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## Article

# Brand loyalty towards quality and tabloid newspapers: A qualitative study exploring the drivers of customer retention

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# Brand loyalty towards quality and tabloid newspapers

A qualitative study exploring the drivers of customer retention

**Verfasser(innen):** Carina Gebhardt, Irene Kramer, Jens U. Pätzmann

## ABSTRACT

Die vorliegende Studie beschäftigt sich mit den Faktoren, welche die Loyalität gegenüber Qualitätszeitungen und Boulevardzeitungen beeinflussen. Das Ziel ist es, herauszufinden, ob es Unterschiede bezüglich der Loyalität gegenüber den beiden Zeitungskategorien gibt. Abgeleitet von der einschlägigen Literatur wurden vier relevante Einflussgrößen identifiziert, welche die Loyalität beeinflussen können: Marken-Performance, Marken-Bildlichkeit, Vertrauen in die Marke und Umstellungskosten. Die Faktoren wurden am Beispiel von zwei deutschen Zeitungen untersucht: der Süddeutschen Zeitung als Qualitätszeitung und der BILD-Zeitung als Boulevardzeitung. Mittels Tiefeninterviews mit Lesern der beiden Zeitungen konnte festgestellt werden, dass sich die Faktoren, die die Loyalität der Leser beider Zeitungstypen beeinflussen, grundlegend unterscheiden. Während Loyalität gegenüber Qualitätszeitungen vor allem durch Marken-Performance und Vertrauen in die Marke beeinflusst wird, wird Loyalität gegenüber Boulevardzeitungen vor allem durch die Marken-Performance beeinflusst. Loyalität wird bei beiden Zeitungskategorien außerdem durch die Umstellungskosten beeinflusst.



The newspaper industry is one of the industries that has been affected the most by digitalization. Especially the development of using the internet as a medium for communication and publishing news has led to serious changes in this sector (Flavian and Gurrea 2006, p. 231). The speed and low cost at which news and information are distributed over the internet, as well as the possibility to keep in direct contact and interaction with consumers, has created a highly competitive environment (Levins 1998, p. 14). Consequently, the increased competition within each medium, as well as between various media, is forcing marketers to gain a deeper insight into the topic of consumer choice and loyalty (Wilkinson 1972, p. 107).

### The importance of brand loyalty

For a company to be successful in the long-run, it must be capable of retaining its existing customers and creating loyalty among them. A high number of loyal customers is a competitive asset for a brand and a major influencer of its equity (Dekimpe, Steenkamp et al. 1997, p. 405). With appropriate branding, marketers can attract and retain loyal customers (Keller 2005, p. 19). Thus, they can create a sustained competitive advantage (Menidjel et al. 2017, p. 642).

In literature, many models exist that investigate the factors affecting loyalty towards brands in general (Punniyamorthy and Raj 2007, Ramesh Kumar and Advani 2005, Keller 2001, Martensen, Gronholdt et al. 2000, Chen and Hitt 2000). Here, it can be distinguished between customer- and brand-related loyalty drivers. As especially customer-related loyalty drivers such as satisfaction, commitment and involvement are a very complex field of investigation and thus sometimes hard to observe and measure (Quester and Lin Lim 2003, p. 37), this research only focuses on brand-related loyalty drivers.

### Brand-related loyalty drivers

Derived from literature, four brand-related loyalty drivers are considered the most relevant: brand performance, brand imagery,

brand trust and switching costs.

The first loyalty influencer is brand performance which relates to the degree to which a product or service meets the consumers' functional needs. The product itself is a major influencer of the consumer's experience with a brand. To create loyal consumers, brands need to make sure that they deliver products that at least meet (if not surpass) their consumer's needs and expectations. The attributes that influence brand performance vary by product category. However, there are five important constructs that often influence brand performance: primary characteristics and secondary features, product reliability and durability, service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy, style and design, price (Keller 2001, p. 10 f.).

The second construct that can affect a consumer's loyalty is brand imagery, which relates to the extrinsic properties of the product or service. It is the degree to which a brand meets a consumer's psychological and social needs or expectations. It refers to the intangible aspects of a brand and is influenced mainly by the following aspects: the consumer profile, the brand's personality and values, the brand's history, heritage and experiences (Keller 2001, p. 10 ff.).

Another major loyalty influencer is brand trust which is defined as the degree to which a customer relies on the brand's ability to perform its stated functions (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, p. 82). High trust in a brand will help consumers to reduce risk as well as increase their readiness to purchase a brand repeatedly (Ramesh Kumar and Advani 2005, p. 257). Research shows a significant causal connection between brand trust and brand loyalty, also being highly correlated with customer satisfaction (Zang, Gao et al. 2014, p. 450).

