



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Customer relationship building: The role of brand attractiveness and consumer–brand identification

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2014

Received in revised form 17 December 2015

Accepted 22 December 2015

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Identification

Social identity theory

Value congruence

Customer similarity

Brand loyalty

Consumer behavior

ABSTRACT

Building enduring relationships with consumers is a key marketing objective for most firms, but how can they develop such relationships? Drawing on social identity and self-verification theories, this research postulates that value congruence and customer-to-customer similarity drives consumer–brand identification directly and indirectly through brand attractiveness, which in turn paves the way for the development of deep relationships with brands (captured through brand loyalty and resilience to negative information). The findings show that (1) brand identification extends to both private and public consumption settings, but the respective drivers of identification markedly differ; (2) the similarity–attraction paradigm helps explain why consumers are attracted to some brands and not others; (3) identified consumers tend to ignore negative information they receive about the brand. Findings suggest that managers should identify the salient determinants for enhancing identification and create the highest possible congruence between the values of the target market and the brand.

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1. Introduction

An understanding of conventional marketing indicators, such as what drives customer satisfaction and the importance of perceived quality, may not be sufficient for sustained success in a competitive landscape characterized by increased complexity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), product proliferation (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), consumer skepticism about brands, and a challenging economic climate (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Increasingly, companies are exploring means of building long-term relationships with customers (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011), motivated by the positive outcomes that can emerge from such relationship-building efforts (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Following the work of Bergami and Bagozzi (2000), we define CBI as the perceived overlap between one's own self-concept and the brand's identity. Consumer–brand identification (CBI) acknowledged as “the primary psychological substrate for that kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers” (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 76), may be a useful construct

in understanding the underlying mechanisms that explain the relationship between consumers and brands.

Although previous studies on CBI provide important insights, two key limitations are apparent. First, despite acknowledgments of the importance of CBI as a key antecedent to consumer behavior (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013), research knows little about the drivers of CBI (Marin & De Maya, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Although building strong relationships with consumers likely enhances their favorable attitudes and behaviors toward the brand, consumers' motivations for entering into volitional enduring relationships with brands remain unclear (Fournier, 1998; Marin & Ruiz, 2007). The concept of self-verification (i.e., preserving one's self-concept; North & Swann, 2009) provides a starting point to investigate consumers' motives. Research suggests that self-verification or self-continuity results in positive self-evaluations, as well as positive evaluations of the other, and thus facilitates attachment to the other (Burke & Stets, 1999). Prior research illustrates the role of brand associations in verifying and maintaining one's self-concept (e.g., Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998). However, the extent to which consumers use brand associations (e.g., brand values, other users/customers of the brand) to verify and maintain their self-concept and, thus, to feel a sense of oneness with the brand (for an exception, see Tuškej et al., 2013) remains unexplored.

Second, although previous research proposes that people are more likely to infer identity from publicly than privately consumed products (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Shavitt, 1990), privately consumed products

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can still contribute to and reflect people's identity (Berger & Heath, 2007; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). However, most prior empirical research on CBI typically focuses on brands of publicly consumed products. Thus, remaining unclear is whether the salience of antecedents and consequences of CBI across publicly versus privately consumed products is uniform.

Against this background, this study makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study builds on and extends CBI research by highlighting the importance of other customers' influence on CBI. Second, this study is among the first to introduce value congruence as a direct driver of CBI. Tuškej et al. (2013) examine the direct impact of value congruence on CBI but do not consider the intervention of mediating variables. Building on Bhattacharya and Sen's (2003) conceptual model, we extend previous research by examining brand attractiveness as a mediator of the effect of both value congruence and customer-to-customer similarity on CBI. Third, this study tests whether CBI plays a dominant role in influencing consumer behavior (i.e., consumer resilience to negative information and brand loyalty). This investigation provides additional insights into the role of brand attractiveness as a significant predictor of consumer behavior. Finally, in contrast with previous empirical studies that focus on conspicuous products, this study examines both publicly and privately consumed products.

In the following, we explain the theoretical foundations supporting the conceptual model before developing the hypothesized relationships between the constructs under examination. Then, we detail the research method, after which we present the analysis and research results. Next, we delineate the study outcomes and offer theoretical and managerial implications. We conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and directions for further research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

The conceptual framework (Fig. 1) explicates potential antecedents and consequences of CBI. The framework draws on theories of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-verification (Swann, 1983), together with ideas from marketing studies on consumer identification (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The model postulates that value congruence and customer-to-customer similarity influence CBI directly and indirectly through brand attractiveness. In turn, CBI and brand attractiveness influence consumer behavior (i.e., brand loyalty and resilience to negative information).

