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THE IMPACT OF BRAND EQUITY ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ON CROATIAN MOBILE PHONE MARKET

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ABSTRACT

The mobile phone market is considered one of the fastest-growing in the world. It involves significant advertising investments, as well. For instance, Croatian mobile operators represented the second largest group of advertisers in 2018. Mobile phone no longer means just another simple need, but often an expression of brand preference, and sometimes even a status symbol. A customer-based brand equity model with three dimensions: brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/brand associations as a composite dimension, was tested. The results pointed out that all three dimensions of the model have a strong and positive impact on brand equity, while brand loyalty represents the dominant component. Regarding the brand awareness/associations dimension, undergraduates showed higher values. Finally, the study findings showed that Croatian mobile phone consumers do not consider their phones as a status symbol. Still, there is a significant difference in favour of male and younger consumers.

KEYWORDS: brand equity, Croatian mobile phone market, the status symbol

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's economy of abundance, consumers' attention becomes the only shortage. Simultaneously in the world of information overload, it becomes more and more challenging to stand out. Furthermore, digital marketing experts estimate that, for instance, American consumers are exposed to 4-10 thousand ads each day [Simpson, 2017]. This environment becomes, even more, an issue for younger consumers who often acquire information and purchase goods and services online. It also enhances the role of brand equity and the advantages that branding provides to a consumer and producer.

The purpose of this paper was to test the relevance of brand equity on consumer behaviour on the mobile phone market in the Croatian environment, which presumably does not differ much compared to global characteristics. The research goals include the topic of mobile phones as status symbols, as well, especially among younger consumers. In the next section, a brief review of the most important antecedents of consumer behaviour, the influence of brand equity, and status consumption scope was given, with a short overview of the Croatian mobile phone market. Finally, the research model, tested hypothesis, and the results of empirical research were presented, followed by discussion and closing remarks.

2. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The concept of brand equity emerged in the late 1980s. Brand equity has numerous definitions, but briefly, brand equity is a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add (or subtract) from a value provided by a product or service to a firm or the firm's customers. The assets and liabilities included in brand equity will differ from context to context. However, they can be grouped into four main dimensions [Aaker, 1991, 16]: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality of a brand, and brand associations.

Advantages of brand equity for consumers like the reduction of uncertainty during the buying process, choice simplification, saving time, effort and hassle while selecting the appropriate brand, image, confidence, and self-respect enhancement, are well known. For the sellers' brands enable better (faster) recognition (among competitors), better consumer loyalty, larger price margins, better sales predictability, advertising efficiency, sustainable competitive advantage and more [Keller, 2003, 60; Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride, 2004, 29]. There are several disadvantages, as well, branding being a time-consuming, complicated, and costly process in the first place. Still, with advertising and price competition, as alternative approaches, branding remains one of the most relevant business strategies.

Brand equity examination usually involves [Guzman, 2004, 13-16]: customer-based, financial (the value of brands for the firms) and combined perspective (cash-flow, and other short-term indicators, combined with using perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association). Most of the academic research has been utilising a customer-based behavioural view of brand equity, which means a measurement of cognitive and behavioural brand equity at the individual consumer level through a consumer survey [Yoo and Donthu, 2001, 2].

The consumer's benefits of brands may be recognised in the mobile phone market, as well. The size and influence of the mobile phone industry are significant. For instance, by the end of 2018, 5.1 billion people around the world subscribed to mobile services, accounting for 67% of the global population in 2018., enabling the mobile industry to generate 4.6% of GDP globally. With an average annual growth rate of 1.9% between 2018 and 2025 will bring the total number of mobile subscribers to 5.8 billion (71% of the population), and over 5% of global GDP, with mobile operators accounting for 60% share [GSMA, 2019, 4].

Although the number of mobile phone subscribers increased globally by 33.5% between 2014 and 2018, European Union has recorded 1.3% decline, but still has the highest global subscriber penetration of over 85%, and over 70% of smartphone adoption [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/Mobile_phone_subscribers; GSMA, 2018, 6]. The same trend (same period) applies to Croatia, with a 1.6% drop in total mobile subscribers

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number, today (Q2 2019) counting 4.44 million [https://www.hakom.hr]. In the world of information overload, it is noteworthy that Croatian mobile operators counted for 15% of total advertising investments in 2018, with the second-largest advertisement budget [Lider – Ipsos-MEDIApuls, February 2019].

