invest themselves into this social world in particular ways; Belk (2004) illustrates how men with extreme levels of identification with automobiles read meaning into these possessions that allow them to function as extensions of the self; while Oliver (1999:40) suggests that brands can be "embedded inextricably within some portion of the consumer's psyche, as well as his or her lifestyle". These brands therefore, become part of the consumer's identity: that is, the individual cannot conceive of themselves as whole without them.

The notion that everybody is suitably positioned to engage in identity projects in this way has, however, been criticised for overlooking class distinctions and the relative limits to accessing said resources (Skeggs, 2014), as well as the inability of individuals in some cases to effectively participate in aesthetic performance (Francombe-Webb and Silk, 2016). Consumer identity projects can also be pathological (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Larsen and Nasir, 2009), and identity goals might at times be conflicting and antithetical, necessitating the use of negotiatory mechanisms.

Despite these critiques, experiential loyalty nevertheless embodies a deeper level of engagement than behaviour or attitude, one that is anchored in the centrality of the brand to the identity of the consumer. In this sense, brands and consumption constitute a symbolic resource for the consumers' sense of self. Rather than consuming a brand simply to satisfy an identified need, the experiential consumer weaves the brand into their daily lives in highly visible ways. Experiential loyalty is thus an important concept as it taps into the social and cultural field of resources which brands constitute.

Community/Socialisation Dimension of Interaction
The market has emerged as a dominant cultural organising force through which consumers forge potent bonds (Holt, 1995; Kates, 2002; Olsen, 1993). Indeed, a primary motivation for loyalty can be to enjoy the support, association, and/or attention provided by the group. In these situations, the product or service plays a secondary role to the camaraderie enjoyed by the consumer as part of the community (Oliver, 1999). These ideas are echoed in particular stream of interpretive research into how consumers coalesce around shared consumption pursuits and create various kinds of collectives that are unique, self-sustaining, and self-selected cultural worlds (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). These collectives are grounded in collective identification, and share values, meanings, beliefs, practices and rituals in ways that have implications for an experiential perspective on loyalty.

Schouten and McAlexander, in their (1995) ethnographic account of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle subculture, show how shared meanings allow values and codes to form around brands. The Harley-Davidson 'consumption community' (Boorstin, 1973) serves as a harbour of meanings (outlaw, non-conformist, anti-establishment) that become articulated as a unique style or ideology that can only be maintained through continuous consumption of the brand. The sociality of the group is the primary focus, and necessitates loyalty to the brand to ensure its perpetuity through related traditions and rituals. As Oliver (1999:40) describes it, "in the social consumption village, the consumer submits to the judgment and recommendations of the group collective voluntarily… for the rewards of membership and to reap the friendships and protectiveness of the collective." In a later study of Jeep owners, McAlexander et al. (2002) suggest that a strong brand community can lead to hyper loyalty. Brand communities, therefore, exert pressure on their members to remain loyal to both the collective and the brand.

Groups of consumers who have highly engaged relationships with one another centred on a brand have also been described as cults (Belk and Tumbat, 2005). A cult brand is one "for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication. Its ideology is distinctive and it has a well-defined and committed community. It enjoys exclusive devotion… and its members often become voluntary advocates" (Atkins, 2004: xix). Dionisio et al. (2008: 18) note that one of the main reasons why people join brand cults is because these groups make

them feel at ease among "like others". Belk and Tumbat (2005) compare the extreme devotion of Mac computer fans to a religious-like cult where members employ narratives of the liberating force of Apple Mac computers to deliver users from the 'evil empire' of Microsoft, and confer on the then CEO, Steve Jobs, Christ-like qualities on account of his apparent charisma and vision. Belk and Tumbat (2005) point to the importance of appreciating the meanings consumers attach to such brands, and how these meanings feed into behaviours, loyal or otherwise.