2.1. Social identity theory and CBI

Social identity theory is the primary theoretical foundation of identification in both organization studies and marketing literature (Lam, 2012; Riketta, 2005). According to the theory, in addition to personal identity, social identity is an integral part of one's self-concept. Individuals' social identity derives from the social entities to which they belong,

such as demographic groups, educational institutions, and occupations (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Proponents of the theory suggest that individuals tend to simplify the social world by classifying themselves and others into various social groups. This social categorization not only helps them cognitively segment and order the social environment but also provides them with a means to define themselves and others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Drawing on social identity theory and organizational identification, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) extend the concept of identification to consumer–company relationships. Given that formal membership is not a prerequisite for identification (Scott & Lane, 2000), Bhattacharya and Sen argue that companies with attractive and meaningful social identities can partially fulfill consumers' key self-definitional needs and thus are valid targets for identification. Similarly, recent research proposes that consumers identify with brands (e.g., Donovan, Janda, & Suh, 2006; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), given that brands, as sources of symbolic meaning, can help consumers construct and maintain their identity (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2005).

2.2. Self-verification theory

Self-verification theory postulates that individuals are motivated to verify, confirm, and maintain both their positive and negative self-concepts (Swann, 1983). Individuals search for situations (including products and brands) that are consistent with their sense of self and avoid situations that threaten their existing self-views (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In an attempt to understand their selves and social worlds, individuals try to maintain a sense of self-continuity or self-verification over time and across situations (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Kunda, 1999). Self-continuity (i.e., consistency of the self-concept) is “the motive to behave consistently with our views of ourselves” (Banister & Hogg, 2004, p. 852). A stable self-concept provides individuals with a powerful sense of psychological coherence and the ability to predict and control their world (North & Swann, 2009). Identity theorists posit that the desire to develop a binding tie between oneself and some other social entity comes from self-verification (Burke & Stets, 1999).

Marketing literature echoes the idea that consumers' self-continuity or self-verification needs drive their choices of products and brands and that satisfying these needs is emotionally pleasing (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Marketing scholars postulate that consumers increasingly meet their self-continuity needs through their perceptions of congruence or similarity between their own self-concept and that of relevant brands (Lam, Ahearne, & Schillewaert, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). For example, “the Harley Davidson brand, with its free-spirited and rebellious image, is likely to appeal more to those individuals whose self-concept contains these traits” (Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007, p. 248). This matching process between consumers' self-concept and a given brand's symbolic attributes is known as self-congruity.

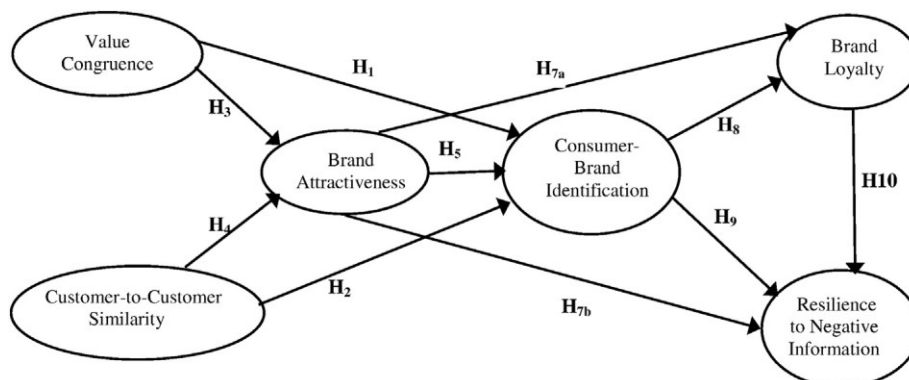


Fig. 1. The conceptual model. The figure does not show the mediating effects hypotheses for simplicity (Hypothesis 6a and Hypothesis 6b).

