

## ASSESSING HOW BRAND EQUITY, CUSTOMER LOYALTY, AND SUSTAINABILITY DRIVE MOTHERS' PREFERENCE FOR GLOBAL BABY FORMULA OPTIONS.

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### ABSTRACT

Motherhood brings its own set of responsibilities, demanding dedication and resilience. A comprehensive online study exploring the emotional and practical experiences of mothers found that those who practiced intermittent breastfeeding while supplementing with formula (Combi) were especially influenced by brand equity, loyalty, and preference, all of which shaped their purchasing decisions. This study considered mothers' perceptions when choosing global baby formula brands over domestic alternatives, assessing how brand equity impacts their loyalty, preferences, and purchase intentions. It aimed to measure awareness, perceived value, brand associations, and preference levels among mothers, helping to predict their loyalty and satisfaction, which influence their purchasing choices. Conducted in Coimbatore, the survey focused on mothers who regularly shop for baby formula in both retail outlets and online, gathering responses from 542 participants using convenience sampling. A strong emotional connection with brand equity, especially when combined with a focus on sustainability, often forms a deep bond between mothers and the brand. For many mothers, the reassurance that they are providing a high-quality, sustainable choice for their children reinforces brand loyalty. Marketing strategies that appeal to both the emotional and sustainability values of mothers can further enhance this connection, encouraging sustainable purchase intentions. Trust, emotional attachment, perceived quality, positive brand associations, commitment to sustainability, and convenience are key factors that influence brand loyalty among mothers. By prioritizing these aspects, baby formula brands can strengthen their brand equity, build a loyal and sustainability-conscious customer base, and promote sustainable purchasing behaviour.

**Keywords:** *Mother, Sustainability, Baby, Formula Feed, Brand Equity, Loyalty, Purchase Intention, etc.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The consumers play a significant role due to the competitive nature of business, in determining characteristics of produce and benefit provided by marketplace. The consumers have become more simulative, fixative, discriminative. This is due to the drastic change in discernment and high anticipation from customer's point of view. This demands a condition where quality based produce is displayed for customers. So, the consumer's loyalty is the utmost need and duty to be met by the industrialist for flourishing the business. The buyers are the pinnacle and the center point around which the whole business revolves. The retailer's basic idea is to act and ready the product based on what the consumers like. The change in buyer's perception may vary due to various facts like age, sex, economic status, area etc. The consumer view of perception and certain intentions towards the products acts as a stimulant to desire for that product. Motives or intentions to buy the materials vary wide from positive as well as negative such as contentment, fondness; being in a relationship, ownership or custody, style of life, ones own satisfaction, egotism, yearning for currency, apprehension etc.. The predilection of the consumer is highly assorted and changes constantly. The majority of the consumers stick to their own choices, preferences and traits, and standard of living. They don't go in for the pick by many people but stick to their own styles and likes. The retailers should be constantly vigilant to the changing reactions of the buyers and suits them with modern suitable methods and techniques, to flourish their business.

#### 1.1. Women

Women play a pivotal role in the welfare of the family. She is the crux on which the wheels of the family revolve. She is stereotypically the responsible person for everyone's wellbeing. She cares for the children and the elderly, balances the challenges and evens out the ups and downs a family faces. Motherhood in itself is a great challenge that rests upon the shoulders of every woman. It demands hard work, diligence and virtuousness and abundance of patience to bring up children. When something is amiss, it is the lady of the house who gets criticized more often than the man.

#### 1.2. Parenting

Specifically, when parents had both high expectation and high involvement in their child's life, children have fewer behavior problems and better grades Amato & Fowler, (2002). When mothers used an authoritative parenting style their children had fewer peers rate the child as mean and reported less hitting. Mothers who were responsive, warm and set clear expectation had children that exhibited fewer fearful behaviors, anxiety, or depression and less aggression or acting out Hoffman & Youngblade, (1999).