Lastly, brand-related loyalty can be affected by switching costs. These are the costs that arise when a consumer changes from one brand to another (Porter 1980, p. 10). It includes monetary as well as psychological (e.g. effort) expenses (Dick and Basu 1994, p. 105). Especially in today's internet environment, where there are a lot of different offers and possibilities, consumers face very low

barriers for switching brands (Chen and Hitt 2000). High switching costs can be reached for example through lock-in strategies or membership programs and have a positive influence on brand loyalty (Lee et al. 2001, p. 44).

### Brand loyalty in the newspaper industry

Although there is wide research on the factors affecting brand loyalty, this should not be generalized to the newspaper industry. Consumers have different norms, values and beliefs and when choosing their newspaper, they are looking for those that correspond to those beliefs. Consequently, for newspaper brands it is important to understand the factors that meet their consumers' expectations. Since their emergence in the 17th century (Welke 2013, p. 2), newspapers have always been one of the key sources of information and the most important providers of news and entertainment (Punniyamoorthy and Raj 2007, p. 222). Nevertheless they belong to those media which suffer the most from adverse impacts (Flavian and Gurrea 2006, p. 231). Nowadays, especially online, the newspaper industry is facing increased competition by other news providers such as broadcasters, online-only news (Leurdijk, Nieuwenhuis et al. 2012, p. 5 f.) and social media platforms. Everyone now has (often free) access to news and can also distribute them. Consequently, sales of the traditional printing business are declining (condivera 2016, p. 5 ff.), and newspapers lost many of their readers during the recent years. However, the problem is not that consumers have less demand for news, but that nowadays there is more competition and a lower willingness to pay (Leurdijk, Nieuwenhuis et al. 2012, p. 1 ff. ). According to a study by AWA, only 8.3% of newspaper readers would be interested in reading an e-paper version of a newspaper that costs money (Schneller 2017, p. 23). In order to react to those changes newspaper brands should understand the factors that influence loyalty towards their brand and invest in relationships with their readers (Leurdijk, Nieuwenhuis et al. 2012, p. 11). Thus, only if newspapers understand their

readership, they will be able to interact (condivera 2016, p. 6).

### Different types of newspapers

There are two different types of newspapers that address people in different ways: quality and tabloid newspapers (Bucher and Schumacher 2007, p. 528). Quality newspapers have a large format and present news in an analytical, extensive and comprehensive way. They are written by specialists and their content is informative rather than sensational. They usually have a well-educated readership that works on a middle or senior job level and sees newspapers as a valuable source of information and opinions. Those expect analytical, balanced and unbiased content that is based on clearly verified facts only (Malovic and Vilovic 2009, p. 2). Tabloid newspapers, however, pay relatively little attention to subjects related to politics, economics and society but rather to sports, scandals and popular entertainment (Sparks 2000, p. 10). Nevertheless, compared to their British counterparts, the German tabloid press has a rather high political coverage (The Economist 2011). Tabloids are typically written in a sensationalist, personalized (Johansson 2007, p. 7) and storytelling style and focus on greater use of visual images (Bird 2009, p. 41). They are colorful and compact and stand out with bold and huge headlines as well as picture-dominated frontpages (Johansson 2007, p. 87). In the UK, tabloids are known to be more aggressive and sensationalist than in Germany which is due to the lack of competition in Germany, where the only tabloid sold on a national level is BILD (The Economist 2011). They often experience a negative image in society, as they are accused of "dumbing down" the media newspaper. Also, they are known to compete for the group of newspaper readers with the lowest incomes and educational levels (Johansson 2007, p. 7). In order to make informed decisions on how to affect consumer's choice (Jacoby and Kyner 1973, p. 2) and create and retain loyal customers, marketers should understand the factors that influence loyalty towards their newspaper brand (Møller

Jensen and Hansen 2006, p. 442). Consequently, the question arises which factors drive loyalty towards newspaper brands and if there are any differences between quality and tabloid newspapers. To answer this question, derived from literature, a theoretical model was developed, which can be seen in figure 1. The model will test if brand performance, brand imagery, brand trust and switching costs positively influence brand loyalty towards quality and tabloid newspapers and which attributes are important within those four influ-

(Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.). Competitors are for example Die Welt or Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Analysing the SZ's brand performance, especially product characteristics like the qualitative content dealing with current and profound subjects regarding politics, economics, media, culture, sports and science, stick out. Furthermore, the newspaper stands out through its multi-opinion and independent journalism (Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.) and its left-liberal orientation (IfM n.d., n.p). It is unique

