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HOSPITALITY

INFLUENCE OF BRAND IDENTITY ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN SELECTED FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty in selected fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Methodology: A pragmatist convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used. Five Nairobi sub-counties formed study clusters, with twelve franchised or chained fast-food restaurants randomly selected from each cluster. Data comprised 387 usable customer questionnaires and 31 supervisor interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and regression, while interviews were analysed thematically and triangulated with survey findings.

Findings: Brand identity recorded an overall mean of 3.71 (SD = 1.141). Brand uniqueness (M = 4.06), distinctiveness (M = 3.96) and trust in consistent quality (M = 3.92) were strongest, while emotional brand connection was weakest (M = 3.15). Brand identity was positively associated with customer loyalty ($r = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$) and remained significant in regression ($B = 0.275$, $\beta = 0.268$, $t = 7.184$, $p < 0.001$); H_{04} was rejected. Supervisor interviews highlighted brand trust and promise delivery, halal certification credibility, social-media reputation and loyalty recognition as mechanisms supporting customer commitment.

Conclusion: Brand identity has a statistically significant positive correlation with customer loyalty. The level of trust, reputation, distinctiveness, and uniqueness is relatively high, while the depth of emotional connection is less developed. When actual restaurant experiences consistently verify the brand promise, brand credibility is enhanced.

Recommendation: Fast-food operators should align brand promises with actual experience, strengthen emotional brand connection, communicate credible halal certification where relevant, and actively manage social-media reputation to protect trust and customer commitment.

Keywords: *Brand Identity, Customer Loyalty, Brand Trust, Fast-Food Restaurants, Nairobi County, Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

Brand identity has become an important basis of competition in contemporary hospitality markets because customers increasingly evaluate restaurant brands before, during, and after the actual dining encounter. In fast-food settings, customers not only purchase a meal but also interact with a recognizable brand promise that communicates expected quality, reliability, values, and distinctiveness. Jin et al. (2016) observed that the image customers hold of a restaurant shapes their evaluation of the establishment and can influence future patronage. Similarly, Keller (2018) argued that strong brands create distinctive associations in customers' minds, making competing alternatives easier to compare and preferred brands easier to recall.

In restaurant markets, brand identity refers to the attachment, emotions, meanings, recognition, and trust that customers associate with a particular restaurant brand (Jin et al., 2016). These associations develop through cumulative experiences, external communication, reputation, visual identity, and the consistency with which a restaurant delivers on its brand promise. Aaker (1996) explained that strong brands are built around differentiated associations that help customers interpret value and reduce uncertainty. For fast-food restaurants, where competing outlets frequently offer comparable menu categories, a clear and credible brand identity can therefore provide a meaningful basis for differentiation.

Brand trust is especially important because customers often rely on familiar restaurant brands to reduce the perceived risk associated with repeated dining decisions. Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016) described brand commitment as a relational outcome that develops when a brand is perceived as credible and dependable. Similarly, Sirdeshmukh et al. (2015) linked trust with perceived value and loyalty within relational exchanges. In practical terms, customers who trust a restaurant brand to deliver consistent quality are more likely to maintain confidence in the establishment, overlook occasional minor shortcomings, and sustain their relationship with the brand over time.

Brand identity also operates through emotional attachment and reputation. Han et al. (2017) showed that restaurant revisit intentions are shaped by accumulated experiences that influence customers' future behavioural responses, while Espinosa et al. (2018) demonstrated that restaurant brand image, satisfaction, and loyalty contribute to continued patronage. Emotional connection is

commercially important because it moves the customer-brand relationship beyond simple recognition toward stronger psychological commitment. A positive reputation further strengthens this relationship by providing social reassurance that the brand can be trusted to deliver a consistent and predictable experience.

Nairobi County provides a relevant setting for examining this relationship because it contains a high concentration of franchised and chained fast-food restaurants operating in commercially active areas and serving customers with multiple brand alternatives. Kenya's food and drink market has continued to expand, intensifying competition among both local and international restaurant brands for repeat patronage (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In such an environment, the ability of a restaurant to differentiate itself, maintain customer trust, and convert brand recognition into sustained loyalty is strategically important. Brand identity may therefore play an important role in determining whether customers continue to prefer one restaurant brand over competing alternatives.