#### 1.3. Child Growth

When mothers are supportive of their spouse's parenting (view them as competent parents, provide encouragement, expect and believe parenting is a joint venture), men are more likely to be involved with, and responsible for their children. Doherty et al., (1998) Pasley, Futris & Skinner, (2002) It plays a greater importance on their father role identity and feel more satisfaction, pleasure, competence, and comfort in their paternal role Bouchard & Lee, (2000). Breastfeeding has unanimously positive short- and long-term health benefits for both mother and infant (Kramer & Kakuma, 2012), and these effects are enhanced with the exclusivity and duration of breastfeeding (Ip et al., 2007). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommend exclusive breastfeeding up to 6 months of age, with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond (Semenic et al., 2012). To achieve this goal, a wide variety of pro-breastfeeding initiatives and campaigns have been developed to promote the commonly affirmed "breast is best" message. Large-scale internet study is the first to quantify the emotional and practical experiences of an overall sample of breastfeeding mothers and identify the differences in the emotional and practical experiences of exclusively breastfeeding mothers (EBF) and combination feeding mothers (Combi), by feeding type and intention. It was hypothesised that mothers who chose to supplement with formula (Combi) would be more susceptible to negative experiences as opposed to those who chose to exclusively breastfeed (EBF).

#### 1.4. Consumer

It is defined as, "Consumer is an individual who buys products or services for personal use and not for manufacture or resale". Customers are the people with deciding authority to buy or reject a product. Their decision is basically shaped through the perception and attitude they experienced based on that produce. The retailers use their marketing skills and advertisement to have a positive impact about their products on consumers perception. So, basically, anyone who buys an item is termed as customer.

#### 1.5. Maintaining Consumer Preference

To maintain the approval of the consumers is the prior step, but maintaining them is of high importance. Most retailers recap trade to gratified buyers. Through after-sales check, the sellers maintain the relationship and rapport with the consumers thereby helping themselves in their product sale. Numerous retailers follow this strategy of repeat-sale to maintain and improve their business.

Baby care market is flooded with Organised and Unorganized players. In coming years, product innovation and development will be the key focus area for most of the companies ^ operating in the Indian baby care products market. Apart from penetrating deep into urban market, rural market also provides growth opportunities to companies. Baby care items especially, baby food industry is getting popular all over the world due to increasing awareness, rising wages and shift in consumer behaviour (V. & P., 2016). Worldwide revenue for baby products is rising each year and is projected to touch USD 13.3 billion by 2021 (statista, 2014).

**2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**2.1. Brand Equity**

A product is turned into a brand, when the consumer study all about it, and memorise the knowledge of the product and saves it in long term memory and use this information during their next purchase. The information structure stabilized in the buyer’s memory helps to improve the product value, which is termed as brand equity. It has significant impact on buyer’s positive outlook towards the brand. Value equity of a brand theoretically is about significance about exclusive technologies, licenses, commercial marks, and other intangible factors such as knowledge and manufacturing process. Researchers suggest that brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are the three dimensions of brand equity.

Trademark fairness is considered as a collection or group of material goods or possessions or resources. It embraces issues like creation of product appreciation or familiarity, allegiance towards the goods, comprehends value and trademark alliance. The above positive features add up or deduct the worth of the product or else the benefits rendered (Aaker, 1991). According to Kotler and Keller (2009), brand’s equity is presumed to imitate what the consumers consider about the product, sense, take action regarding the brand; also about the cost, allocation and revenue it creates for the industry. Client- centered brand equity is known to create discrepancy result established through familiarity of the product in respect to buyer’s reaction to product’s advertising.

**2.2. Psychological Loyalty**

From the perspective of research conducted in the area of Social identification, there are several factors that have been shown to influence favourable downstream outcomes of identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). It has been shown in the studies that once the consumer identifies themselves with a certain firm, they tend to get psychologically attached to that particular firm/brand/product, and this expresses in action as the care the consumers tend to show towards the firm. Their identification also motivates the consumers to become loyal to the company, and inspires them to take up certain voluntary actions on its behalf (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, (2013). It has been made evident by the investigations conducted by Escalas and Bettman (2003) that the consumers with identification with a reference group clearly have a great positive effect in the consumers’ attitude and behaviours toward the brands, which are represented by the reference group.