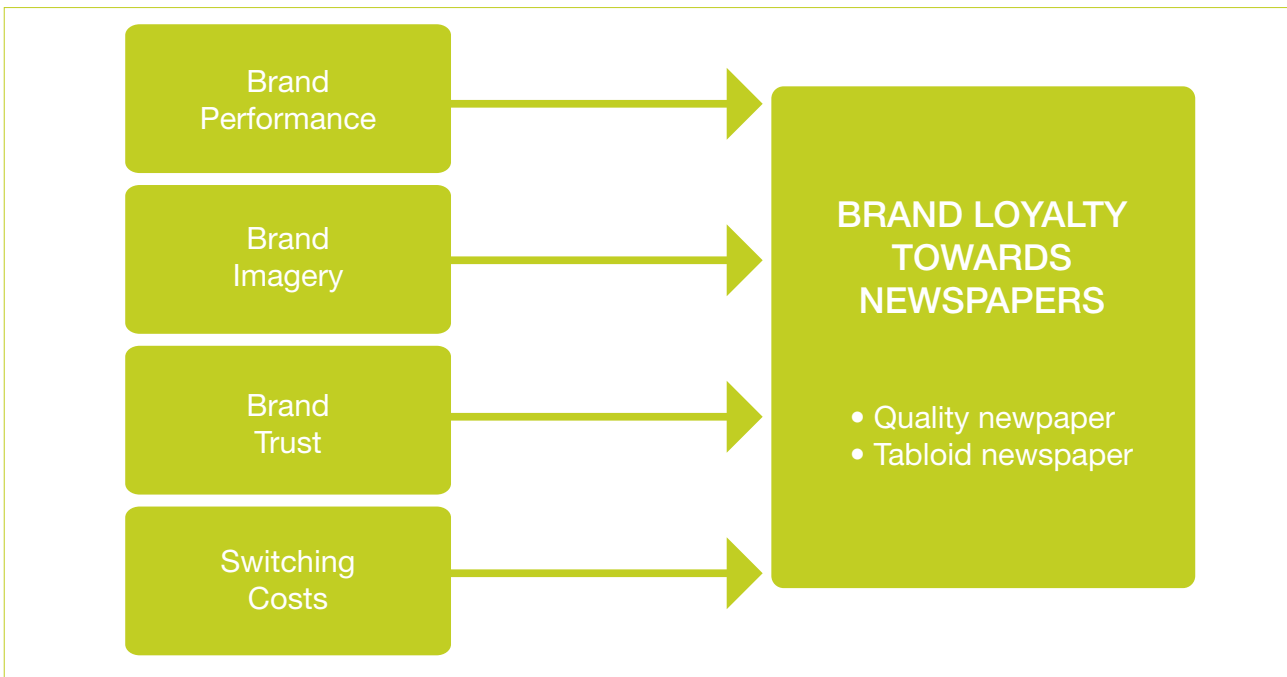


Figure 1: Potential drivers of brand loyalty towards newspaper brands  
Source: Own representation

encers. Hereby, an empirical research on the basis of the Süddeutsche Zeitung as quality newspaper and BILD as tabloid newspaper will be conducted. Firstly, both newspapers were analysed in regard to their brand characteristics and after, in-depth interviews with readers of both newspapers were conducted.

### Quality newspaper: What characterizes the Süddeutsche Zeitung?

The Süddeutsche Zeitung was founded in 1945 and is nowadays one of the most popular German national quality newspapers. It belongs to the publishing house Süddeutscher Verlag and reaches around 1.13 million readers daily (2016)

for its “Seite Drei”- articles which contain in-depth features about different topics – with a focus on people and their stories rather than abstract data (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2010, n.p.). It publishes various regional versions, especially around the area of Munich (Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.). In addition to the printed version, an online version of the newspaper is offered, which has around 11.45 million unique users per month (December 2017) (AGOF 2017). Regarding its product reliability and accessibility, the newspaper is known for always delivering good quality. It is available everywhere in Germany either as a printed version or online via website or app. Also, the newspaper offers different subscription options