2.3. Antecedents of CBI

Consumer–brand value congruence (or value congruence for short) describes the similarity between consumers' personal values and their perceptions of the brand values (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Personal values refer to “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Value congruence, which is under the control of brand managers (e.g., through positioning and marketing activities), can help consumers fulfill their self-definitional needs for continuity or verification (Lam et al., 2013; Tuškej et al., 2013). Previous marketing research reports the influence of self–brand congruity (i.e., brand's personality rather than values is the point of reference for self-congruity) on constructs similar to CBI, such as brand attachment and brand relationship quality (Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber, & Lee, 2006; Malar et al., 2011). With the establishment of the role of self–brand congruity as a significant predictor of CBI (e.g., Kuenzal & Halliday, 2008; Lam et al., 2013), we expect consumers' perceptions of congruence between their own values and a brand's values to have similar influences on CBI. Thus:

Hypothesis 1. Value congruence is positively related to CBI.

Customer-to-customer similarity refers to the self-perceived similarity to other customers or users of the brand (Brocato, Voorhees, & Baker, 2012; Karaosmanoglu, Bas, & Zhang, 2011). Similarity is the degree to which customers are alike in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender) and psychographic traits (e.g., lifestyle, personality) (Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010). Research positions users or other customers of the brand as non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1993), intangible assets (Kim & Ko, 2012), or external communicators of identity that are not entirely under the control of the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). According to Martin (1996), customers influence one another either directly through interpersonal encounters or indirectly by being part of the environment. Although these indirect encounters may lack direct interaction with other customers of the brand, they may be more ubiquitous and involve processing of information about customers and their chosen brands (Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand, 2009). The customer-based component of the social environment entails how customers' perception of other customers' observed traits and characteristics influence their attitudes and behavior toward the brand (Brocato et al., 2012).

A key assumption of identification is the consumer's perception of belonging to a particular social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Both the similarity–attraction paradigm (Bryne, 1971) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posit that individuals prefer relationships with similar others to maintain a consistent sense of self (Marin & Ruiz, 2007). This proposition mirrors Cialdini's (2001) assertion that individuals can cultivate a fruitful relationship through similarities to other individuals. Empirical evidence provides support for similarity–attraction theory arguments in the consumption context (Karaosmanoglu et al., 2011), suggesting that when customers perceive high similarity to other customers of a company, they tend to become attached to that company. Similarly, Escalas and Bettman (2003) find that self-verification needs lead customers to form connections with brands associated with reference groups congruent with their self-concept. We therefore postulate that the extent to which consumers perceive high similarity to other customers of the brand influences their identification with a particular brand.

Hypothesis 2. Customer-to-customer similarity is positively related to CBI.

2.4. Antecedents and consequences of brand attractiveness

Brand attractiveness refers to the positive evaluation of the brand's central, distinctive, and enduring associations and characteristics

(Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009). Studies suggest that the need for self-continuity partially accounts for the attractiveness of a brand's perceived characteristics (e.g., Marin & Ruiz, 2007). In other words, a brand tends to have an attractive identity when the brand associations match the consumer's sense of self (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In support, Currás-Pérez et al. (2009) find that coherence, a brand identity characteristic that helps consumers maintain a consistent sense of self, is related to brand attractiveness. When the brand's values and consumers' personal values are congruent, consumers are more apt to express and exhibit the characteristics and values in their self-concept more fully and authentically (Dutton et al., 1994). Such congruency between the brand's and consumer's values corresponds to the notion of identity similarity that Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose as an important driver of perceived attractiveness of commercial entities, such as companies or brands. For example, a consumer who cares about animal rights will be drawn more to a brand such as the Body Shop (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus:

Hypothesis 3. Value congruence is positively related to brand attractiveness.

In an effort to satisfy their self-verification needs, consumers tend to evaluate a brand by matching their actual sense of self with the brand-user image (Kressmann et al., 2006). In other words, the attractiveness of a brand is likely to be related to the extent to which customers perceive other users of the brand to be similar to themselves; such a brand resembles the sense of who they are, offers the possibility for self-expression (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009), and paves the way for them to evaluate the brand positively (Kressmann et al., 2006). Building on the similarity–attraction paradigm, we postulate that a source of motivation underlying brand attractiveness is perceived similarity to other brand users. Therefore, to the extent that interpersonal attractions are indicative of those for brand attraction, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 4. Customer-to-customer similarity is positively related to brand attractiveness.