**2.3. Purchase Intention**

One of the major concepts in marketing literature is purchase intention which has routine applications in researches and also covers wide range of products and services. Kim and Kim (2004) define purchase intention as the tendency of consumers with the identified aim where it is usually measured in terms of real purchasing. Moreover, Crosno, Freling & Skinner (2009) described that purchase intention refers to the possibility of purchasing a special brand in a product category during purchase. However, the implementation of the product's purchase intention depends on various factors such as customer willingness and interest to the product, imposed social pressure on the customer from others and a general sense of what is received.

**3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Thus this study primarily focussed focused on the psychological loyalty of mothers preferring formula feed supplement influenced by various components like brand awareness, brand value, brand association, brand preference leading towards their purchase intention. Though there are numerous unbranded and domestically produced brands in the market, few international brands significantly competing in the market place. In this regard, mothers perception towards opting for different international brands over domestic brands were considered depending on brand equity and its impact on their loyalty and purchase intentions. The study intended to measure the awareness, value, association, preference of brands among mothers thus, predicting the loyalty or satisfaction of mothers and further influencing their purchase intention.

**4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- 1. To examine the brand equity impact on loyalty and intention of mothers opting for formulae feed products in Coimbatore.

**5. METHODOLOGY**

The research is descriptive in nature. Primary and secondary data are used for data collection. In the district of Coimbatore, the survey concentrated consumers (feeding mothers) regularly visiting retail outlets also involved in online shopping for buying baby formulae feed products. Five hundred and forty two samples were taken using convenient sampling method. The collected data have been analyzed using Garrett Ranking Method, Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling.

**6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

- The study is confined to Coimbatore District and therefore findings may not be related to other areas. The survey includes all the limitations inherent in the questionnaire.