The link between socialisation, brand loyalty, and groups has also been explored using the tribes construct (Cova and Cova, 2002), which draws upon the postmodern notion of fragmented, momentary and enjoyable consumer experiences (Firat, 1992). Cova (1997) notes that the word 'tribes' highlights the re-emergence of traditional values of togetherness and a local sense of identification. Thus, brand/consumer tribes embody shared cultures, common languages, social conventions, and experiences similar to those attributed to traditional tribes. Dionisio et al. (2008:18) suggest that tribes are "a network of heterogeneous persons, in terms of gender, age, sex and income, who are linked by a shared passion or emotion." Cova and Cova (2002) identified the existence of four different roles amongst consumer tribe members. These range from low participation (the Sympathizer), to active Members, to Practitioners and lastly Devotees, who possess high levels of involvement and emotional attachment. It follows then, that brands that link people together as enthusiasts or devotees benefit from a loyal body of fans.

The body of work on communities points to their role as a potential locus for the consumer to situate identity. It also highlights the peer-to-peer dimension of interaction, and the effect this has on the relationship between the consumer and the brand. One of the hallmarks of experiential loyalty is the need to share the enjoyment of the brand with likeminded others. The community thus amplifies existing loyal behaviours and provides avenues and structures through which consumers can read their own meanings into mediated texts and engage in their shared passions.

Sacralisation and Reverence
Moving progressively towards what might be seen as deeper consumer-brand bonds, another strand of loyalty related research employs religious narratives to capture the reverential relationships consumers have with some brands (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). This sheds light on the process by which sacred meaning is invested and divested; how everyday consumer goods and brands get elevated into sacred objects; the sacralisation rituals consumers engage in; and how these affect consumer loyalty.

Along these lines, Belk et al. (1989) introduce the concept of 'sacralisation', as the elevation of mundane, everyday activities, objects and experiences to the status of the sacred, which then facilitate transformative and transcendent religious experiences. They note that the nature and experience of what they describe as sacred consumption may be antithetical to the dominant, more traditional, mono-disciplinary systemic approaches to marketing and loyalty. "Positivist methods are not sympathetic to the mystical and experiential nature of sacredness, but instead are oriented to a different universe of discourse" (Belk et al. 1989: 30). By instead engaging in naturalistic qualitative fieldwork, Belk et al. (1989) succeed in highlighting the talismanic relationship consumers form with certain brands, and also point to the personal meaningfulness and cultural matrix from which loyalty emerges.

Extending this work, Pimentel and Reynolds (2004:1) describe these strong emotional bonds as 'consumer devotion': a "religious fervour…a level of loyalty so intense that the loyalty survives poor product performance, scandal, bad publicity, high prices, and absence of promotional efforts". Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007) note that the use of the term 'devotion' highlights the intimately personal nature of the relationship between the consumer and their chosen brand. Common behaviours of devoted consumers identified by Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) include rituals, collecting and displaying, recruiting, word-of-mouth recommendations, personal sacrifices, and pilgrimages. Relatedly, Rook (1985) focuses attention on the role of rituals in consumption. Rituals are expressive, symbolic activities that take on an episodic nature. These activities, carried out with seriousness over time and permeating daily life, imbue the brand with personal meaning in the eyes of the devoted consumer.

Religious themes have been applied not only to secular consumer culture, but also to fan cultures. Noting Elvis Presley's continued prominence years after his death, Doss (1999:90) argues that expressions of fandom for the late singer resemble a religion, as evidenced by the creation of elaborate shrines in fans' homes, and annual pilgrimages made to Graceland, Presley's home in Memphis. This is a journey which often entails considerable sacrifice, scrimping and saving on the part of devoted fans, in order to "indulge their love, loss and loneliness for Elvis". She argues that fans rework and reinvent Elvis's image "to mesh with their personal and social preferences". In doing so, fans form strong, quasi-religious attachments to Elvis driven by their need to satisfy spiritual longings in an age when traditional forms of religion are felt to be declining in relevance.

Religiosity is important in highlighting the spiritual meanings individuals attach to their consumption activities. We might ponder, however, whether the metaphor has been pushed too far. Duffet (2003) argues that the premise that a thing is a religion because it looks like one is weak, since activities that are interpreted as religious or transcendent are not always understood as such by those involved. Besides, religious resources are already readily available to consumers irrespective of their culture. Religion and spirituality are themselves popular products (Einstein 2008). This means that religious narratives are in wide circulation. It is therefore not a question of religiosity being an attribute of a reified brand community, but of religious discursive resources being contextually drawn upon by consumers in expressing their experiences with certain brands (O'Reilly and Doherty, 2006). Nevertheless, religious metaphors capture an intensity and level of brand loyalty that goes completely unnoticed under behavioural conceptualisations of brand loyalty, and barely registers under attitudinal conceptualisations.