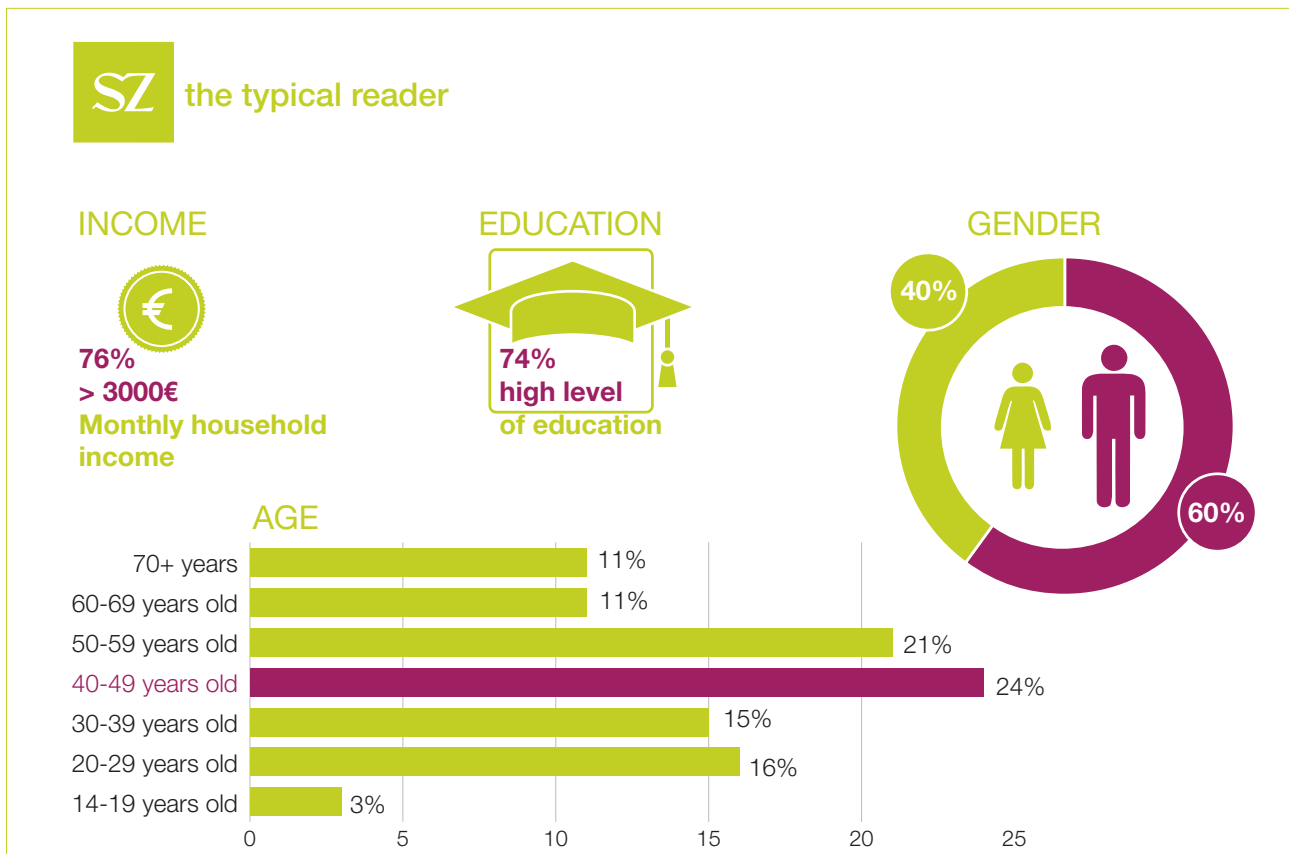


Figure 2: The typical SZ reader  
 Source: Own representation based on media impact, 2017

which can be chosen according to the customer's needs (Süddeutsche Zeitung n.d., n.p.). Online, some articles can even be accessed for free. The service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy have rather a negative image. Although the SZ customer service is reachable via telephone and e-mail, there are several reviews on the rating platform dooyoo.de, where customers complain about the service. Most of them felt cheated when trying to end their subscription (dooyoo n.d., n.p.). In terms of style and design, the SZ is rather plain. Its layout is clear, legible and clean. The font being used was developed only for the newspaper and is supposed to be part of its brand identity (Kister 2012, n.p.). The headlines are bold and big but always in relation to the text size. Although colourful pictures can be found on a number of pages, the text itself is still in focus. Comparing the price of the SZ to other daily quality newspapers in Germany, there are no big differences. Looking on the brand imagery of the SZ, it is seen that it has a distinct user profile (figure 2).

Its readers are generally in a high education and income group. The majority (74%) has a high level of education and a monthly household income of more than 3000€ (76%). The majority of the readers is between 40 to 59 years old, and in 2017, the newspaper had 60% male and 40% female readers (media impact 2017, n.p.). The SZ's claim is "Set your standards high", which is an important part of its brand personality (Wunderhaus 2017, n.p.). It sets value on critical journalists and principles like liberality, tolerance and editorial freedom (Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.). With its independent and objective reporting it wants to contribute to the democratic society (Wunderhaus 2017, n.p.). On the review platform dooyoo the Süddeutsche Zeitung has a rating of 4 stars out of 5, based on 46 reviews. Analysing the positive reviews, especially adjectives like informative, up-to-date, sincere, qualitative, independent, extensive and enthralling were mentioned (dooyoo n.d., n.p.). In addition, the newspaper has a long history, as it was the first newspaper in Bavaria that the US