**7. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

**7.1. Garrett Ranking Method**

**Table 1: Rank the reason for opting specific Baby formula feed products**

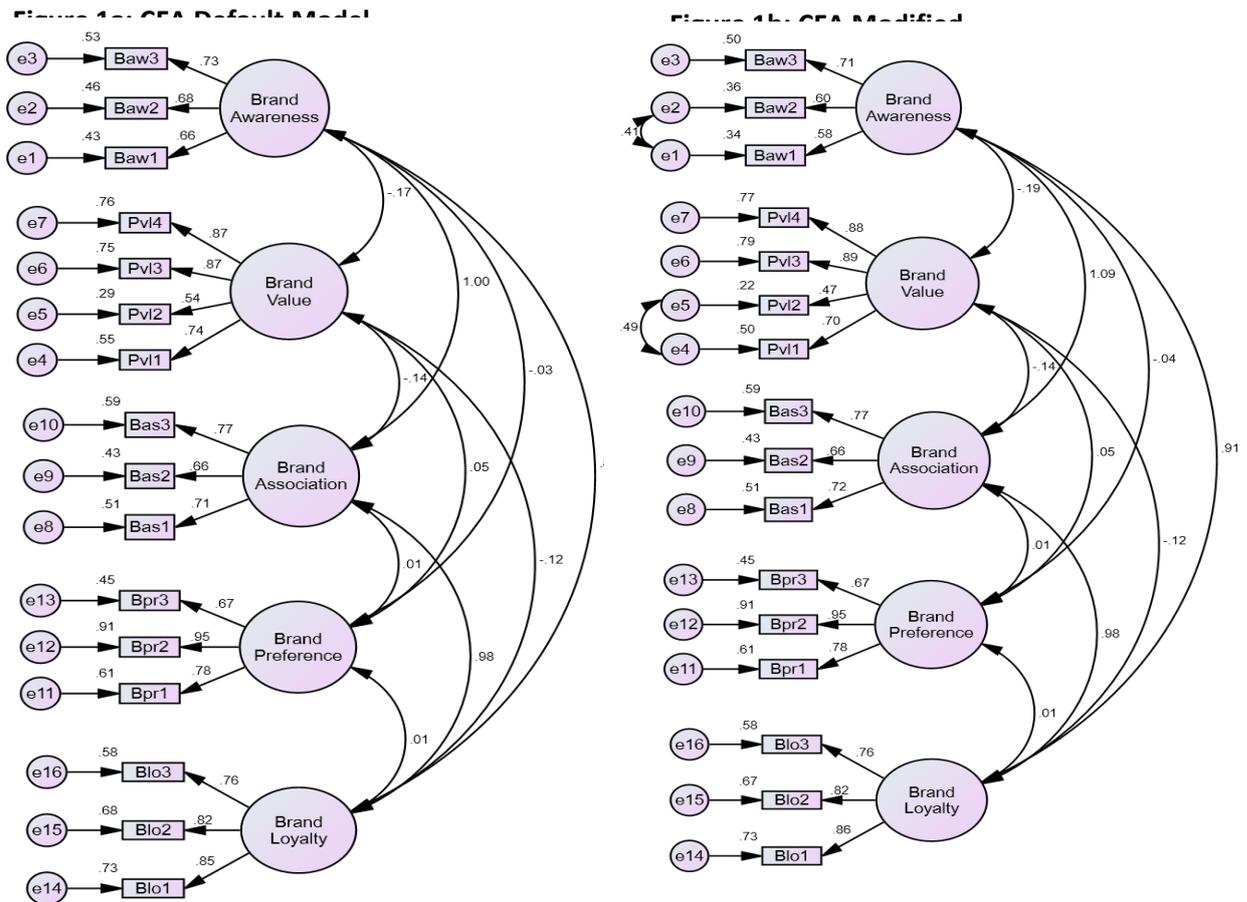
Attributes	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	Score	Mean	Rank
International quality standards	79	82	75	57	86	49	114	26457	44.84	4
Brand equity meeting expectations	25	75	80	100	86	101	75	25167	42.66	6
Safer as per international norms	159	105	78	90	38	38	34	31918	54.10	1
Health claim is trust worthy	54	34	57	111	83	118	85	24621	41.73	7
Baby growth and development	40	96	90	37	117	83	79	25948	43.98	5
In store and online availability	92	87	78	71	55	104	55	27970	47.41	2
Brand reputation and Nutritional Benefits	93	63	84	76	77	49	100	27077	45.89	3

Table shows the ranking of the mothers opting specific baby formula feed as an alternate for mother feed recorded high score, mean and rank towards Safer as per international norms: Score=31918, Mean=54.10, followed by In store and online availability: Score=27970, Mean=47.41, 3<sup>rd</sup> for Brand reputation and Nutritional Benefits: Score=27077, Mean=45.89, 4<sup>th</sup> towards International quality standards: Score=26457, Mean=44.84, 5<sup>th</sup> for Baby growth and development: Score=25948, Mean=43.98, 6<sup>th</sup> for Brand equity meeting expectations: Score=25167, Mean=42.66, finally, Health claim is trust worthy: Score=24621, Mean=41.73.

**7.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** is a special form of factor analysis, most commonly used in social research It is used to test whether measures of a construct are consistent with a researcher's understanding of the nature of that construct (or factor). As such, the objective of confirmatory factor analysis is to test whether the data fit a hypothesized measurement model. This hypothesized model is based on theory and/or previous analytic research. CFA was first developed by Joreskog and has built upon and replaced older methods of analyzing construct validity