Consumer-Brand Relationships
The use of a relational perspective in understanding brand-consumer connections (Fournier, 1998) is based on the premise that brands possess human-like qualities that can facilitate self-expression (Aaker, 2012). Relationship theory in the brand-consumer context relies on the assumption that the brand is a viable relationship partner, playing a proactive role in driving the exchange process and evoking feelings of loyalty. To facilitate this process, brands are vitalised and humanised through a process of anthropomorphisation (Brown, 1991).

Fournier (1998) suggests that anthropomorphisation could occur through different mechanisms such as invoking the likeness of a person, as in the use of spokespeople in advertising; the strong brand-person associations that occur as the brand takes on a personal relation to a past other e.g. "the brand of air freshener grandmother kept in her bathroom" (p

345); or through the complete anthromorphisation of the brand object itself by transferring emotions and motivations to it. This inclination speaks to a need on the part of consumers to facilitate human-like interactions with the non-material world and is likely to be most visible when there is a match between the individual's self-image and the brand's supposed personality. The use of a relationship perspective suggests that once a significant relationship is established, the meaning of the brand becomes inseparable from the value of the product (Fournier, 1998).

Pioneered by Fournier's work, research on consumer-brand relationships has expanded to include a range of other perspectives. Accordingly, Escalas and Betteman (2005; 2009) focus on reference groups such as celebrities as a source of brand meaning in the construction and communication of the self; Albert et al. (2013) explore the notion of 'brand passion', which they describe as an intense feeling held by a consumer toward a brand, which predisposes the consumer to a close relationship with the partner (brand), and physiological arousal from possessing or consuming the brand; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian (2011) characterise 'brand romance' as a relationship observable where the primary motive for engaging with the brand is stimulation through novelty, excitement, and arousal; Walsh et al. (2010:78) look at 'brand commitment', "the enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with the brand"; and Batra et al. (2012) focus on 'brand love' as mentioned earlier. The relationship perspective thus underpins experiential loyalty by highlighting the personal symbolic meanings consumers in different contexts associate with particular brands.

The normalisation of loyal consumer-brand relationships has, however, also been met with some distrust. Molesworth et al. (2017) for instance, assert that the largely taken-for-granted idea of mutually beneficial loyal relationships with brands needs to be questioned. Consumers might remain in brand loyal relations despite unsatisfactory outcomes, and brands promote dysfunctional relationships to the extent that these result in continuing sales. Loyal consumers have been shown to display negative emotions by boycotting or retaliating against brands (Grégoire et al., 2009) or engaging in negative word-of-mouth by venting online (Kähr et al., 2016). Consumers might also be stuck in dependent relationships with brands (Lin and Sung, 2014). Loyalty schemes such as vouchers or club cards, for instance, can be manipulative, engineered to retain consumers in long-term relationships in the pursuit of profits.

Patterson and O'Malley (2006:10) accuse proponents of the relationship perspective of "stretching the inter-relationship metaphor too far". Rather than operating as an analogy or metaphor that enhances understanding of the complex connection between two constructs, much marketing scholarship has presented the relationship between people and brands as if it operates almost in a literal sense (O'Malley and Tynan, 1999). Instead, Patterson and O'Malley (2006) recommend a brand community perspective that acknowledges the links between consumers themselves and understands the role brands play in facilitating these links. These critiques notwithstanding, the relationship perspective, with its appreciation of the meanings consumers draw from brands with which they align, can more clearly be accounted for under experiential loyalty than is currently the case under behavioural and attitudinal perspectives.