Previous Kenyan studies have examined customer satisfaction, service-related attributes, and the consumption of hospitality products; however, limited objective-specific evidence exists on the relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty within franchised and chained fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County (Gachuru, 2017; Wambui, 2019). Much of the existing restaurant-brand literature has also originated from established Western and Asian markets, creating a contextual gap in the Kenyan fast-food sector. Consequently, there remains a need for localized empirical evidence on how brand identity relates to customer loyalty within Nairobi County. This article therefore isolates brand identity from the broader meal-experience study and examines its relationship with customer loyalty in the Nairobi County fast-food context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County compete in a market where customers can choose among numerous local and international brands offering broadly similar meal categories. This competitive density makes customer loyalty difficult to sustain through product availability or location alone. Restaurant operators invest in advertising, visual identity, digital communication and promotional campaigns to differentiate themselves, yet these efforts do not automatically create durable customer commitment when the brand promise is not consistently matched by customers' actual

experience. The practical problem is therefore the conversion of brand recognition and reputation into repeat patronage, recommendation, trust and resistance to competing offers.

The empirical problem is that existing evidence does not sufficiently explain the extent to which brand identity, considered through uniqueness, distinctiveness, trust, reputation, emotional attachment, brand connection and brand-experience alignment, is associated with customer loyalty in Nairobi County's franchised and chained fast-food restaurants. Gachuru (2017) examined e-services and customer satisfaction, while Wambui (2019) focused on offer quality in franchised restaurants. These studies did not isolate brand identity as the central explanatory construct in a mixed-methods analysis of customer loyalty. The present article addresses this gap by examining whether stronger brand identity is significantly associated with higher customer loyalty and by using supervisor evidence to explain the brand mechanisms underlying that association.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To determine the relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty in selected fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty in selected fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical foundation of the brand identity-customer loyalty relationship and reviews the objective-specific literature on brand identity, customer loyalty, and the empirical association between the two constructs. The review retains the dimensions used in the thesis and concludes with the conceptual framework tested in this article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The principal theoretical anchor for the article is the Gap Model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). The model explains service-quality problems as discrepancies among customer expectations, organizational understanding of those expectations, service specifications, actual delivery and external communications. Its relevance to brand identity lies particularly in Gap 4, which concerns the difference between what an organization communicates externally and

what it actually delivers. In a fast-food restaurant, advertising, digital communication, menu imagery and brand positioning create expectations that customers subsequently compare with the experienced meal and service encounter.

Gap 4 offers a direct explanation for the alignment of brand experience and brand trust. The discrepancy that arises when a restaurant conveys a commitment to consistent quality, reliability, or a unique experience but delivers a product that is significantly inferior can erode customer loyalty and erode trust. Conversely, when the brand promise is substantiated by the actual experience, the consistency of the brand serves to fortify credibility and solidify the brand meaning that customers associate with the brand (Keller, 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Consequently, the theory posits that brand identity is a relationship between the meaning communicated and the performance experienced, rather than a logo or promotional message alone.

The model is also beneficial for the interpretation of the reputational and emotional dimensions of brand identity. Repeated alignment between external communication and lived experience enables customers to cultivate a cohesive brand image, attachment, and confidence. Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016) demonstrate that credible service brands are more likely to generate commitment, while Jin et al. (2016) underscore that customer perceptions formed through experience are a significant factor in restaurant image. The Gap Model elucidates the reasons why uniqueness and distinctiveness captivate the attention of customers in this article, while trust, reputation, and promise delivery determine whether that recognition evolves into loyalty.

BRAND IDENTITY

Brand identity can be understood as the set of meanings and associations that distinguish a restaurant in the minds of customers. Aaker (1996) treats identity as the distinctive character a brand seeks to establish and maintain, while Keller (2018) emphasizes the network of associations through which customers recognize, interpret and evaluate a brand. In restaurant settings, these associations are formed through tangible and intangible cues including the name, reputation, perceived quality, communication, accumulated service experience and emotional relationship with the establishment.

