



# The role of consumer–brand identification in building brand relationships<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate relationships between congruity of consumer and brand values, brand identification, brand commitment, and word of mouth. The results show that congruity of consumer and brand values tends to have positive influence on consumers' identification. Consumers who identify with a brand tend to commit stronger to a brand and generate positive word of mouth. The results show that consumers' identification fully mediates the impact of value congruity on brand commitment. However, brand commitment does not mediate the impact of consumers' identification on generating positive word of mouth.

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## 1. Introduction

For decades, brands have been crucial for building relationships with consumers assuring long-term business success. In the time of great consumer skepticism toward brands, coupled with the fall in value of traditional media in promoting brands and the current global economic crisis, questions concerning consumer–brand identification have become even more important for brand management. Here, consumer–brand identification refers to the individual's sense of sameness with a particular brand. Despite growing awareness, scholars (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Tildesley and Coote, 2009) argue that there is still much to learn about the role of consumers' identification with a brand, as well as its relation to consumer behavior and branding.

Scholars recognize that consumer identification process has a significant impact on individual consumer behavior including: consumer buying-related decisions (Ahearne et al., 2005), brand preference (Tildesley and Coote, 2009), consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2001), psychological sense of brand community and brand commitment (Casaló et al., 2008), consumer satisfaction and a higher possibility of repurchase (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008),

positive word of mouth (Del Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008) and consumers' willingness to pay a price premium (Del Rio et al., 2001).

Though prior studies offer important insights into consumer identification process and related constructs, future research could still bridge important gaps in this scholarly inquiry. Firstly, whilst much research deal with concepts that relate to consumers' identification with a brand in the literature, there is little attempt to empirically document the factors that affect consumers' identification with a brand and to relate the concept of consumers' identification with other variables, such as brand commitment and positive word of mouth (WOM). Secondly, the branding literature mostly focuses on the concept of brand loyalty and less on the concept of brand commitment generally housed within the relationship marketing literature (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Additionally, the understudied relationship between brand commitment and positive WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001) has recently emerged as a major issue in using new media in brand promotion.

An investigation of relations among the following key issues concerning the consumers' identification with a brand value congruity, consumer–brand identification, consumer–brand commitment, and positive WOM should bridge these gaps in consumer behavior and branding literature. The purpose of this study is to conduct such an investigation.

This paper employs a pragmatist position and searches for methods and approaches that can best address useful research questions. This approach supports the importance of theories as mechanisms to help explain and predict phenomena and create valuable practical

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implications (Wicks and Freeman, 1998). As Ravasi and van Rekom (2003) report, consumer identification clearly has multidisciplinary foundations. Thus, on the theoretical side, the study advances the relations among studied concepts by integrating diverse literatures. On the practical side, this paper uses the approach similar to consumer psychology approaches such as self-brand connection and consumer-brand relationships Van Doorn et al. (2010), which should provide compelling answers about the relationships among the researched phenomena.

The rest of the paper reads as follows. The next section presents an overview of the relevant literature and hypotheses. Following that is a discussion of study methodology and findings. The paper concludes with highlighting managerial implications, research limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Consumers' identification with a brand

Two main streams of studying consumer identification are present in the literature: interpretative/sociological and psychological approaches. While sociological approaches mostly interpret structures within which the identification processes unfold, the psychological approaches illuminate the corresponding processes at the level of the individual (Ravasi and van Rekom, 2003).

The first group of approaches tries to explain consumer behavior as an important part of construction of self (Belk, 1988; Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Kleine et al., 1993). Similarly to theorists of consumer culture and society (Douglas and Isherwood, 2005; Ekstrom and Brembeck, 2004; Warde, 2008) researchers in the marketing field establish that brands, as the signifiers of consumption goods, are important in creating and communicating consumer identity (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008; Rodhain, 2006). Because brands and possessions help consumers emphasize their uniqueness, express their identity, and provide a sense of past, consumers tend to identify with them at an early stage in life (Belk, 1988). McEwen (2005) agrees with this argument: a consumer tends to create powerful relations with brands because they express and enhance one's identity, which play an important role in a consumer's life. Even though this relationship is not interpersonal, brands can take the role of the "other" with whom the consumer identifies, especially if consumers animate, humanize or somehow personalize the brand (Fournier, 1998, p. 346). The perception of brands and social entities facilitate consumers' identification with a brand (Scott and Lane, 2000). Identification in this respect is identification with an object instilled with meanings that, in relation to the individual, functions as a pseudo person, while the consumer perceives its meanings and characteristics as his or her own. As such, according to Lasswell's identification theory through a symbol (Lasswell, 1935/1965), this paper defines consumers' identification with a brand as the perception of sameness between the brand (signifying an object with symbolic meanings) and the consumer.