As a result of the brand equity impact, the consumers often exhibit a willingness to pay a premium price for a preferred brand, when confronted with various offers of mobile phones with similar features.

3. CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH MODEL

Aaker's [1991, 270], customer-based brand equity (shortened: CBBE), approach initially implies four principal components: brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand associations (along with other proprietary brand assets, such as competitive advantage). However, according to broadly utilised Yoo and Donthu [2001, 6-9][1] conceptualisation of brand equity construct, a three-dimensional model proved to be a better fit, than four-dimensional, because a high correlation between brand awareness and brand associations suggested inseparability of those two constructs. Figure 1. displays the conceptual model based on the three-dimensional approach used in this research.

Figure 1. Model of study
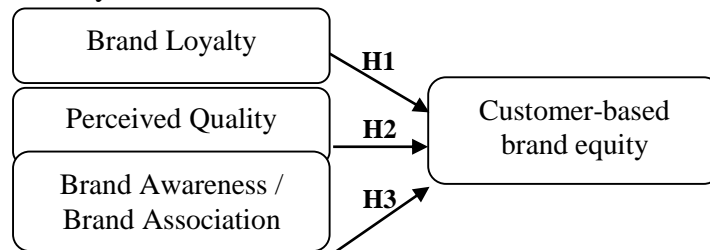
Source: authors; adapted from You and Donthu, 2001.

Aaker [1991, 39, 42] defines brand loyalty as a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand. Brand loyalty is considered the core component of brand equity, mainly because of the value of a brand depends on the loyalty of the consumers. Furthermore, unlike other dimensions of brand equity, brand loyalty cannot exist without prior purchase and use experience. However, brand loyalty is not equivalent to simple inertia, i.e. the consistent pattern of buying a particular brand out of habit merely because less effort is required. Compared to an inertia situation when the consumer passively accepts a brand, a brand loyalty situation means that consumer is actively (sometimes even passionately) involved with a favourite brand [Solomon et al., 2006, 289]. Brand loyalty is a well-researched phenomenon [Yoo et al., 2000; Chaudhuri, 2001; Atilgan et al., 2005; Pappu and Quester, 2006; Gil et al., 2007; Yasin et al., 2007; Tong and Hawley, 2009; Kumar et al., 2013, cited in Ahmad and Sherwani, 2015, 61]. Thus the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Brand loyalty has a significant and positive impact on brand equity.

Perceived quality can be defined as the consumer's judgment about an entity's (service's) overall excellence or superiority [Zeithaml, 1988, 3]. Aaker [1991, 85], defines perceived quality as a

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[1] According to PlumX Metrics [https://plu.mx/plum/a/?doi=10.1016/S0148-2963(99)00098-3&theme=plum-sciencedirect-theme&hideUsage=true], the model developed and published by Yoo and Donthu in 2001. (i.e. the concerned article), were cited 897 times in Scopus, till July 2019.

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consumers perception about the products, tangible or intangible from other related concepts, such as: actual or objective quality (the extent to which the product or service delivers superior service); product-based quality (the nature and quality of ingredients, features, or services included); manufacturing quality (conformance to specification, the "zero defect "goal). Various researchers determined that perceived quality is positively related to brand equity [Aaker, 1991; Kamakura and Russell, 1993; Feldwick, 1996; Motameni and Shahrokhi, 1998; Yoo et al., 2000, cited in Ahmad and Sherwani, 2015, 62], so following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived quality has a significant and positive impact on brand equity.

Brand awareness encompasses brand recognition and brand recall performance. Brand recognition refers to consumers' ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand, while brand recall relates do its ability to retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category, for instance [Keller, 2003, 67]. According to Aaker's awareness pyramid [1991, 62], apart from consumers who are unaware of the brand, brand awareness could gain three different levels – from brand recognition and brand recall to the highest "top of the mind ". However, it is not clear how recognition and recall translate into preference. Indeed, brand recognition and recall are essential, for creating brand awareness, it is not necessarily sufficient to alter consumer preferences. To accomplish this, marketers need more sophisticated attitude-change strategies [Solomon et al., 2006, 83].

Aaker [1991, 109, 111] defines brand association as anything "linked "in memory to a brand, so brand image represents a set of associations, usually organised in some meaningful way. Brand associations represent bases for purchase decision and brand loyalty. Both brand awareness and brand associations were found to determine the strength of brand equity [Motameni and Shahrokhi, 1998; Bridges et al., 2000, Yoo et al., 2000; Ye and van Raaij, 2004; Pappu and Quester, 2006; Tong and Hawley, 2009; Marinova et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2013, cited in Ahmad and Sherwani, 2015, 62]. Following the You and Donthu three-dimensional model, brand awareness and brand associations have has been tested as a composite variable, so hypothesis H3 is formulated:

H3: Brand awareness/brand associations have a significant and positive impact on brand equity.