A distinctive identity reduces substitutability because the customer can recognize a particular restaurant as different from competing alternatives. Jin et al. (2016) found that perceived restaurant

image influences customer evaluation and behavioural outcomes, supporting the view that brand differentiation contributes to future patronage. Distinctiveness is particularly important in fast-food markets where menus can be similar and switching costs are low. A recognizable and unique identity gives the customer a reason to prefer one restaurant even when competitors offer comparable categories of products.

Brand trust represents the customer's confidence that the restaurant will deliver reliably and with integrity. Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016) identify trust and commitment as central relational features of service brands, while Sirdeshmukh et al. (2015) show that trust contributes to value and loyalty in ongoing exchanges. In a fast-food setting, trust is strengthened by repeated consistency between the restaurant's promise and the experience customers receive. A trusted brand therefore reduces uncertainty and makes the decision to return less risky.

Reputation is closely related to trust but reflects the broader social evaluation of the restaurant. Reputation is built through customers' accumulated experiences, word-of-mouth, public communication and increasingly digital commentary. Keller (2018) argues that brand knowledge develops through repeated exposure to information and experience, meaning that both favourable and unfavourable signals can shape future choice. For fast-food operators, reputation management is consequently not separate from brand identity; it is one of the channels through which customers decide whether a brand remains worthy of preference.

Emotional attachment describes the affective bond that goes beyond cognitive recognition. Customers may know, trust and prefer a brand without yet developing a strong emotional connection to it. Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016) note that commitment is built over time through repeated credible encounters, while Chiou and Droge (2016) show that satisfaction and trust interact within loyalty relationships. Emotional attachment is therefore expected to develop more gradually than recognition or reputation because it depends on a sustained pattern of experiences that acquire personal meaning for the customer.

Brand-experience alignment concerns whether the quality experienced by the customer matches what the restaurant brand represents. This dimension is theoretically important because it operationalizes Gap 4 of the Gap Model. A restaurant can create strong expectations through external communication, but failure to meet those expectations creates a credibility deficit that

weakens the brand. The present study therefore measured brand identity through eight indicators covering unique identity, distinctiveness, trust in consistent quality, reputation, emotional attachment, the match between food quality and brand representation, quality association, and strong brand connection.

CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Customer loyalty combines a favourable attitude toward a restaurant with behavioural willingness to continue the relationship. Gikonyo et al. (2018) describe loyalty in hospitality as the relationship between relative attitude and repeat business behaviour. Kandampully et al. (2018) further emphasize that hospitality loyalty includes revisit intention, recommendation, preference and resistance to competitor alternatives. Loyalty is therefore broader than repeated visits because a customer may return out of convenience without possessing genuine commitment to the brand.

Attitudinal loyalty is reflected in preference, attachment and willingness to remain with a restaurant despite competitive offers. Behavioural loyalty is expressed through repeat patronage, frequent visits and active recommendation. Ali et al. (2018) show that positive experiences can strengthen both satisfaction and loyalty, while Han et al. (2018) identify brand-related factors as important drivers of continued restaurant patronage. The distinction is relevant because customers can express high preference and trust while still distributing their purchases among several competing restaurants.

For restaurant operators, loyalty is strategically valuable because it stabilizes demand and transforms satisfied customers into advocates. Positive word-of-mouth and recommendation reduce the cost of attracting new customers, while resistance to competing offers protects the restaurant's market position. The present article measures customer loyalty through eight indicators that capture continued loyalty despite competition, tolerance of occasional shortcomings, preferred choice, attachment, repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth, active recommendation and comparative visit frequency.

BRAND IDENTITY AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

The conceptual relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty is based on the proposition that customers remain committed to restaurant brands that are recognizable, distinctive, trustworthy and consistent with their promises. Jin et al. (2016) established that

perceived restaurant image has important behavioural consequences, while Keller (2018) argues that favourable, strong and distinctive brand associations increase the likelihood that customers will choose and remain attached to a brand. In fast-food settings, where competing alternatives are readily available, the strength of these associations can influence whether customers simply recognize a brand or actively prefer it.