Conceptualising Experiential Brand Loyalty
Through the rich and diverse work done within consumer research, brand loyal consumers have been shown to draw deep meanings from the brands with which they engage (Fournier and Yao, 1997), which are anchored in identity (Kozinets, 2001; Belk, 2004) and community

(Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Tumbat, 2005). Rather than solely responding to the actions of marketers, consumers have been shown to be materially active and productive, reworking and negotiating meaning in brands through their engagement with, and consumption of those brands (Kates 2002; Belk and Tumbat, 2005). The factors highlighted as foundations of experiential loyalty – the centrality of identity, community, sacralisation and reverence, and consumer-brand relationships are indicators of experiential loyalty as covered in relation to a range of topics within consumer research. These features do not all have to be present at the same time however. The features that manifest are solely dependent on the subjective meanings given to particular brands by particular consumers in particular contexts. For example, consumers may engage with meaning individually or they may interact within communities of interests. In either case, the presence of the features highlighted serve as an indicator of the tone of engagement with the brand which one might describe as experientially loyal. This attention to consumers' subjective, symbolic, meaning-based and active engagements is what we refer to as 'experiential loyalty', and this perspective is outlined in Table 1.

The experientially loyal consumer is thus defined as one who: *is sufficiently invested in a brand to find personal symbolic meanings in the act of consuming that brand and who engages around these meanings, individually or within the context of communities of similarly engaged consumers in the pursuit of identity projects.* While behavioural loyalty highlights purchase metrics which can easily be measured (brand share, proportion and probability of purchase), and attitudinal loyalty highlights the positive thoughts and feelings expressed towards the brand relative to other brands, experiential loyalty complements these perspectives by focusing on the underlying symbolic meanings that drive sustained loyal behaviour. Experiential loyalty is viewed through the eyes of the consumer, approaching brand loyalty from the diverse social and cultural contexts within which they reside.

Feature ∨	Perspective >	Behavioural Loyalty	Attitudinal Loyalty	Experiential Loyalty
Focus		Repeat purchases	Brand preference, Psychological commitment	Meaning, Consumer-brand engagement
Nature		Functional	Functional	Experiential, Meaningful, Symbolic
Measures/Indicators		Sequence of purchase, Brand share, Proportion of purchase, Purchase frequency, Probability	Positive feelings, Beliefs relative to other brands, Purchase	Centrality of brand to identity and/or as a locus of community/socialisation, Intensity of engagement
Consumer Perceived as		Passive, Responding to marketing action	Passive	Active, Materially productive and creative, Constantly reworking and negotiating meaning in brands/cultural texts through consumption

Managerial/Marketing Potential	Measurable action, Directly related to performance	Consumer willingness to commit, Word of mouth promotions	Co-creation of brand meaning and experiences through consumers material and semiotic productivity
Locus	Market Centred	Market Centred	Consumer centred, Social and cultural context of consumer
Paradigm	Positivist	Positivist	Interpretivist > Critical

Table 1: Perspectives on brand loyalty

Both behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty are embedded in the ontology and epistemology of positivism, in that they are based on the assumptions that reality is objective and singular, humans are reactive, and that causes of behaviour can be determined. This aligns with the field of consumer research more broadly, which has historically been dominated by the positivist paradigm (Murray and Ozanne 1991). Where a positivist paradigm enables the identification of attitudes, behaviours and decision-making processes, experiential loyalty draws upon an interpretivist paradigm that assumes reality is socially constructed and multiple, humans are social and proactive, and that behaviour and knowledge is context specific. This facilitates an understanding of the deep meanings that frame and underlie these behaviours, as has largely been applied in culturally-focused consumer research. In this way, experiential loyalty bridges the gap between brand loyalty and experiential consumption literatures. As such, the concept of experiential loyalty can be put to use by focusing on the unique ways particular consumers or groups of consumers articulate or make sense of their relationship with a brand. Experiential loyalty is activated by its subjectivity; by locating *meaningful* expression in the lived experiences of particular consumers. Whereas behavioural loyalty is articulated by action i.e. purchase, and attitudinal loyalty is operationalised by rational preference in the midst of choice, experiential loyalty is brought to life by symbolic meanings as understood by consumers. Such an ontological position also opens up space for a critical paradigm and approaches that consider issues of power in the marketer – brand – consumer relationship, such as can be observed in some of the critiques of brand loyalty outlined earlier (e.g. the lock-in effect) and which encourage us to shift our point of view from that of the manager, to include the experiences of the consumer and of other interested parties.

Rooted in consumer culture literature, experiential loyalty draws heavily from the interpretive paradigm where qualitative methods are dominant. Criteria for 'measurement' are therefore not as easy to pin down as might be the case from a behavioural/positivist perspective of brand loyalty. Nonetheless, the following could serve as indicators of the presence and strength of such loyalty in relation to the brand in question: (1) the nature of alignment between the brand and consumers' sense of identity as understood by the consumer; and (2) the ability of these identity links to foster community interactions with likeminded others.