**Figure 1: Brand Equity Model**



**Table 2: Model Fitness Summary (CFA of Default and Modified models)**

Fitness	Chi-Square	CMIN/DF	RMR	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	PClose
Criteria	--	< 3	< 0.05	> 0.90					0.05 (or) 0.08	>0.05
Default Model	383.950	4.085	0.054	0.920	0.884	0.915	0.916	0.934	0.076	0.000
Modified Model	177.531	1.930	0.039	0.962	0.944	0.961	0.975	0.981	0.041	0.938

While summarizing the good fit indices considering default and modified Brand Equity Model shows significant improvement in the modified model after co-varying the error terms e1 and e2 as well as e4 and e5. In this regard, default and modified brand equity CMIN shows 177.531 and while the default and modified brand equity shows CMIN/DF=4.085 and 1.930 thus the modified model achieving reasonably good fit. Model posed improved fitness when comparing the default and modified brand equity of RMR value achieved less than the specified level (0.05), i.e., from 0.54 to 0.039. GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) of default and modified brand equity achieved 0.920 and 0.962 indicating the proportion of variance-covariance matrix. Further, default and modified brand equity achieved NFI shows 0.915 and 0.961 likewise, default and modified brand equity shows CFI 0.934 and 0.981 which are more than the specification 0.9 also found closer to one finally, the RMSEA value of default and modified brand equity model shows 0.076 and 0.041 which is less than 0.08 in both cases further recording PCLOSE of 0.938 in the modified brand equity model thus, , resulting as an excellent fit brand equity model. Results further supported to conduct path model analysis considering brand equity as exogenous constructs, while loyalty as mediating endogenous and purchase intention as endogenous construct.

### 7.3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

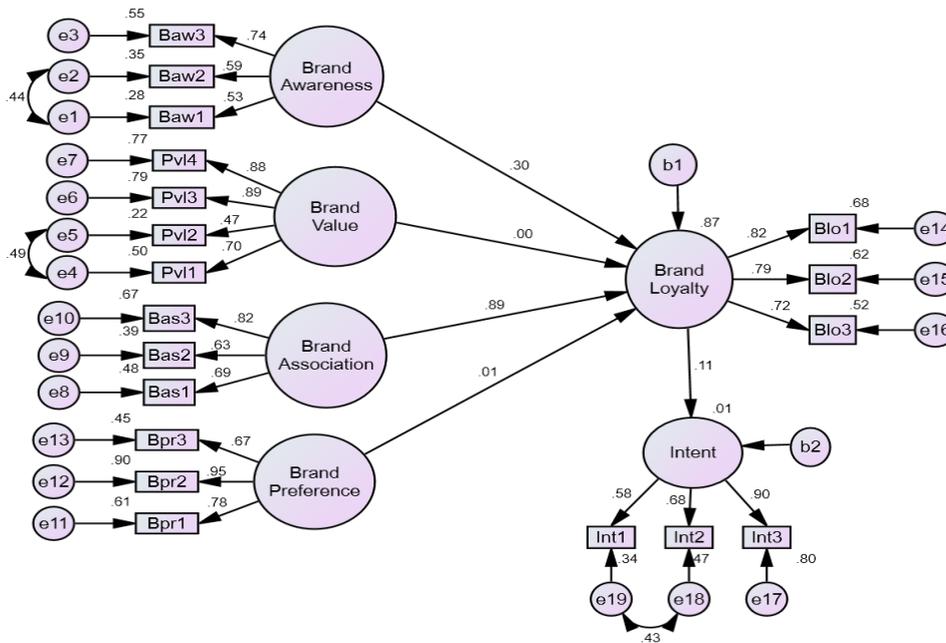
Structural Equation Modeling concept was invented by Sewall Wright who was a geneticist (Wright, 1921). It is derived from the path analysis. Structural Equation Modeling is a statistical modeling techniques generally used in behavioral science. A path diagram has circles, boxes and is connected among them through arrows. Analysis using SEM will start with path diagram. According to the notation of Wright, the measured (observed) variables are shown in a rectangle box and unmeasured factors shown by a circle or square box or ellipse. In the model, causal relationships are defined by using a single headed arrow, which are also called paths, where the variable at the tail end of the arrow is the cause of the variable at that point. Double headed arrow indicates correlation, without any causal relation. Single headed arrow represents coefficient of regression and double-headed arrows represent covariance, statistically.