Consumer–brand relationships based on identification are selective and volitional acts on the part of consumers and cannot be imposed by companies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Consumers choose to identify with brands they perceive as attractive, motivated by their self-definitional needs fulfillment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identifying with a company that has an attractive perceived identity may result in benefits to consumers in terms of self-enhancement (Marin, Ruiz, & Rubio, 2009). Consumers will feel the motivational impulse to attain a psychological attachment to a brand when they perceive the brand as attractive and as partially fulfilling one or more of their fundamental self-definitional needs (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009). Previous research reports that perceived attractiveness of the company's attributes engenders consumer-company identification (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005; Marin & De Maya, 2013). Thus:

Hypothesis 5. Brand attractiveness is positively related to CBI.

Combining Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4, and Hypothesis 5 implies that brand attractiveness plays a positive mediating role in the links between value congruence and CBI and between customer-to-customer similarity and CBI. Thus:

Hypothesis 6. Brand attractiveness mediates the relationship between (a) value congruence and CBI and (b) customer-to-customer similarity and CBI.

Perceived attractiveness of the brand's central and enduring associations can positively influence both CBI and consumer behavior. Social identity theory highlights brand identification as a significant driver of consumer behavior, which largely stems from the attractiveness of the brand's identity (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003;

Currás-Pérez et al., 2009). Branding literature indicates the positive influence of meaningful brand associations on consumer choice, purchase preference, and intention and willingness to pay a price premium for the brand (e.g., Belén, Vazquez, & Iglesias, 2001; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). In other words, satisfying consumers' self-definitional motives through brand characteristics and attributes leads to greater consumer attitudinal and behavioral support (He, Li, & Harris, 2012). Thus, consumers' perceptions of a brand as attractive, motivated by self-definitional needs fulfillment, lead to both brand loyalty and a tendency to overlook any negative information received about the brand.

Hypothesis 7. Brand attractiveness is positively related to (a) brand loyalty and (b) resilience to negative information.

2.5. Consequences of CBI

The more the brand is integrated into the self and the more consumers profit from the brand in a social and psychological manner, the more likely they are to expend their own social, financial, and time resources to maintain and nurture this brand relationship (Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogel, 2010; Park et al., 2010). Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan (1976) maintain that associations with attractive social groups result in significant ego enhancement, leading to positive outcomes. In a similar vein, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) envisage consumer behaviors resulting from identification along a continuum ranging from low levels (e.g., brand loyalty) to high levels (e.g., resilience to negative information about the brand). Such behaviors can be classified as customer in-role and extra-role behavior. A well-known example of customer in-role behavior is brand loyalty (Lam, 2012); extra-role behaviors occur over and above the call of duty and are of benefit to the organization rather than purely for self-interest (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Consumers' resilience to negative information, which is similar to sportsmanship behavior in organizational literature, is an example of consumer extra-role behavior (Lam, 2012).

Previous research investigating the effect of CBI on brand loyalty reports mixed results. Some studies report a significant impact of CBI on brand loyalty (e.g., Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), whereas others show that CBI is not related to brand loyalty (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Kim, Han, & Park, 2001). Regardless, we argue that a positive relationship exists between CBI and brand loyalty because consumers who identify with a brand are more likely to purchase that brand as a means of self-expression (Ahearne et al., 2005). Accordingly, we propose that highly identified consumers are more prone to stay loyal to the brand.

Hypothesis 8. CBI is positively related to brand loyalty.

Consumers' desires to support the brand they identify with often go beyond normal purchase behavior (Sen, Du, & Bhattacharya, 2009). Because consumer–company identification helps consumers satisfy their self-definitional needs, they are more likely to dismiss any negative information they receive about the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Specifically, when strongly identified consumers confront negative publicity, they are more prone to protect and preserve their self-defining beliefs by processing negative information in a biased and defensive manner (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006). Resilience to negative information is likely to occur because identification with a brand enhances consumers' willingness to engage in extra-role behavior, such as courtesy, altruism, and sportsmanship (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Sen et al., 2009). Accordingly, consumers are more prone to be forgiving when things go wrong (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Wu and Tsai (2008) confirm this view and report that consumer identification influences the intensity of consumers' tolerance for defects, indicating that consumers tend to forgive the company for its mistakes. Taken together, we postulate that highly identified consumers are more likely to ignore negative information they receive about the brand.

Hypothesis 9. CBI is positively related to resilience to negative information.