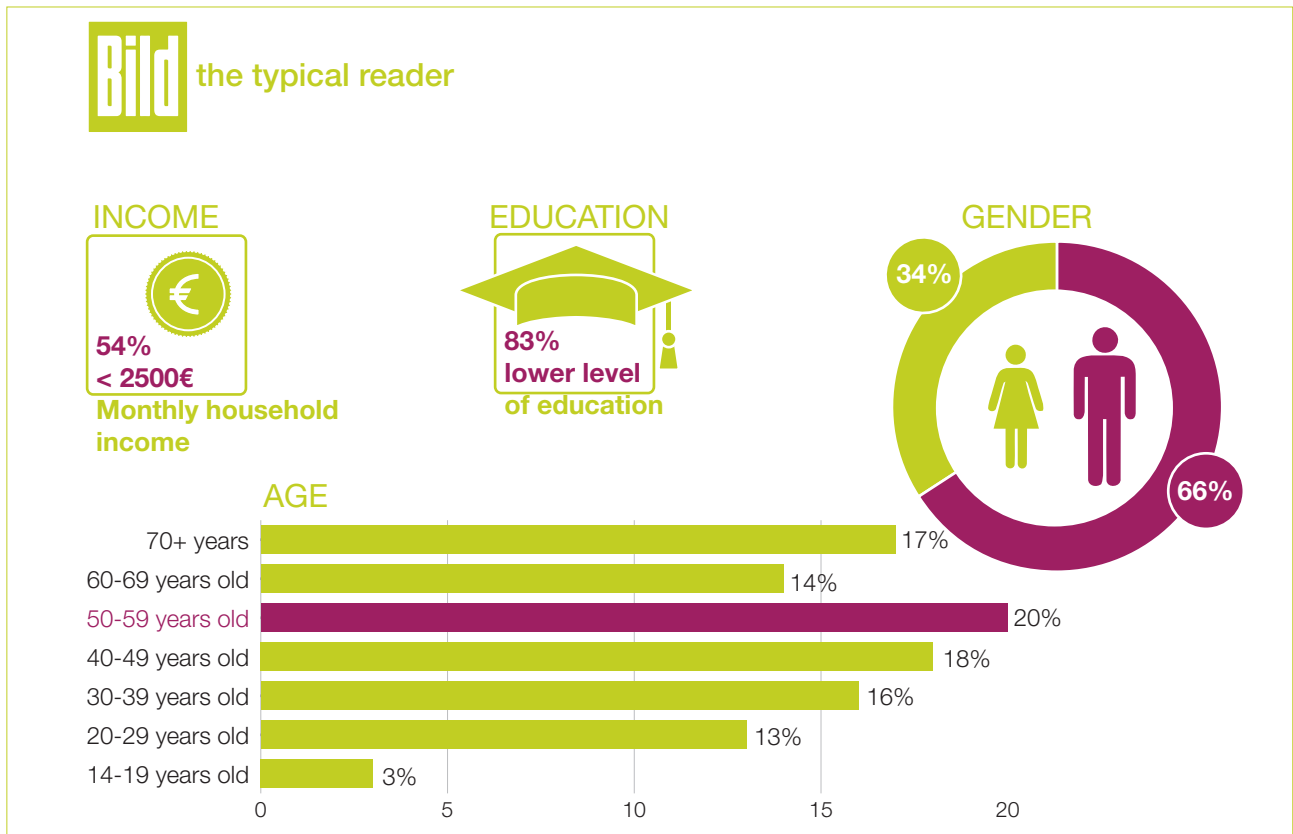


Figure 3: The typical BILD reader  
Source: Own representation based on media impact, 2017

military government allowed after World War II. Ever since, it is regarded as the fundament for free press in Bavaria (Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.). Concerning the brand trust, it turns out that the SZ is especially known for its credibility (Süddeutscher Verlag n.d., n.p.). Compared to other national quality newspapers in Germany, the SZ has the highest amount of readers that exclusively read this and no other national quality newspaper (LAE 2017, n.p.). Thus, it can be indicated that the SZ savours trust among its readers.

The brand tries to commit its existing customers by creating switching costs through different subscription options. However, no special loyalty programs are offered in order to keep customers.

### Tabloid newspaper: What characterizes BILD?

BILD was first published in 1952 and describes itself as “the biggest European daily newspaper”. It belongs to the media company Axel Springer and reaches around 9.97 million readers daily (Axel Springer 2016). A competitor is for example

Hamburger Morgenpost. However, BILD is the only one that is published on a national level.