**Table 3: Model Fitness Summary (CFA)**

Fitness	Chi-Square	CMIN/DF	RMR	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	PClose
Criteria	--	< 3	< 0.05	> 0.90					0.05 (or) 0.08	>0.05
Default Model	704.269	4.891	0.084	0.906	0.876	0.901	0.889	0.918	0.085	0.000

The summary measuring model fitness of Brand Equity influencing Purchase Intention mediated by Brand Loyalty of mothers feeding branded baby food shows CMIN=704.269, CMIN/DF = 4.891, RMR=0.084, GFI=0.906, AGFI=0.876, NFI=0.901, TLI=0.889, CFI=0.918. All the indices viz.: GFI, AGFI, NFI, and CFI values are expected to be greater than 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999) is well established satisfying the recommended threshold and RMSEA was marginally above specification of 0.08 achieving 0.085 achieving moderate fitness level. The direct and indirect effects measuring influence of Brand Equity on Purchase Intention mediated by Brand Loyalty based on mothers feeding their infants with branded baby food supplements.

**Figure 2: Brand Equity influencing Purchase Intention mediated by Brand Loyalty**



Predictors	Mediator (Loyalty)			Dependent (Indirect Effect)	Dependent Total Effect
	Std. Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Un. Std. Direct Effect		
Brand Awareness	.295	--	.471	0.032	.295
Brand Value	-.002	--	-.002	0.000	-.002
Brand Association	.887	--	.971	0.096	.887
Brand Preference	.013	--	.012	0.001	.013
Loyalty → Intention			.114	--	.108

**Table 4: Regression Weights measuring Direct and Indirect Effects**

### **Direct, Indirect Effects**

- Brand awareness of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Loyalty was a direct effect achieving significance  $\beta=0.471, SE=0.079, CR=5.925, P=0.000$ . Direct path model indicates significant brand awareness among mothers influence their loyalty towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies thus, rejecting null hypothesis.
- Brand Value perceived by mothers towards buying branded food supplement for their babies as an alternate for mother feed observed with negative effect on Loyalty however the direct effect did not achieved significance  $\beta=-0.002, SE=0.032, CR=-0.063, P=0.950$  thus, accepting null hypothesis.
- Brand Association of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Loyalty was a direct effect achieving significance  $\beta=0.971, SE=0.065, CR=14.907, P=0.000$ . Direct path model indicates significant brand association among mothers influence their loyalty towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies thus, rejecting null hypothesis.
- Brand Preference perceived by mothers towards buying branded food supplement for their babies as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive effect on Loyalty however the direct effect did not achieved significance  $\beta=0.012, SE=0.028, CR=0.408, P=0.683$  thus, accepting null hypothesis.
- Brand Loyalty of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Purchase Intention was a direct effect achieving significance  $\beta=0.114, SE=0.054, CR=2.102, P=0.036$ . Direct path model indicates significant Brand Loyalty among mothers influence their Purchase Intention towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies thus, rejecting null hypothesis.
- Brand awareness of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Purchase Intention mediated by Loyalty was a direct effect achieving significance  $\beta=0.032, P=0.012$  thus, rejecting null hypothesis. Likewise, brand association of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Purchase Intention mediated by Loyalty was a direct effect achieving significance  $\beta=0.687, P=0.001$  thus, rejecting null hypothesis. Whereas, brand value as well as brand preference of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Purchase Intention mediated by Loyalty was an indirect effect did not achieved the significance levels thus accepting null hypothesis.