Finally, the purpose of this study was to examine the respondents (mobile phone users), about their attitude toward mobile phone as a status symbol. Kotler and Keller [2012, 155] define status as one's position within his or her hierarchy or culture. Solomon et al. [2006, 117, 428] define status symbols as products that are purchased and displayed to signal membership in a desirable social class. According to O'Cass and Frost [2002, cited in Madinga et al., 2016, 132], status symbol is what the product means to consumers and the broad spectrum of feelings they experience in purchasing and using it, such as arousal, excitement or pleasure. Marketers must be aware of the status-symbol potential of products and brands.

Although, some of the current surveys of luxury goods [for instance: D'Arpizio et al., Bain & Company, 2019], do not consider mobile phone as a luxury category, while others still do [for instance: Delloite report Global Powers of Luxury Goods, 2014, 26], studies of consumer behaviour proved that mobile phone is still considered as status symbol [for instance: Chan and Wang, 2015, 70, Fan and Burton, 2002, 40, Madinga et al., 2016, 134]. According to Heugel [2015, 13], consumers often purchase expensive mobile phones such as Apple (iPhone) and Samsung Galaxy to portray their status to their surroundings. Thus the following hypothesis is formulated:

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H4: Croatian consumers consider their mobile phones as a social status symbol.

4. METHODOLOGY

As a part of consumer-based brand equity measurement model development Yoo and Donthu [2001, 14] also tested a multidimensional scale for measuring customer-based brand equity (shortened: MBE), with ten items and additional four items of unidimensional measure of overall brand equity (OBE), designed for a convergent validity check of the MBE. This scale was later validated by Washburn and Plank, with recommendations how to improve the measurement of consumer-based brand equity [Washburn and Plank, 2002; Pappu et al., 2005, cited in Lee and Leh, 2011, 2]. Numerous researchers have successfully applied the original fourteen items multidimensional scale (for instance Lökken et al., 2012, 25, Ahmad and Sherwani, 2015, 64], and finally, it was translated and adapted for this study.

The other goal of the study was to determine consumer behaviour regarding their status consumption in the mobile phone market. In this section, a five-item scale originally designed by Eastman et al. [1999, 44],[2] was translated and adapted. The final questionnaire also included several self-developed items about consumer's mobile phone brand preferences and other information. Five demographic variables (sex, age, education level, occupation and income), were included, as well. Seven-grade Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, to 7 = totally agree), was utilised to measure all variables (except demographic). We distributed the online questionnaire via e-mail to 865 addresses of students, former students and employees of Polytechnik of Rijeka, as well as with help from members of authors social networks. Finally, 114 valid responses have been received (13.2%). Table 1. encompasses the demographic statistics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of the sample

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
Sex	*114*		*Age (years)*	*114*	
Female	75	65.46	< 18	0	0
Male	39	34.54	19 – 22	29	25.44
Education level:	114		23 – 26	32	28.07
Lower	0	0	27 – 30	12	10.53
Middle	64	56.14	31 – 40	15	13.16
Middle-high	33	28.95	41 – 50	18	15.79
High	17	14.91	> 50	8	7.02
Occupation:				*114*	
Employed				64	56.14
Unemployed				1	0.88
Student				48	42.11
Other				1	0.88
Household income last year:				*114*	
Below average (hardly make our ends meet)				2	1.75
Average – enough for daily purposes and some savings				21	18.42
Above-average – we can save, go to trips, etc.				65	57.02
Considerably above average – we live a luxurious life				26	22.81

Source: Authors research

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[2] Numerous researchers utilised the scale developed by Eastman et al. [1999] on different markets and brands worldwide. Google Scholar found out that Eastman et al. [1999] study have 311 citations until July 2019.

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5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The statistical tool GNU PSPP Statistical Analysis Software (version 2014), has been applied for descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The regression analysis was selected among the multivariant methods, whereas the correlation and ANOVA analysis among the univariant statistical methods. The Cronbach α coefficient was used to test the reliability of the measurement scales (the results in Table 2.).