Analysing its brand performance, it turns out that its product characteristics include current topics from economics, politics, entertainment, sports and celebrities. BILD describes itself as being a newspaper that keeps readers better informed about the topics of the day – with a clear, concise style and the “best pictures” (Axel Springer 2016). It says about itself that it provides its readers with topics that agitates them, is written with passion and turns facts into emotions. That it is omnipresent and helps readers to filter the relevant news out of the multiplicity of news every day (BILD and Media impact 2017, p. 4). Additional to the printed version (with 22 regional versions), a digital version is offered (bild.de), which is said to be Germany’s biggest news-and-entertainment portal (BILD n.d., n.p.). It has around 22 million unique users monthly (AGOF n.d., n.p.). Its product reliability has a rather negative image. BILD is known for not always delivering the best quality and has often been criticized for that. However,

it is easily accessible everywhere in Germany. It can also be accessed with different subscription options or as a single copy. The digital version (BILDplus) can be either read on the website or on apps. Online, some articles can be accessed for free. This means that BILD's Paid Content strategy can be described as a freemium model. BILD's customer service is reachable via telephone and e-mail. So far, no reviews exist about its customer service. That indicates that the service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy is rather positive. BILD's style and design is quite unique. The newspaper tries to appeal to its readers' emotions and often speaks to them directly (e.g. with the term "we"). Its features are short, easy to understand and often dramatized and provocative. It uses personified language, neologisms and big, bold and screaming headlines. The BILD writing style creates pictures and the newspaper is popular for its huge colourful pictures that often leave people speechless (BILD and Media impact 2017, p. 4). Compared to German quality newspapers, the price is rather low. Depending on the region, a single copy costs between 0.50€ and 0.90€ (Axel Springer n.d. , n.p.).

Examining the brand imagery, it turns out that

BILD also has a distinct user profile (figure 3). Most of the readers are in a lower education and income class, 54% have a monthly household income of less than 2500€. 66% of the BILD readers are male and 34% female and more than 50% are above the age of 50 (media impact 2017, n.p.). BILD has a unique brand personality and value: it polarises. On the one hand it is known to have a rather negative image and is criticised a lot, but on the other hand it is very popular and has many readers. On the review platform dooyoo it has a rating of only 2 stars out of 5 - based on 179 reviews. The words that were often used to describe the tabloid newspaper were "dull", "manipulating", "lying" and "baiting". Numerous positive reviews, however, state that BILD is entertaining, fast in delivering news, understandable, concise and direct (dooyoo n.d., n.p.). Its history goes back to 1952, when Axel Springer initiated BILD as he wanted to offer the people an unconventional newspaper with short texts and plenty of pictures. Through that, he wanted to offer a printed version of television (von der Burchard 2012, n.p.). However, during its history, BILD has been criticised many times for its features.