Previous studies show that loyal customers engage in extra-role behaviors, such as cooperative behaviors (e.g., Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011). Similarly, scholars frequently suggest that commitment, a construct similar to loyalty, leads to extra-role behavior (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Riketta, 2005). Consumers' commitment to a favored brand and desire to continue the relationship are likely to manifest in more efforts that support the brand (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011). For example, consumers are likely to overlook negative information received about that brand and forgive the brand for its mistakes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Liu, Wang, & Wu, 2010). Specifically, in an attempt to preserve and defend their beliefs about a brand's attractiveness, loyal consumers may engage in biased processing when dealing with negative information about their favored brand (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011). We therefore propose that loyal consumers are more prone to dismiss negative information received about the brand.

Hypothesis 10. Brand loyalty is positively related to resilience to negative information.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a survey of customers. Following a pretest ($N = 30$), which suggested only minimal changes to the design, the questionnaire was administered to consumers in a large metropolitan area in the North East of the United Kingdom, through a mall intercept technique (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). The mall intercept method has the advantages of reaching more potential respondents over a short period and having the opportunity to pre-screen respondents on desired criteria (He et al., 2012). We asked the respondents to complete the survey with respect to their favorite brand in two product categories: mobile phones and TVs. Both product categories are familiar to all respondents and widely consumed. Mobile phones are publicly consumed products that allow consumers to signal their personal identity, whereas TVs are privately consumed. We collected 293 completed responses (no missing data for the specific variables of concern) ($N_{TV} = 135$; $N_{Mobile\ Phone} = 158$). The mean age of the respondents was 37 and 36 years, respectively, for the TV and mobile phone conditions. The sample consisted of 56% men and 44% women in the TV setting and 48% men and 52% women in the mobile phone setting.

3.2. Construct measures

Following Sirgy (1982), we operationalized value congruence by reverse-coding absolute difference scores between brand values and consumer values and then averaging all values for each respondent. To avoid survey fatigue, we measured both brand and consumer values using the 10-item, 7-point short version of Schwartz's value survey (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005). We measured customer-to-customer similarity using a three-item, seven-point Likert scale adopted from Sirgy et al. (1997). We captured brand attractiveness using a four item, seven-point Likert scale based on the work of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) and Currás-Pérez et al. (2009). We measured CBI using two items developed by Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). The visual item includes a series of Venn diagrams indicating the extent of overlap between one's self and the brand's identity and respondents are required to choose the level of overlap that best reflects their relationship with the brand. The verbal item is a seven-point scale anchored by "not at all" and "extremely". For the dependent variables, a three-item scale measured consumers' resilience to negative information (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007), and we measured brand loyalty following Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Yoo and Donthu

(2001). Both constructs were measured with 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In line with prior studies (e.g., Fombelle, Jarvis, Ward & Ostrom, 2012; Lam et al., 2013), we employed consumer demographic variables (age, gender, and income) as control measures.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. Measurement model

We carried out exploratory principal axis factoring on all constructs of interest, which resulted in the first deletions of poorly performing items from the scales due to weak or cross-loadings (see Table 1 for the remaining items). Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for all constructs with multiple measures separately for mobile phones and TVs appear in Table 2. Cronbach's alphas were above the recommended value of .70 (Nunnally, 1978) for all constructs, except that resilience to negative information was just below the desirable level (0.66 and 0.67 for mobile phones and TVs, respectively). According to the confirmatory factor analysis run for each product category, all the resulting fit indexes were satisfactory. For mobile phones, the goodness-of-fit measures were as follows: χ^2 (34) = 70.513, normed chi-square = 2.074, RMSEA = 0.083, SRMR = 0.048, CFI = 0.94, and









Table 2

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliabilities (CR), and AVE across product categories.

	Means	Standard deviations	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
<i>Publicly consumed products (mobile phones)</i>					
Brand attractiveness	4.59	1.11	0.78	0.78	0.54
Brand loyalty	4.58	1.34	0.76	0.76	0.61
Consumer–brand identification	3.77	1.52	0.84	0.84	0.73
Customer-to-customer similarity	4.22	1.08	0.71	0.72	0.56
Resilience to negative information	4.16	1.09	0.66	0.68	0.47
<i>Privately consumer products (TVs)</i>					
Brand attractiveness	4.79	0.98	0.73	0.75	0.52
Brand loyalty	4.54	1.37	0.77	0.77	0.62
Consumer–brand identification	3.40	1.62	0.87	0.88	0.79
Customer-to-customer similarity	4.11	1.23	0.84	0.84	0.73
Resilience to negative information	4.05	1.28	0.67	0.67	0.51

IFI = 0.94. For TVs, the goodness-of-fit measures were as follows: χ^2 (34) = 89.877, normed chi-square = 2.643, RMSEA = 0.094, SRMR = 0.0642, CFI = 0.93, and IFI = 0.93. Using three to four indexes provided adequate evidence of model fit. That is, in addition to the chi-square value and degrees of freedom, at least one absolute index and

Table 1 Standardized factor loadings and t-values across product categories.