## **8. SUMMARY OF RESUTLS**

### **8.1. Garrett Ranking shows**

Mothers opting specific baby formula feed as an alternate for mother feed recorded ranks from one to seven shows

1. Safer as per international norms
2. In store and online availability
3. Brand reputation and Nutritional Benefits
4. International quality standards
5. Baby growth and development
6. Brand equity meeting expectations
7. Health claim is trust worthy

### **8.2. Direct Effects**

#### **Significant direct effects observed between**

#### **Brand Awareness and Brand Loyalty rejecting $H_0$ .**

- One unit increase in brand awareness among mothers towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies improves their loyalty by 0.471 units, thus, rejecting null hypothesis.

#### **Brand Association and Brand Loyalty rejecting $H_0$ .**

- One unit increase in brand association among mothers towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies improves their loyalty by 0.971 units, thus, rejecting null hypothesis.

#### **Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intention rejecting $H_0$ .**

- One unit increase in Brand Loyalty among mothers towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies improves their Intention by 0.114 units, thus, rejecting null hypothesis.

#### **Direct effects was insignificant between**

#### **Brand Value and Brand Loyalty accepting $H_0$ .**

- Direct path model indicates insignificant brand value perception among mothers did not highly influenced their loyalty towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies thus, accepting null hypothesis.

#### **Brand Preference and Brand Loyalty accepting $H_0$ .**

- Direct path model indicates insignificant brand Preference among mothers did not significantly influenced their loyalty towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies thus, accepting null hypothesis.

### **8.3. Summary of Indirect Effects**

#### **Significant indirect effects observed between**

#### **Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention mediated by Brand Loyalty rejecting $H_0$ .**

- One unit increase in brand awareness among mothers towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies improves their purchase intention mediated by loyalty by 0.032 units, thus, rejecting null hypothesis.

#### **Brand Association and Purchase Intention mediated by Brand Loyalty rejecting H<sub>0</sub>.**

- One unit increase in brand association among mothers towards buying supplementary alternate for their babies improves their purchase intention mediated by loyalty by 0.096 units, thus, rejecting null hypothesis.

#### **Insignificant indirect effects accepting H<sub>0</sub>.**

- Brand value as well as brand preference of mothers towards buying branded infant food supplement as an alternate for mother feed observed with positive impact on Purchase Intention mediated by Loyalty was an indirect effect did not achieved the significance levels thus accepting null hypothesis.

### **9. SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS**

Brand equity refers to the value a brand adds to a product. It encompasses consumer perceptions, brand recognition, and the overall market strength of a brand. For mothers purchasing baby formula, brand equity can significantly influence their loyalty to a particular brand. Components of Brand Equity comprises of Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Perceived Quality and Brand Loyalty.

- Impact on Loyalty demonstrates mothers prioritize trust and reliability when choosing baby formula. High brand equity fosters trust, leading to repeat purchases. It is recommended to maintain for stringent quality control measures and safety standards tend to retain loyal customers.
- An emotional connection strongly associated with brand equity often includes an emotive bond between the brand and the consumer. For mothers, emotional reassurance that they are providing the best for their child enhances loyalty. It is suggested strategic marketing campaigns that resonate emotionally with mothers can strengthen this connection further augmenting buying intentions.
- Brands with high perceived quality are more likely to have loyal customers. Mothers are willing to pay a premium for brands they believe offer superior nutrition and safety. It is suggested that consistent positive experiences with the product reinforce the perceived quality and brand loyalty along with purchase intentions.
- Further recommendations such as positive associations, endorsements by pediatricians or other mothers, can enhance brand equity. Also, word-of-mouth recommendations and social proof play a crucial role in building brand loyalty among new mothers. Likewise, brands that ensure wide availability and convenient purchase options (e.g., online, in-store) can boost loyalty. Consistent availability prevents mothers from switching to alternative brands.

### **10. CONCLUSION**

The brand equity of baby formula significantly impacts mothers' loyalty. Key factors include trust, emotional connection, perceived quality, positive associations, and convenience. By focusing on these elements, baby formula brands can enhance their equity and cultivate a loyal customer base to augment their purchase intention.

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