



## Drivers of consumer–brand identification

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of *consumer–brand identification* (CBI) is central to our understanding of how, when, and why brands help consumers articulate their identities. This paper proposes and tests an integrative theoretical framework of the antecedents of CBI. Six drivers of CBI, a moderator, and two consequences are posited and tested with survey data from a large sample of German household consumers. The results confirm the influence of five of the six drivers, namely, brand–self similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand social benefits, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences. Further, we find that all five of these antecedents have stronger causal relationships with CBI when consumers have higher involvement with the brand's product category. Finally, CBI is tied to two important pro-company consequences, brand loyalty and brand advocacy. Theoretical and managerial significance of the findings are discussed.

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“Choices are made more easily—either more routinely or more impulsively, seemingly—because one object is symbolically more harmonious with our goals, feelings, and self-definitions than another.” Sidney J. Levy (1959, p. 120)

“Why has the Toyota Prius enjoyed such success ... when most other hybrid models struggle to find buyers? One answer may be that buyers of the Prius want everyone to know they are driving a hybrid .... In fact, more than half the Prius buyers surveyed this spring ... said the main reason they purchased their car was that ‘it makes a statement about me.’” Micheline Maynard (2007)

### 1. Introduction

Striving for a sense of self (i.e., answering the question, “Who am I?”) is a fundamental aspect of the human condition (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Brewer, 1991; Freud, 1922; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Further, as succinctly put by Belk (1988, p. 160), “we are what we have”—what we buy, own, and consume define us to others as well as to ourselves. In this context, it is widely recognized

that *brands* have the ability to embody, inform, and communicate desirable consumer identities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2009; Fournier, 1998, 2009; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010; Levy, 1959; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008; Tsai, 2005). Not surprisingly then, a growing body of research has focused on what it means for consumers to identify with brands and the implications of such *consumer–brand identification* (CBI) for both consumer behavior and effective brand management (e.g., Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2009; Lam et al., 2010).

Much less is understood, however, about the *drivers* of CBI—what factors cause it, when, and why. While a comprehensive sense for what produces CBI is of considerable importance to both marketing academics and practitioners, these issues have been examined from many diverse perspectives, causing our understanding to be rather fragmented. For instance, in their work on consumer–company identification, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) draw on social identity theory to proffer consumers' self-defining and enhancing motives as the main drivers of identification (see also Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). The work of Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2009), on the other hand, locates such identity-based bonds in the broader social context, suggesting that consumers bond with brands whose identities are consonant with desirable reference groups and celebrity endorsers. The communal consumption of brands and its role in the construction of identity narratives by consumers is stressed in the work of Fournier (2009), McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), and O'Guinn and Muniz (2009). Sociocultural factors such as the circulation of brand stories and myths among consumers are highlighted by Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003), Diamond et al. (2009), Holt (2005), and Thompson,

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Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006). Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park (2005) and Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010), on the other hand, emphasize the role of emotional reactions to the brand in the formation of consumer–brand connections. It is also worth noting that while it is assumed that CBI can occur in a wide range of categories, empirical research in this domain has usually been restricted to single category studies (e.g., Lam et al., 2010), thereby precluding a deeper understanding of the category-specific determinants, if any, of CBI.

Given this backdrop of fragmented insights into the drivers of CBI, the present paper makes three key contributions. First, it synthesizes a wide range of ideas pertaining to identity construction, identification, and brand relationships to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for the determinants of CBI. The outcome of our conceptual synthesis is a set of six antecedents of CBI that includes three primarily cognitive variables (brand–self similarity, brand distinctiveness, and brand prestige) as well as three affectively rich brand-related factors (brand social benefits, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences). Second, to strengthen the validity of our conceptual framework and to go beyond extant single-category examinations of CBI (e.g., Lam et al., 2010), we implicate an important category-level variable—product category involvement—as a moderator of the relationships between CBI and its various drivers. Additionally, we relate CBI to two key consequences: brand loyalty and brand advocacy. Finally, in the process of establishing this nomological network for CBI, we develop a valid, parsimonious measure of this focal construct that attempts to assess the state of CBI more independently of its antecedents and consequences (e.g., social rewards, negative affective states produced by discontinued brand usage) than extant measures (e.g., Lam et al., 2010).