	Mobile phones		TVs	
	Standardized loading	t-Value	Standardized loading	t-Value
<i>Customer-to-customer similarity</i>				
The typical users of [brand X] reflect the type of person who I am.	0.661		0.817	
The typical users of [brand X] are similar to me.	0.828	4.402	0.889	8.356
*The image of the typical user of [brand X] is consistent with how I see myself.				
<i>Brand attractiveness</i>				
I like what [brand X] stands for.	0.726		0.835	
[Brand X] is an attractive brand.	0.680	7.444	0.546	6.899
I like what [brand X] represents.	0.784	8.244	0.735	9.055
*[Brand X] is a favorable brand.				
<i>Consumer–brand identification (CBI)</i>				
Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with [brand X] image.	0.922		0.948	
Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at the right represents [Brand X] identity. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the level of overlap between your own and [brand X] identity				
	My Identity		Brand Identity	
	A			Far Apart
	B			Close Together but Separate
	C			Very Small Overlap
(circle one)	D			Small Overlap
	E			Moderate Overlap
	F			Large Overlap
	G			Very Large Overlap
	H			Complete Overlap
			0.779	7.116
			0.827	11.727
<i>Brand loyalty</i>				
I will buy [brand X] the next time I buy TVs.	0.748		0.781	
I would be willing to pay a higher price for [brand X] over other brands of TVs.	0.816	7.905	0.796	7.313
<i>Resilience to negative information</i>				
If [brand X] did something I didn't like, I would be willing to give it another chance.	0.699		0.665	
I will disregard any negative information that I hear or read about [brand X].	0.657	7.116	0.753	7.746
*I will forgive [brand X] when it makes mistakes.				

* Dropped items.

Table 3
Pearson product moment correlation matrix of key constructs.

	Brand attractiveness	Brand loyalty	CBI	Customer-to-customer similarity	Resilience to negative information	Value congruence
Brand attractiveness		0.55	0.35	0.33	0.62	0.56
Brand loyalty	0.71		0.19	0.38	0.40	0.60
CBI	0.31	0.29		0.34	0.63	0.49
Customer-to-customer similarity	0.32	0.27	0.26		0.43	0.50
Resilience to neg. information	0.63	0.60	0.31	0.10		0.65
Value congruence	0.09	0.23	0.44	0.17	0.14	

Coefficients for publicly consumed goods (mobile phones) are below the diagonal, and coefficients for privately consumed goods (TVs) are above the diagonal.

one incremental index should be reported (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013).

For both product categories, we separately evaluated convergent validity using three criteria. As Table 2 shows, all composite reliabilities were above the recommended level of 0.7, except for resilience to negative information (0.68 and 0.67 for mobile phones and TVs, respectively). All factor loading estimates were above 0.5, and all were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating convergent validity (see Table 1). Except for resilience to negative information in the mobile phone category, all average variances extracted (AVEs) exceeded the 0.50 benchmark, indicating additional support for convergent validity. Taken together, all constructs in the measurement model achieve convergent validity.

To assess discriminant validity, we adopted two approaches separately for each product category. First, we assessed discriminant validity using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommended procedures, in which we compared the AVE for each construct with the squared correlation between construct pairs. All AVEs (see Table 2) exceeded the squared correlations for all measures (see Table 3). Second, we conducted a series of chi-square difference tests by comparing the fit of pairs of constructs that were freely estimated with those that were constrained to unity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). For each comparison, the unconstrained models fit the data better than the constrained models. Taken together, these two tests provide evidence of discriminant validity of the multi-item measures.