Using the example of the U2 brand, indicators of experiential loyalty would be the meanings the band holds for its fans, both individually and collectively constructed. These could include, for example, the connections fans make with U2's music and transcendent religious experiences, U2's political activism and advocacy for the less privileged, or a perceived sense

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of U2's authenticity. There may be as many, if not more, meanings as there are consumers making the assessment. These meanings are the personal symbolic markers that keep consumers grounded in behavioural and attitudinally loyal behaviour towards the band. Personal meanings also point to a greater sense of alignment between the identity of the consumer and the brand. These meanings are negotiated and reworked as consumers engage with other consumers of the band within communities of interest, such as online forums and social media.

Discussion

Much brand loyalty is currently explained in the literature by prevailing behavioural and attitudinal perspectives. The tendency for conventional research to lean towards the needs of management to measure the behaviour of consumers that has a direct impact on business performance i.e. purchase, however, has meant that experiential/interpretivist perspectives have played a less prominent role in the brand loyalty literature. Thus, the experiential aspects of brand loyalty, though acknowledged in consumer research more broadly, have remained underrepresented within the core brand loyalty canon.

Abandoning behavioural and attitudinal perspectives is not the aim of this paper, but enriching the notion of loyalty with greater attention to its experiential aspects could be beneficial for both scholars and practitioners. In the first place, experiential loyalty would serve as an organising perspective for meaning-based research focused on the consumer within the brand loyalty research tradition, thus opening up space for interpretivist research on brand loyalty. This would relate brand loyalty explicitly to some of its touchpoints in consumer research, thereby adding depth and nuance of understanding to the study of loyal behaviours by recognising the salience of identity, subcultures of consumption, brand community etc. Second, cultural meanings are multiple and fragmented (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and emphasise the intermingling of consumption traditions. As such, consumer culture theorists situate the study of loyalty in diverse consumption contexts. Experiential loyalty could extend existing theoretical formulations by providing avenues to ask questions such as:

- What does being experientially loyal to a brand feel like?
- How is this experience of consuming a brand to which one is loyal different from consuming a brand which one is not?
- How does the consumer express loyalty throughout the whole consumption process?
- How do experientially loyal consumers react when the brand does something problematic?
- What meanings in relation to this brand are being circulated and negotiated by consumer communities?

Answering questions on experiential loyalty necessitate focusing attention on the context wherein consumption happens (e.g. the stadium, the Harley Davidson meetup, the Star Trek fan forum). This broadens the investigative focus of brand loyalty to include the consumers' lived experience, resulting in more nuanced and contextually sensitive understandings of the underlying symbolic markers that underpin loyalty. These consumer-focused experiences also have implications for segmentation and targeting activities, advertising and brand management.

Given the limitations of the various perspectives on brand loyalty outlined in this paper, it is essential for research to embrace a holistic approach. Brands, as they function in the minds of

consumers, are dynamic and constantly evolving. Accordingly, by focusing on the consumer, experiential loyalty captures this dynamic nature of brands as lived, experienced and negotiated, thus allowing for a deeper engagement with brand loyalty. For brand managers, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, brands as experienced by consumers may draw on the symbolic and expressive brand attributes put forward through official communications. On the other hand, however, negotiated meanings may destabilise and contest the otherwise stable brand meanings preferred by the producer or brand manager. There is already acknowledgement of the fact that consumers increasingly contribute to shaping brand meaning (e.g. Cova and White 2010; Thompson et al., 2006). In addition, marketing scholars have highlighted the role played by consumer groupings and interactions in facilitating and accelerating these negotiatory and co-creative endeavours (e.g. Fournier and Avery, 2011; Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). However, brand loyalty research has been slow to accommodate these changing dynamics, focusing instead on brand preferences and consumer buying behaviours.