Beside this view, most definitions of consumers' identification with a brand derive from social identity theory based on social psychology. According to this theory, Kim et al. (2001, p. 196) define the level of consumer-brand identification as the degree to which the brand expresses and enhances consumers' identity. Del Rio et al. (2001) distinguish between personal identification and social identification function of a brand (see also Carlson et al., 2008). Personal identification function means that consumers can identify with a specific brand and develop feelings of affinity towards the brand, whereas social identification refers to the brand's ability to act as a communication instrument allowing consumers to manifest the desire to integrate with or to dissociate from the groups of individuals that make up their closest social environment (Del Rio et al., 2001, p. 412). According to Carlson et al. (2008, p. 286), personal identification with a brand refers to the degree of overlap between an individual's self-schema and the schema s/he holds for a brand.

### 2.2. Value congruity

Consumers are likely to find brand's identity more attractive when the brand matches their own sense of who they are because such identities enable them to maintain and express their sense of self more fully and authentically (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). The self-congruity theory (Johar and Sirgy, 1991) defines value congruity as a mental comparison that consumers make in respect to the similarity or dissimilarity of entity's values and their own set of values. Self-congruity theory defines consumer behavior as partly determined by the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product user or brand image and the consumer self-concept (Hamilton and Xiaolan, 2005, p. 7). Such psychological comparison can lead to high congruity when consumers perceive that brand image matches their own sense of self (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). Using perceived brand values and consumer values to measure value congruity is similar to the brand personality congruity (BPC) concept where instead of user-imagery brand personality is used to assess brand image (Parker, 2009). However, values can also act as an important and basic linking element between consumers and a brand (Allen et al., 2002; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003), and have an important influence on consumer activities. Consumers tend to acquire brands to perform actions that move them closer to realizing their values and ideal selves (Belk, 1988).

Similarly, from the social identity theory perspective Bhattacharya and Sen (2003, p. 77) in the corporate context propose that in the process of identification "a state of self-categorization into organizationally defined categories" helps consumers to compare their own defining characteristics such as values with those that define the company. Hence, brand values that are congruent with consumers' values are likely to lead to stronger identification:

**H1.** Value congruity positively influences consumers' identification with a brand.

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) further suggest that identification relates to satisfaction of self-definitional consumer needs. Moreover, because consumers have needs for self-consistency and self-esteem, brands that can establish high self-congruity do not enhance only consumer-brand identification, but also positive attitudes toward the brand (Hamilton and Xiaolan, 2005). Some previous studies have already confirmed that self-congruity has a positive impact on brand loyalty (Kressman et al., 2006; Sirgy et al., 2007), which is a similar though weaker behavioral process compared to consumers' commitment to a brand. Organizational identity theory additionally confirms the impact of congruity on commitment by suggesting that identity congruence has a significant effect on member commitment (Dutton et al., 1994; Foreman and Whetten, 2002).

**H2.** Value congruity positively influences consumers' commitment to a brand.

### 2.3. Consumers' commitment to a brand

Consumers' commitment to a brand implies an emotional or psychological attachment that reflects the degree to which a brand is firmly entrenched as the only acceptable choice within a product class (Warrington and Shim, 2000, p. 764). Commitment in contrast to identification represents a positive attitude toward the brand while consumers' self and the brand remain separate entities (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 333). Brand commitment also closely relates to but is different from brand loyalty. Brand loyalty refers to the behavioral perspective and reflects mainly in the repeated purchase of a particular brand (Assael, 1998) as well as consumers' need to reduce effort and simplify decision-making processes (Warrington and Shim, 2000). Brand commitment, on the other hand, relates to an attitudinal perspective. This perspective is the "reason why brand commitment is a better

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