BILD is known as a newspaper that often publishes

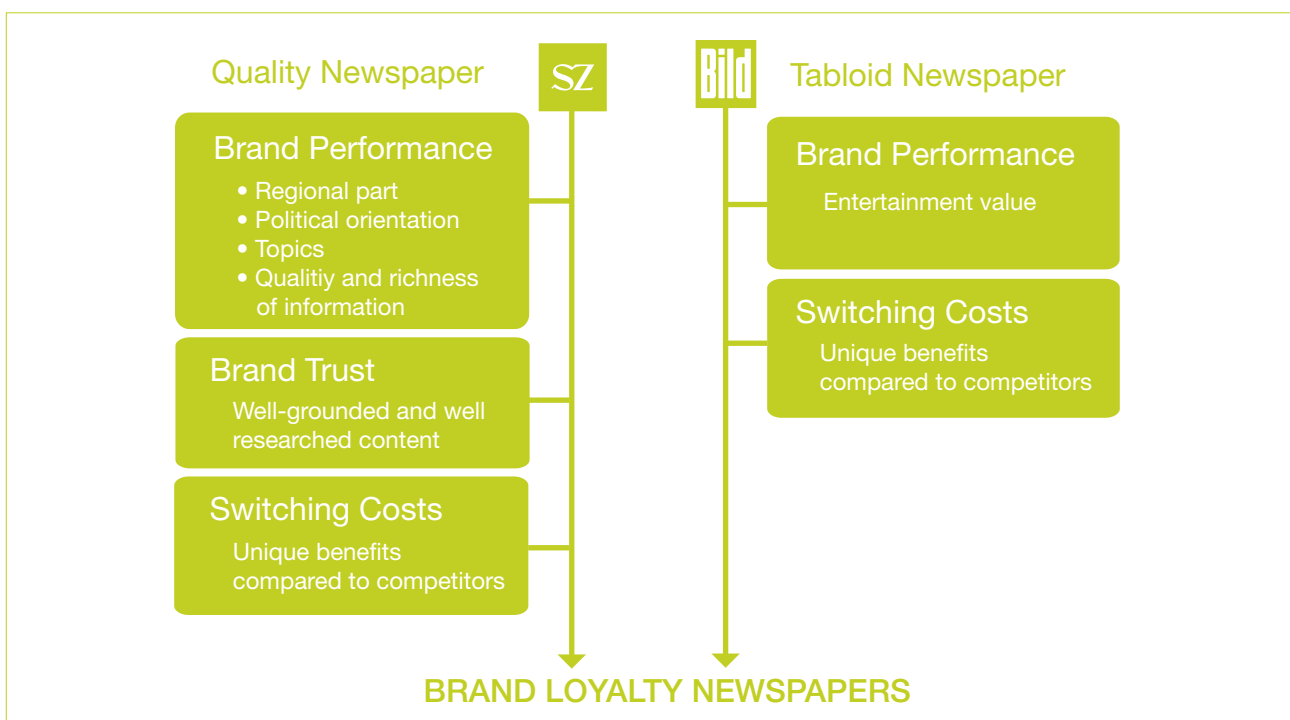


Figure 4: Brand loyalty drivers of SZ and BILD  
Source: Own representation based on media impact, 2017



articles that are not very well-researched and thus untrue. As mentioned earlier, on the review platform dooyoo many users described the tabloid as lying and manipulating (dooyoo n.d., n.p.). This might indicate that the brand trust in BILD is quite low.

As already mentioned, it is quite easy to switch between news provider brands. BILD tries to retain its customers with different subscription offers. Furthermore, it provides its readers with unique content and a unique style that, so far, no other news provider offers. This might indicate that the switching costs for users are quite high.

### Why are readers loyal to the Süddeutsche Zeitung and BILD?

To identify the factors that influence brand loyalty towards the Süddeutsche Zeitung and BILD, in-depth interviews were conducted. For each newspaper, three loyal customers were interviewed. In total, three males and three females participated (one female and two males for the SZ and two females and one male for BILD). In the context of this article, loyalty is defined as repeated reading behaviour. In the following, the interviews will be presented, analysed and the results compared.

### The customers' brand loyalty and reading behaviour

First of all, to make sure that the right target group is interviewed, the participants were asked if they are loyal to either the Süddeutsche Zeitung or BILD and how often they read the newspaper in focus. All SZ readers had a daily subscription to the quality newspaper, whereas only one of the BILD readers was subscribed to BILDplus (online version) (BILD reader 3). The other two participants either read it online (BILD reader 2) or buy single printed copies (BILD reader 1), both a few times a week. Secondly, they were asked whether they read the newspaper online, offline or both. Among the SZ readers all participants mainly read the printed version, but two of them also check articles online sometimes (SZ reader 2, SZ reader 3). Among the BILD readers, all three participants

read it online and only one person claims to buy the printed version from time to time (BILD reader 1). Next, they were asked if they are also loyal to other newspapers. Among the SZ readers, one person exclusively reads the SZ (SZ reader 3) and the other two also subscribed to the Schwäbische Zeitung, which is a regional newspaper. Among the BILD readers all three answered that they also read other newspapers, but that they are not subscribed to any. To investigate the readers unaffected thoughts about the factors that are most important to them when choosing a newspaper, they were asked for the reasons why they chose the newspaper. All three SZ readers mentioned that the regional part (for Starnberg and south of Germany) of the newspaper is one of the reasons they subscribed to it. Another reason for all three of them is that it's orientated left-liberal and contains informative and qualitative content. One person also states to read the SZ because it is honest (SZ reader 3). Another person mentioned that to choose the SZ because it reports seriously, neutrally and independently and does not belong to the Axel Springer publishing house (SZ reader 1). The BILD readers especially mentioned the entertainment value of the tabloid. Two of the participants said that they foremost read the newspaper because of the gossip about celebrities and random people (BILD reader 3). One person also states to read it because it is more provocative than other newspapers (BILD reader 3). Another person pointed out that he is loyal to BILD because it visualizes information rather than printing too much text. Also, this person reads it because of the sports section (BILD reader 2).

### Brand performance and product attributes

The next question aimed to find out if the brand performance is important to the reader and if so, which particular product attributes the brand needs to comply with. All three SZ readers mentioned that for them the topics covered are very relevant. Hereby, politics, economics, culture, sports, science, regional topics and the opinion page were

named. Two respondents mentioned that to them it is also vital that the newspaper is well-arranged (SZ reader 1, SZ reader 2). One person added that it is significant that the newspaper gets delivered reliably (SZ reader 1). Furthermore, all BILD readers said that they are aware that BILD does not deliver the best quality but that they read it just for the entertainment value. All of them also mentioned that they like the short articles and the high number of pictures. One of the BILD readers also claimed to rather buy BILD instead of other newspapers because it is cheaper (BILD reader 1).