Table 2. Cronbach alpha coefficient values

Concept	N of Items	Cronbach alpha coefficient
Brand loyalty	3	0.89
Perceived Quality	2	0.91
Brand awareness/brand associations	5	0.80
OBE (overall brand equity)	4	0,90
Status symbol consumption	5	0,77
Total (n) = 19 statements	19	0.89

Source: authors` research

The reliability analysis shows that the value of the Cronbach alpha coefficient for each concept in the measurement instrument is between 0.77 and 0.91, i.e. all coefficients are within the referential limits of reliability. Cronbach alpha coefficients for most concepts are above 0.80, which shows that the measurements of these concepts are highly reliable.

The differences between variables of the CBBE model regarding demographic (control) variables, were examined by ANOVA and t-test analysis. Table 3. displays only statistically significant results.

Table 3. Statistically significant differencies regarding demographic variables

Sex	Female (N = 75)		Male (N = 39)		t	Sig.
Variable (concept)	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.		
Mobile phone as a status symbol	1.94	1.11	2.61	1.36	- 2.83	0.06*
Age	≤ 22 y. (N = 29)		≥ 23 y. (N = 85)		t	Sig.
Multidimensional brand equity	5.64	1.51	4.89	1.55	- 2.09	0.040*
Mobile phone as a status symbol	2.59	1.27	2.02	1.20	- 2.17	0.032*
Occupation	Employed (N = 65)		Students (N = 49)		t	Sig.
Mobile phone as a status symbol	1.86	1.04	2.58	1.38	- 3.20	0.02*

Education level	Middle (N = 64)		Middle-high (N = 33)		High (N = 17)		F	Sig.
Variable (concept)	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.		
Brand awareness/ brand associations	5.44	1.24	4.81	1.39	4.46	1.71	4.61	0.012*

St. dev.=standard deviation; Sig.=significance; **significance level at 0.01; *significance level at 0.05
Source: Author's research

T-test analysis results pointed out that male respondents lean more toward viewing the mobile phone as a status symbol. The mean results for both sexes suggest that mobile phone does not represent a social status symbol (1.94 for females and 2.61 for the male at 7-point scale, where

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the responses ≥ four should demonstrate a positive attitude toward mobile phone as a status symbol). The occupation differences, guides to the same conclusion, as the student's group is more inclined considering the mobile phone as a status symbol than employed respondents, but both groups do not view a mobile phone as an essential social status symbol (mean for employed = 1.86 and 2.58 for students). Statistically significant differences occurred for „brand awareness/brand associations" variable between different educational levels, where respondents with lower educational level demonstrated the highest average level of brand awareness/brand associations (at $p < 0.05$).

The analysis also pointed out that younger respondents (< 22 years old) demonstrate higher multidimensional brand equity (MBE), and a slightly higher propensity to consider the mobile phone as a status symbol, compared to older respondents (> 23 years old). Both differences were found statistically significant, but either group showed that they do not consider their mobile phones as relevant social status symbols (mean for younger group = 2.59 and 2.02 for the older group at 7-points scale).

Statistically significant differences between respondents, owners of one of the three most recognised brands, and all other brands were registered, too. Among 114 respondents, 44 (38.6%) possess Samsung brand mobile phone, 39 (34.21%) Huawei, and 10 (8.77%) iPhone, while 21 respondents (18.42%) possess some of eight other brands. T-test analysis demonstrated statistically significant results between these two groups for two (out of three) dimensions of brand equity construct (brand loyalty and brand awareness/brand associations) as well as for mobile phone as a status symbol (Table 4.).

Table 4. Statistically significant differences regarding mobile phone brand

Differences regarding consumers own brand	Three top brands (N = 93)		Other brands (N = 21)		t	Sig.
Variable (concept)	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.		
Brand Loyalty	4.97	1.73	4.05	1.88	- 2.18	0.031*
Brand wareness/ Brand associations	5.23	1.35	4.56	1.53	- 2.00	0.048*
Mobile phone as a status symbol	2.33	1.30	1.44	0.51	- 3.10	0.002**

St. dev.=standard deviation; Sig.=significance; **significance level at 0.01; *significance level at 0.05
Source: Author's research

The analysis reports displayed in tables 3. and 4. pointed out that there are statistically significant differences between demographic groups for „mobile phone as a status symbol" variable. However, respondents do not consider the mobile phone as a status symbol, as all the average results remain considerably below 4 (i.e. below mean on 7-point Likert scale). It means that the **hypothesis H4** which state that „Croatian consumers consider their mobile phones as a social status symbol", **must be rejected**.