Experiential loyalty expands the research focus not only to symbolic meanings, but also to the negotiation and management of these meanings within communities of interest, thus expressly linking loyal behaviours to embedded meanings that drive and sustain them. Experiential loyalty makes visible different material features that form part of the consumption assemblages (Rokka and Canniford, 2016) in which brands that attract loyal followings feature. For brand managers, this creates questions not only of how to integrate divergent circulating symbolic meanings around a brand, but also how to maintain a consistent brand identity. This suggests a need for future research on brand loyalty to examine the symbolic and expressive touchpoints through which consumers engage with brands and organise their emotional and narrative lives and identities. Having said this, a note of caution might be appropriate. Witness, for instance, the promise of the firm Fanalytica Ltd to analyse "client and public data sets" from social media, thereby enabling client organisations to "shift a fan from being merely entertained to deeply invested" by identifying "conversations that will change fan behaviour" (*fanalytica.ai* – website accessed 25 July 2018). The firm seductively promises "great audience experiences", but does it have the consumer's interest at heart? An experiential perspective also opens the way for critical questions about power relations, such as this, to be addressed.

Conclusion
Despite the recent attention within marketing research to 'experiential consumption' and 'consumer experience' (Carù and Cova 2003; Holbrook 2001) as counter to the narrative of a rational, utility seeking consumer, prior perspectives on brand loyalty do not adequately account for experience. As a result, the primarily subjective place of affect, emotions and meanings within the brand loyalty research domain has largely been ignored. By extending the conceptualisation of brand loyalty, we account for the place of experience within the brand loyalty research domain. We advance theorising in this area by providing a template for approaching the subject of loyalty from an interpretive perspective which focuses on the meanings that shape consumer experiences. This perspective takes a more nuanced view of the relationship between brand meanings and the cultural milieu within which they develop, and situates these relationships within a dynamic marketplace context. We also articulate the features of an experiential perspective on brand loyalty, and set it alongside existing perspectives as a complementary position that bridges the gap between the experiential consumption and brand loyalty literatures (See Table 1).

Fandom has been a useful concept in pointing us to the foundations of experiential brand loyalty in consumer research. However, fandom remains a distinct concept as a subjective term mostly used in the sports and cultural industries to capture the highly engaged and passionate relationship between consumers and certain brands. Although experiential brand loyalty is particularly visible when considering 'fan' brands which usually have strong aesthetic or hedonistic components, any brand can be considered from an experiential perspective because of the element of subjectivity. Rather than focusing on particular types of products or services, we focus on the brand-consumer interaction in terms of its ability to engage the consumers' subjectivity. In a social-constructionist sense, as long as the brand is linked to the subjectivity of the consumer, it is variable and open to experiential examination. Marketing theory and practice has been on a steady trajectory towards increased subjectivity, as exemplified by the growth of relationship marketing and customisation for instance. The movement towards understanding subjective brand-consumer interactions is an invitation to make greater use of the experiential perspective on brand loyalty, irrespective of the type of brand being considered. More broadly, experiential loyalty is an organising perspective for analysing any brand in any sector that attracts intense engagement, and is tied to identity and community.

The notion of experiential loyalty provides a useful lens for approaching experience and the meaning dimension beyond the context of brand loyalty. Although contemporary marketing research presents a range of opportunities to take advantage of the experiential view of the consumer (e.g. relationship marketing), proponents of the rational, utility seeking consumer and the hedonistic/ experiential consumer view are content with focusing on brands, situations and questions that speak to their particular corner of the utilitarian – experiential spectrum. Addis and Holbrook (2001) note, however, that a new version of marketing is emerging, which focuses on the customers' experience in a holistic and subjective way. Marketing practice and scholarship must therefore acknowledge this changing environment, and proactively embrace the conception of experience more readily, irrespective of particular inclinations. Experiential loyalty as articulated in this paper provides a means of analysing brands as part of any marketplace offering towards achieving an understanding of the meaning dimension as an underpinning driver of consumer behaviour.

In approaching brand loyalty, if we are interested in consumer purchases, then a frame we may use is behavioural loyalty. If we wish to understand what consumers think of a brand, then the attitudinal perspective comes into view. However, if we are interested in how consumers *experience* brands then we are now able to adopt the frame of experiential loyalty. Experiential loyalty does not seek a 'better' understanding of loyalty, nor is it a rejection of the classic approaches. Rather it is a different and complementary approach that enhances contextual clarity in our understanding of brand loyalty and what those brands mean for apparently 'loyal' consumers.

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