### The brand imagery of the newspapers

The next question asked the participants if the brand imagery is essential to the reader. For the SZ, all participants said that the image of the brand is not relevant to them and that it doesn't influence their loyalty towards the newspaper. One person however, mentioned that he likes the SZ because it started in Munich (SZ reader 1). Another person mentioned that she likes it for its social values (SZ reader 2). All BILD readers agreed that they are aware that the BILD and their readers are often criticised but that this does not influence their reading behaviour. One participant stated that people shouldn't take BILD too seriously and that its provocative and sometimes outrageous content, is what creates its entertainment value (BILD reader 3).

### Brand trust and its influence on reading behaviour

The next question was asked in order to discover if the people trust the newspaper brand and if that influences their reading behaviour. For the SZ, all readers agreed that they trust the brand and that it is one of the most vital factors when choosing a newspaper. They want to be sure that they can trust the content and that it is well-grounded and researched. The BILD readers agreed that they do not trust the brand and that they know that the content is not always true. However, they rather read it for entertainment and consult other newspapers for more serious topics.

### Switching costs of the newspapers

The last question aimed to reveal whether the participants find it easy to switch between newspaper brands and if the switching costs influence their reading behaviour. Two of the SZ readers said that for them it is easy to switch to other brands, especially online (SZ reader 1, SZ reader 2). For one person it is not as easy because it reads the SZ for the Starnberger section and feels like that there is no satisfying alternative (SZ reader 3). All participants agreed that loyalty programs and subscription contracts do not influence their loyalty because for them mainly the brand performance and trust are important. If they were dissatisfied with those two factors, they would immediately switch to another brand. Among the BILD readers, two agreed that it is generally easy to shift to another brand – especially online (BILD reader 1, BILD reader 2). However, one participant finds it hard to switch because the tabloid offers her such a unique entertainment value (BILD reader 3). All of them agreed that loyalty programs and subscription contracts have no influence on their reading behaviour and that they stay loyal to BILD mainly because it offers more entertainment than any other newspaper.

### Summarizing and concluding the findings

Derived from the empirical research, it was seen that there are major differences in loyalty towards the two newspaper formats (figure 4). Loyalty towards the SZ is especially influenced by brand performance and brand trust. Switching costs also have an influence on loyalty whereas brand imagery does not influence loyalty. Regarding the brand performance, especially the regional part, the political orientation (here liberal-left), clarity, the topics as well as the quality and richness in information were important. As already mentioned, the SZ stands for credibility (Süddeutscher Verlag 2017, 2018), which seems to be highly correlated with brand trust. For the interviewed SZ readers, brand trust is mainly created through well-grounded and well-researched content. Furthermore, it is seen

that switching costs are mainly created through the benefits the brand offers to the customers, compared to other newspaper brands. Customer retention activities like subscription offers do not influence loyalty. However, if the readers were dissatisfied with the quality of the newspaper, they would switch to another brand immediately. Loyalty towards BILD is especially influenced by brand performance and switching costs. However, brand imagery and brand trust do not influence loyalty towards the tabloid. Regarding brand performance, especially the entertainment value of BILD is important. This derives from the provocative, entertaining and short texts with plenty of pictures and from topics like sports and stories about celebrities and random people. For BILD readers, switching costs are mainly created through the unique entertainment value of the tabloid that so far, no other daily newspaper provides. Customer retention activities like subscription offers do not influence loyalty.

To sum up, it could be found that loyalty towards the SZ is mainly created through brand performance and brand trust as well as product-related switching costs, whereas loyalty towards BILD is mainly formed through brand performance and product-related switching costs. Although for both reader groups brand performance is very important, they have different expectations towards it. While for the SZ readers primarily quality and richness in information are central, for BILD readers the entertainment value is crucial. Switching costs influence loyalty towards both newspapers in the point that the brands managed to create unique product-related benefits for their customers that so far, no other newspaper provides. Whereas for the SZ readers brand trust is very important, it is not for BILD readers, which is because BILD is mainly read for entertainment rather than staying up-to-date on serious topics. Brand imagery is not important to either reader group.

Through the digitalization, the circulation of newspapers is declining continuously whereas the use of the internet for reading news is rising steadily (Schneller 2017, p. 20). Thus, the multi-channel

distribution of newspapers will be gaining more and more importance within the next years. Frasquet et al. (2017) state that marketers need to coordinate their offline and online channels in order to build stronger brands and that in today's digital environment, where customers can easily switch between brands it is important to build strong customer-brand relationships. They found out that those customers that are loyal offline are more likely to develop online loyalty and that marketers can increase loyalty by enhancing trust beliefs and exploiting synergies between their offline and online channel. Thus, newspaper brands should be aware to shift loyalty towards their brand, so that they can build strong relationships with their readers. This might help them to also tie online readers to their brand.



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