We applied the correlation and regression analysis for the verification of the other three (H1, H2, and H3) hypothesis. Tables 5 and 6. display the results of both analysis.

Table 5. Correlation analysis results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Pearson Corr. Coefficient	Sig.	Conclusion
H1	Brand loyalty → OBE	0.74	0.000**	
H1 (Brands)	Brand loyalty (3 top brands) → OBE	0,70	0.000**	Supported
	Brand loyalty (other brands) → OBE	0.83	0.000**	
H2	Perceived quality → OBE	0.48	0.000**	Supported
H3	Brand awareness/Brand associations → OBE	0.59	0.000**	
H3 (Brands)	Brand awareness/Brand associations (3 top brands) → OBE	0,60	0.000**	Supported
	Brand awareness/Brand associations (other brands) → OBE	0.49	0.024*	
H3 (Education Levels)	Brand awareness/Brand associations (Middle) → OBE	0.65	0.000**	
	Brand awareness/Brand associations (Middle/High) → OBE	0.53	0.001**	Supported
	Brand awareness/Brand associations (High) → OBE	0.40	0.110	Not supported

OBE=overall brand equity; Sig.=significance; ** significance level at 0.01; * significance level at 0.05
Source: Author's research

The correlation analysis supported all hypothesis, i.e. brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/brand associations, was found positively (medium to high level)[3] correlated with OBE construct, at p < 0.01. Consequently, hypothesis **H1, H2, and H3 are supported**, so brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/brand associations, „have a significant and positive impact on brand equity" (measured by OBE construct). Furthermore, the correlation between brand loyalty of respondents with „other brands", and OBE construct was found slightly higher than respondents with „top three brands," while the correlation between the group with faculty education level and OBE construct, was not found significant.

Table 6. Regression analysis results

Hypothesis	Relationship	B Coeff.	β Coeff.	t	Sig.	Conclusion
H1	Brand loyalty → OBE	0.56	0.60	6.34	0.000	Supported
H2	Perceived quality → OBE	0.11	0.08	1.00	0.321	Not supported
H3	Brand awareness/Brand associations → OBE	0.15	0.13	1.44	0.152	Not supported

OBE=overall brand equity; Sig.=significance; ** significance level at 0.01; * significance level at 0.05
Source: Author's research

The regression analysis results confirmed hypothesis H1, i.e. that „brand loyalty has a significant and positive impact on brand equity", while other two hypotheses were not supported. However, the regression model demonstrated high 'R' value (0.70)[4], so there is a very high (strong) positive relationship between independent variables (brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/brand associations) and dependent variable (brand equity). The determination coefficient value ($R^2 = 0.56$) means that 56% of the variance of

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[3] According to Cohen i Holliday [1982, cited in Bryman i Cramer 2005, 219] who suggests: very week correlation < 0.19; week correlation 0.20 till 0.39; medium correlation 0.40 till 0.69; high correlation 0.70 till 0.89, and very high correlation > 0.90.

[4] According to Leech et al. [2005, 56], multiple correlation coefficient (R) reveal: low level of connectivity (R) ≥ 0.14 < 0.36; middle level (R) ≥ 0.36 < 0.51; high level (R) ≥ 0.51 < 0.70 and very high level (R) ≥ 0.7.

brand equity can be predicted (explained) with independent variables. Furthermore, ANOVA analysis confirmed that the results are statistically significant, $F(3, 110) = 45.97$, at $p < 0.01$.

6. CONCLUSION

Building strong brand equity is very important in the mobile phone market in Croatia, even more with a declining number of subscribers in recent years. The research was aimed to examine the applicability of Aaker's customer-based brand equity conceptual model on the mobile phone market. The study results confirmed that three dimensions (brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/brand associations) have a positive impact on brand equity measured by a scale developed by You and Donthu [2001]. These results are in line with the conclusions of the study by Ahmad and Sherwani [2015]. However, regression analysis findings pointed out brand loyalty as the dominant component of the model, whereas other components impact (perceived quality and brand awareness/brand associations), was not statistically significant.

Regarding mobile phones as status symbols study revealed that male and younger (≤ 22 years) respondents are more inclined to consider mobile phone as a status symbol, but the results were not statistically significant.

The limitation of the study could be predominantly student population in the sample, which does not correspond to an average Croatian demographic structure. Furthermore, this study did not cover the Croatian mobile operator brands, which has a leading role in the domestic market, apart from foreign mobile phone brands. So we suggest this direction for further studies.

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