Brand trust is one of the clearest mechanisms linking identity with loyalty. Sirdeshmukh et al. (2015) connect trust to value and loyalty in relational exchanges, and Chiou and Droge (2016) demonstrate that trust operates within satisfaction-loyalty relationships. When customers believe that a restaurant brand will deliver consistent quality, the perceived risk of returning decreases. Trust can therefore support repeat patronage and recommendation even when the market offers many alternatives.

Brand image and emotional attachment provide complementary pathways. Espinosa et al. (2018) show that restaurant brand image and satisfaction help explain why customers continue to return, while Han et al. (2017) link accumulated restaurant evaluations to revisit intentions. Emotional attachment can make loyalty more resilient because the restaurant becomes personally meaningful rather than merely functional. However, strong emotional connection usually requires repeated positive experiences and can lag behind cognitive recognition and trust.

Despite these established relationships, the available evidence is dominated by studies outside the Kenyan fast-food context. Wambui (2019) and Gachuru (2017) provide useful Kenyan hospitality evidence but do not isolate the brand identity-loyalty relationship using the dimensions examined here. The specific gap is therefore whether brand uniqueness, distinctiveness, trust, reputation, attachment, brand connection and quality-brand alignment collectively relate to customer loyalty among customers of franchised and chained fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this article positions brand identity as the independent variable and customer loyalty as the dependent variable. Brand identity is represented by unique identity and distinctiveness, brand trust and reputation, emotional attachment and connection, and the alignment between experienced quality and what the brand represents. Customer loyalty is reflected in repeat patronage, preferred choice, positive word-of-mouth, recommendation and

resistance to competing offers. The framework tests a direct positive relationship from brand identity to customer loyalty, consistent with Gap 4 of the Gap Model and the empirical literature reviewed above.

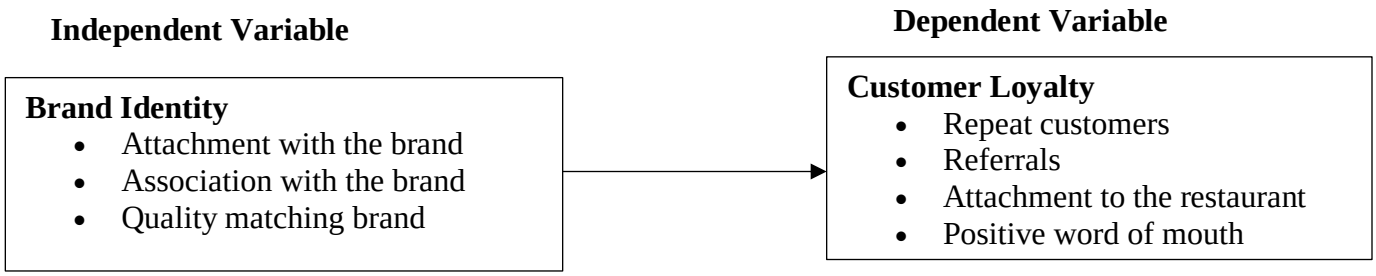


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a pragmatist philosophy and a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. A multi-stage sampling approach was used to select 60 franchised and chained fast-food restaurants from five Nairobi County sub-counties, with 420 customers and 60 supervisors targeted. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Brand identity and customer loyalty demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.805 and 0.751, respectively. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically and triangulated with the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Taber, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From 420 distributed questionnaires, 387 were usable, a 92.1% customer response rate. The supervisor response rate was 51.7%, with 31 of 60 targeted supervisors interviewed. 55.3% of customers were men and 44.7% women. 46-55 years (29.2%) and 18-25 years (26.9%) predominated. Bachelors (38.8%) and certificates or diplomas (26.1%) were the most common degrees. The largest occupational group was self-employed and business owners (31.3%), while 34.4% earned between Ksh 50,001 and Ksh 100,000 regularly. The sample represented a broad urban market that could assess restaurant brand loyalty and identity.