Next, we develop our conceptual framework culminating in a set of predictions pertaining to the antecedents and consequences of CBI. We then test our hypotheses with survey data from a large sample of German household consumers. The paper ends with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial significance of our findings.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. The concept of consumer–brand identification

Brands, as carriers of symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959), can help consumers achieve their fundamental identity goals and projects (Belk,

1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2009; Fournier, 2009; Holt, 2005; Huffman, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2000). Therefore, consumer–brand identification, defined here as a consumer’s perceived state of oneness with a brand, is a valid and potent expression of our quest for identity-fulfilling meaning in the marketplace of brands. This definition is consistent with the organizational behavior literature, wherein identification typically has been defined as a perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate, such as employees with their companies or students with their alma maters (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stuart, 2002). Note that consistent with the theory in this domain (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), we assume that the *state* of CBI is distinct from the process of comparison of self traits with brand traits that may *contribute* to CBI.

Table 1 presents an overview of constructs related to CBI and their definitions from prior literature. While our conceptualization of CBI is rooted in organizational identity, it is related to the construct of self-brand connections proposed by Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2009), defined as the extent to which an individual has incorporated a brand into his or her self-concept. However, the construct of CBI is, notably, narrower in that it excludes the potential motivations guiding such self-brand connections, such as communicating one’s identity to others and achieving one’s desired self (both part of Escalas and Bettman’s self-brand connection measure). CBI is similarly akin to the broader notions of brand–self connection in the work of Park et al. (2010) and the component called self-connection in Fournier’s (2009) Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) scale. As in the case of self-brand connections, we regard the construct of CBI as narrower than, but potentially overlapping with, constructs such as BRQ (Fournier, 2009) and brand attachment (Park et al., 2010).

Lam et al. (2010) take a somewhat different approach by defining CBI as “a customer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand” (p. 130). In doing so, these authors view CBI as a formative construct composed of three dimensions. The cognitive dimension of their construct is similar to the notion of cognitive organizational identification in the work of Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). The emotional consequences of brand usage serve as the second dimension of Lam et al.’s CBI construct, and “evaluative CBI” is its final dimension, defined as “whether the consumer thinks the psychological oneness with the brand is valuable to him or her

**Table 1**  
Constructs related to consumer–brand identification in prior literature.

Construct name	Construct definition	Representative literature
Organizational identification	Perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization’s successes and failures as one’s own. Cognitive connection between the definition of an organization and the definition a person applies to himself or herself, thereby viewing identification as a process of self-definition.	Ashforth and Mael (1989), Mael and Ashforth (1992) Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994), and Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell (2002)
Cognitive organizational identification	Perceived oneness or belongingness to an organization of which the person is a member. Cognitive state of self-categorization that reflects self-awareness of one’s membership in an organization.	Bhattacharya et al. (1995) Bergami and Bagozzi (2000)
Consumer–company identification	Identification with a company as an active, selective, and volitional act motivated by the satisfaction of one or more self-definitional needs.	Bhattacharya and Sen (2003)
Customer–brand identification	Customer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand.	Lam et al. (2010)
Brand attitude	Individual’s judgment of the extent to which a brand is good or bad.	Park et al. (2010)
Brand love	Degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name. Different cognitions (e.g., about self-identity), feelings, sense of connectedness and fit, and behaviors (e.g., frequent interactions, and resource investments).	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012)
Brand attachment	Strength of the bond connecting a brand with the self.	Park et al. (2010)
Emotional brand attachment	Bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand and involves feelings (i.e., affection, passion, and connection) toward the brand.	Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011)
Brand prominence	Salience of the cognitive and affective bond that connects a brand to the self.	Park et al. (2010)
Self-brand connection, Brand–self connection	Extent to which an individual has incorporated a brand into his or her self-concept.	Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2009), Fournier (2009), and Park et al. (2010)
Consumer–brand identification	Consumer’s perceived state of oneness with a brand.	Present research

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