4.2. Common method bias

Common method bias can occur with self-reported data (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Thus, we enforced a procedural

remedy at the data collection stage to ensure that respondents' identities remained confidential. Furthermore, item ambiguity was reduced, and the items were mixed in the questionnaire. We performed statistical analysis to assess the severity of common method bias. Specifically, we included a common method factor (CMF) in the structural model. Following Homburg, Mueller, and Klarmann (2011), we constructed the CMF to load on a selection of items used to measure the antecedents and CBI. Homburg et al. argue that the inclusion of such a factor helps control for common method bias in hypothesis testing. We specified the loadings of the CMF to be of the same size to account for common method variance influencing all items equally and to achieve model convergence. The inclusion of a CMF did not affect the findings of the hypotheses, and thus we conclude that common method variance does not bias the study results.

4.3. Direct effects

We ran a structural model using AMOS 22. The fit indexes for mobile phones were as follows: $\chi^2 (44) = 87.283$, normed chi-square = 1.984, RMSEA = 0.079, SRMR = 0.056, CFI = 0.925, and IFI = 0.927. Those for TVs were as follows: $\chi^2 (44) = 120.25$, normed chi-square = 2.736, RMSEA = 0.091, SRMR = 0.076, CFI = 0.911, and IFI = 0.913. We hypothesize that three antecedents—value congruence (Hypothesis 1), customer-to-customer similarity (Hypothesis 2), and brand attractiveness (Hypothesis 5)—are positively related to CBI. Empirical results (see Table 4) show that while both value congruence and brand attractiveness are related to CBI across both consumption settings, customer-to-customer similarity is only related to CBI in private consumption. We posit that value congruence (Hypothesis 3) and customer-to-customer similarity (Hypothesis 4) are antecedents of brand attractiveness.

Table 4
Results of the structural equation models.

Hypothesized paths	Public consumption	Private consumption
	Mobile phones	TVs
	Path coefficient (t-value)	Path coefficient (t-value)
Hypothesis 1: Value congruency → CBI	0.318 (2.596)**	0.387 (3.830)***
Hypothesis 2: Customer-to-customer similarity → CBI	0.100 (0.902)†	0.200 (2.250)**
Hypothesis 3: Value congruency → brand attractiveness	0.150 (1.237)†	0.211 (2.039)**
Hypothesis 4: Customer-to-customer similarity → brand attractiveness	0.264 (2.232)**	0.348 (3.659)***
Hypothesis 5: Brand attractiveness → CBI	0.192 (1.840)*	0.161 (1.730)*
Hypothesis 7a: Brand attractiveness → brand loyalty	0.703 (6.297)***	0.527 (5.224)***
Hypothesis 7b: Brand attractiveness → resilience to negative information	0.337 (1.867)*	0.450 (3.722)***
Hypothesis 8: CBI → brand loyalty	0.092 (1.045)†	0.065 (0.769)†
Hypothesis 9: CBI → resilience to negative information	0.303 (2.891)***	0.479 (5.020)***
Hypothesis 10: Brand loyalty → resilience to negative information	0.269 (1.484)†	0.054 (0.526)†
R ²		
Brand attractiveness	0.114	0.201
CBI	0.205	0.316
Brand loyalty	0.540	0.309
Resilience to negative information	0.518	0.622

*** $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.05$.
* $p < 0.10$.
† Not significant.

Table 5
Mediation analysis.

Relationship	Direct effects	Total effects	Indirect
Public consumption (mobile)			
Hypothesis 6a: Value congruence → brand attractiveness → CBI	0.318***	0.347**	0.079†
Hypothesis 6b: Customer-to-customer similarity → brand attractiveness → CBI	0.100*†	0.151†	0.086†
Private consumption (TV)			
Hypothesis 6a: Value congruence → brand attractiveness → CBI	0.387***	0.421***	0.093†
Hypothesis 6b: Customer-to-customer similarity → brand attractiveness → CBI	0.200**	0.256**	0.079†

*** $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.05$.
* $p < 0.10$.
† Not significant.

Across both product settings, the results provide support for Hypothesis 4 but only partial support for Hypothesis 3. For the outcomes of CBI across both product settings, the results suggest that respondents are not brand loyal (Hypothesis 8) but are resilient to negative information (Hypothesis 9). This finding highlights the central role of CBI on resilience to negative information (i.e., consumers' extra-role behavior) compared with brand loyalty (i.e., consumers' in-role behavior) across both product categories. Contrary to expectations, the results do not show any support for Hypothesis 10 across both product categories. We observe significant, positive relationships between brand attractiveness and brand loyalty (Hypothesis 7a) and between brand attractiveness and resilience to negative information (Hypothesis 7b) across both consumption settings. We controlled for individual differences through the inclusion of consumer demographic variables in the model.