Descriptive Statistics for Brand Identity

Brand identity was assessed using eight statements on a five-point scale. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation for each statement.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Brand Identity (n=387)

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	SD
I prefer this brand because of its unique identity	7.2	10.6	7.2	19.1	55.8	4.06	1.306
This brand stands out among other fast-food restaurants	7.2	8.3	10.1	30.2	44.2	3.96	1.236
I trust this restaurant brand to deliver consistent quality	3.4	5.7	11.6	54.0	25.3	3.92	0.946
This restaurant brand has a good reputation	3.6	9.0	10.3	61.5	15.5	3.76	0.944
I feel emotionally attached to this restaurant brand	10.9	11.4	11.9	23.0	42.9	3.76	1.388
The food quality matches what the brand represents	4.1	15.2	8.0	63.0	9.6	3.59	0.995
I associate this brand with high-quality food and service	7.8	10.3	16.3	58.7	7.0	3.47	1.031
I have a strong connection with this restaurant brand	11.6	26.4	11.9	35.9	14.2	3.15	1.280
Average						**3.71**	**1.141**

The overall brand identity mean of 3.71 (SD = 1.141) shows that customers generally liked the identities of the fast-food restaurants they patronised, but the variation across items shows that not every dimension was equally developed. Unique identity had the highest mean (M = 4.06, SD = 1.306), with 55.8% strongly agreeing that they preferred the restaurant. Brand distinctiveness followed closely (M = 3.96, SD = 1.236), with 44.2% strongly agreeing and 30.2% agreeing that the brand stood out from fast-food restaurants. These findings support the idea that brand preference in competitive restaurant markets depends on differentiation (Aaker, 1996; Jin et al., 2016). Also highly rated was trust in consistent quality (M = 3.92, SD = 0.946). Most respondents (79.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that the restaurant brand would deliver consistent quality. Trust has a lower standard deviation than emotional items, suggesting more consensus. This matches Sirdeshmukh et al. (2015), who link trust to value and loyalty, and Keller (2018), who emphasises brand meaning through consistency.

Both reputation and emotional attachment had a mean of 3.76, but response patterns differed. The standard deviation of reputation was 0.944, indicating broad consensus, while emotional attachment was 1.388, indicating more polarised experiences. The contrast suggests that customers can identify a restaurant as reputable without becoming attached to it. Cognitive approval of a brand can develop before emotional commitment, making this distinction crucial. The mean score for whether food quality matched brand representation was 3.59 (SD = 0.995). Of the 63.0% who agreed, 9.6% strongly agreed and 15.2% disagreed. This result is relevant to Gap 4 of the Gap Model because some customers saw a gap between brand promise and actual experience (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Discrepancies can damage brand credibility even with strong brand recognition.

Quality association averaged 3.47 (SD = 1.031), while strong brand connection was weakest (M = 3.15, SD = 1.280). Over one-third of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were connected to the restaurant brand. Nairobi's fast-food customers may have valued recognition, distinctiveness, and trust over deep relational connection. Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016) agree that sustained and credible experiences build brand commitment, not recognition alone.

Customer Loyalty Profile

Customer loyalty recorded an overall mean of 3.75, indicating moderate to good loyalty among respondents. The highest-rated loyalty statement was remaining loyal despite competitive offers elsewhere (M = 4.16, SD = 1.121), followed by willingness to forgive occasional service shortcomings (M = 4.04, SD = 1.114) and considering the restaurant the preferred fast-food choice (M = 3.99, SD = 0.936). By contrast, comparative visit frequency recorded the lowest mean (M = 3.17, SD = 1.246). The pattern shows that attitudinal commitment was stronger than exclusive behavioural patronage, an important distinction when interpreting how brand identity translates into loyalty (Kandampully et al., 2018).

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the bivariate relationship between brand identity and customer loyalty. Table 2 presents the objective-specific correlation.

Table 2: Correlation between Brand Identity and Customer Loyalty

	Brand Identity	Customer Loyalty
Brand Identity	1.000	
Customer Loyalty	0.617**	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
N	387	387

Brand identity had a statistically significant positive correlation with customer loyalty ($r = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$). The coefficient indicates that customers reporting stronger brand identity perceptions also tended to report higher levels of loyalty. The magnitude is substantial enough to show that brand identity is not a peripheral feature of the dining relationship. Instead, uniqueness, trust, reputation, emotional attachment and the credibility of the brand promise move systematically with preferred choice, repeat patronage, recommendation and resistance to competitor offers. The result is consistent with Jin et al. (2016), Keller (2018) and Espinosa et al. (2018), who connect strong restaurant brand meanings with favourable behavioural responses.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The null hypothesis H_{04} was tested using the brand-identity coefficient from the study's direct-effects regression model. Only the coefficient relevant to this article is reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Coefficient for Brand Identity and Customer Loyalty

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Brand Identity	0.275	0.038	0.268	7.184	0.000

Brand identity recorded a positive coefficient of $B = 0.275$ with a standard error of 0.038, a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.268$, and $t = 7.184$. The p-value was below 0.001, indicating a statistically significant positive relationship with customer loyalty. The positive coefficient means that stronger brand identity was associated with higher customer loyalty after accounting for the other predictors included in the direct-effects model. H_{04} was therefore rejected. The regression result supports the Gap Model's proposition that consistency between external brand communication and actual delivery has behavioural consequences. Where customers perceive a

distinctive and trustworthy brand whose experience matches the promise made, the relationship is more likely to produce continued preference and loyalty. Conversely, a gap between the communicated identity and actual experience can weaken the credibility required for sustained customer commitment (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Keller, 2018).

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Supervisor interviews provided objective-specific quantitative relationship context. Brand identity influenced customer commitment for 24 supervisors (77.4%). The brand-identity data revealed four sub-themes: brand trust and promise delivery, halal certification and credibility, social media reputation management, and loyalty recognition programs. Fast-food restaurant management operationalises the statistical relationship using these themes. Most important sub-themes were brand trust and promise delivery. Supervisors defined trust as cumulative credibility when restaurants consistently meet customer expectations. Broken promises are especially damaging because customers see them as proof that the brand cannot be trusted. This supports the high survey rating for trust in consistent quality and the Gap 4 explanation that external communications must match delivery.

Halal certification and brand credibility were contextually important in Nairobi County. Supervisors reported that verified halal status was a non-negotiable credibility signal for Muslim customers and could significantly impact brand loyalty. Thus, in objective-specific evidence, halal certification was a brand trust cue rather than a menu feature. In a religiously diverse urban market, culturally credible brand signals are crucial.

Brand management is increasingly concerned with social media reputation management. Supervisors said online reviews and social media commentary quickly amplify positive and negative perceptions. This supports the brand literature's focus on reputation and brand knowledge (Keller, 2018). It also means that reputation is increasingly created by public customer narratives that can boost or hurt brand identity outside of restaurants. Brand commitment and customer rewards were operationally linked by loyalty recognition programs. Recognition mechanisms strengthen customers' brand loyalty, according to supervisors. The qualitative findings support the positive correlation and regression coefficient by showing that brand identity builds loyalty through credibility, recognition, trust, and relationship maintenance rather than visibility.

DISCUSSION

The study found a statistically significant positive correlation between brand identity and customer loyalty. This finding lends support to Jin et al.'s (2016) argument that restaurant image and identity shape customers' behavioural responses, as well as Keller's (2018) proposition that strong, favourable, and distinctive associations make a brand more likely to be preferred. In Nairobi County's competitive fast-food market, identity serves as a loyalty resource, assisting customers in distinguishing between similar alternatives and reducing uncertainty about what to expect from the restaurant. The high performance of uniqueness and distinctiveness provides the most compelling evidence that cognitive differentiation is already well developed among the sampled customers. More than 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the brands were unique or distinguished from other fast-food restaurants. Aaker (1996) views distinctiveness as critical to strong brand identity because it provides customers with a recognisable basis for preference. The findings show that fast-food operators have largely succeeded in creating visible differentiation, but that distinction alone does not guarantee deep commitment.

The trust result is particularly significant because it connects brand meaning to repeated behavioural confidence. Trust in consistent quality had a high mean and a low standard deviation, indicating widespread agreement among customers. Sirdeshmukh et al. (2015) explain that trust boosts perceived value and loyalty in relational exchanges, and Chiou and Droge (2016) place trust in the satisfaction-loyalty process. In this study, trust appears to be one of the primary mechanisms by which the brand becomes a reliable option rather than just a familiar name. Simultaneously, the lowest mean for strong brand connection indicates a limitation in the depth of the customer–brand relationship. Customers may recognise a brand as unique, distinctive, and trustworthy while still lacking a strong personal connection to it. According to Kimpakorn and Touquer (2016), brand commitment necessitates repeated positive experiences, which explains why emotional connection takes longer to develop than recognition. The managerial implication is that promotional visibility should be supplemented by relationship-building experiences that gradually increase personal relevance and recognition.

The brand-experience alignment finding is equally important. The statement that experienced food quality matched what the brand represented received only moderate agreement, with a significant minority disagreeing. This suggests that the customer-facing brand promise was not always fully

supported by the actual experience. Such differences are especially damaging under Gap 4 of the Gap Model because external communications raise expectations that the organization must then meet (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Even if a restaurant's advertising initially draws customers in, over-promising can erode trust.

The qualitative evidence provides context that traditional brand models do not adequately capture. Halal certification emerged as a credibility signal capable of shaping brand loyalty among Muslim consumers, whereas social media reputation management emerged as a modern source of brand risk. These findings show that brand identity in Nairobi County is culturally and digitally embedded. Brand credibility is thus influenced not only by traditional advertising and visual differentiation, but also by whether the brand sends credible signals that are relevant to specific customer communities, and whether its online reputation reinforces or contradicts the intended identity. Therefore, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence supports the conclusion that brand identity influences customer loyalty via multiple but interconnected mechanisms. Unique identity attracts preference, trust reduces uncertainty, reputation validates choice, promise delivery maintains credibility, and emotional connection strengthens commitment. When these elements come together, the brand transforms into a relationship platform that can sustain loyalty beyond a single restaurant transaction.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that brand identity has a statistically significant positive relationship with customer loyalty in selected fast-food restaurants in Nairobi County. Brand identity was positively associated with loyalty at the bivariate level ($r = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$) and retained a significant positive coefficient in the direct-effects regression model ($B = 0.275$, $\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis H_{04} was therefore rejected. The descriptive evidence shows that the strongest aspects of brand identity are uniqueness, distinctiveness and trust in consistent quality. These dimensions indicate that customers can clearly recognize restaurant brands and perceive meaningful differences among them. Reputation is also comparatively strong. However, deep emotional connection remains less developed, showing that many customer-brand relationships are still stronger at the cognitive and trust levels than at the emotional level.

The findings further demonstrate that brand identity depends on the credibility of the relationship between what the restaurant communicates and what customers actually experience. The moderate rating for quality-brand alignment and the supervisor emphasis on promise delivery support Gap 4 of the Gap Model. Brand-building therefore becomes effective for loyalty only when the operational experience validates the communicated promise. Qualitative evidence also shows that halal certification credibility and social media reputation management are important context-specific elements of brand identity in Nairobi County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Restaurant managers should ensure strict alignment between brand promises communicated through advertising, menus and social media and the actual experience delivered to customers. Brand standards should be translated into measurable operating requirements and reviewed routinely so that gaps between communication and delivery are identified before they erode trust.

Fast-food restaurant operators should strengthen emotional brand connection rather than relying only on recognition and visual differentiation. Customer-recognition programmes, relationship-oriented loyalty schemes, personalized digital communication and consistent post-purchase engagement should be used to convert brand awareness and trust into deeper customer attachment.

Fast-food restaurant operators serving Muslim customer segments should obtain credible halal certification and communicate it clearly and consistently. The certification should be treated as part of the brand's trust architecture because supervisors identified verified halal status as an important signal of credibility and a contributor to continued patronage among relevant customer groups.

Restaurant management should establish proactive social media monitoring and rapid-response systems for brand reputation. Customer comments, reviews and complaints should be treated as brand intelligence rather than purely promotional feedback. Recurrent complaints about mismatch between brand promise and actual experience should trigger operational correction as well as communication response.

Brand identity performance should be monitored through customer measures that go beyond awareness, including brand trust, emotional attachment, quality-brand alignment, recommendation

and repeat preference. This would enable restaurant operators to determine whether branding investments are generating genuine customer commitment rather than only visibility.

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