4.4. Mediating effects

Hypothesis 6a and Hypothesis 6b predict a mediating effect of brand attractiveness between value congruence with CBI and, respectively, customer-to-customer similarity and CBI. In order to test this mediation, following Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010), we carried out a full analysis of the covariance structural model using the Bootstrap method. As shown in Table 5, the indirect effects through brand attractiveness are not significant. As such, contrary to expectations, we find that brand attractiveness does not mediate the effects of value congruence (Hypothesis 6a) and customer-to-customer similarity (Hypothesis 6b) on CBI across both product categories (see Table 5). Table 6 collates all the results and summarizes the findings.

Table 6
Snapshot of results across the two consumption settings.

	Public consumption (mobile phones)	Private consumption (TVs)
Hypothesis 1: Value congruence is positively related to CBI.	√	√
Hypothesis 2: Customer-to-customer similarity is positively related to CBI.	ns	√
Hypothesis 3: Value congruence is positively related to brand attractiveness.	ns	√
Hypothesis 4: Customer-to-customer similarity is positively related to brand attractiveness.	√	√
Hypothesis 5: Brand attractiveness is positively related to CBI.	√	√
Hypothesis 6a: Brand attractiveness mediates the relationship between value congruence and CBI.	No mediation	No mediation
Hypothesis 6b: Brand attractiveness mediates the relationship between customer-to-customer similarity and CBI.	No mediation	No mediation
Hypothesis 7a: Brand attractiveness is positively related to brand loyalty.	√	√
Hypothesis 7b: Brand attractiveness is positively related to resilience to negative information.	√	√
Hypothesis 8: CBI is positively related to brand loyalty.	ns	ns
Hypothesis 9: CBI is positively related to resilience to negative information.	√	√
Hypothesis 10: Brand loyalty is positively related to resilience to negative information	ns	ns

√ = as hypothesized, ns = not significant.

5. Discussion

This study shows that brands of publicly and privately consumed products can influence the creation and maintenance of consumers' identity. Whereas previous research focuses on brand personality as one brand association source that fulfills consumers' self-verification needs (e.g., Lam et al., 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), the focus herein was on the roles of brand values and other brand users as facilitators of self-verification. The results indicate that value congruence, customer-to-customer similarity, and brand attractiveness play different but positively significant roles in influencing consumers' identification across different product categories. The effect of value congruence on CBI is in line with Zhang and Bloemer's (2008) finding of the influence of value congruence on brand relationship quality, a construct similar to CBI. The impact of customer-to-customer similarity on CBI for privately consumed products is consistent with Karaosmanoglu et al.'s (2011) study, which provides evidence of other customers' effect on emotional attachment and consumer-company identification in the service context. However, for publicly consumed products, the relationship between customer-to-customer similarity and CBI was not supported. Broadly speaking, the significance of a self-verification motive in strengthening consumer-brand relationships confirms that brands with actual self-congruence generate higher levels of brand attachment than those with ideal self-congruence (Malar et al., 2011). In line with previous studies (e.g., Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Marin & De Maya, 2013), the direct influence of brand attractiveness on CBI is confirmed for both publicly consumed products.

We find that value congruence is a notable predictor of CBI across both product categories. This result indicates the crucial role of value congruence in cultivating meaningful relationships with consumers. A likely explanation may be consumers' need for verification and uniqueness. Given that consumers perceive products and brands as part of their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003), the association with particular brands is a vehicle that they can use to express their authenticity (Dutton et al., 1994) and distinctiveness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). When the brand's values and consumers' personal values are congruent, consumers are more willing to express themselves more fully and authentically (Dutton et al., 1994). In addition, because products and brands are important for identity construction, consumers are more likely to use them to distinguish themselves from others (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010), which may explain why the effect of customer-to-customer similarity on CBI is less pronounced than that of value congruence.

We find that brand attractiveness is a consequence of customer-to-customer similarity and value congruence; however, the magnitude of variance explained was low. This result may be because, as Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose, brand attractiveness is a function of different factors that contribute to the fulfillment of individuals' key

self-definitional needs (i.e., self-verification, self-enhancement, and self-distinctiveness), elements not considered in this study. We also aimed to broaden understanding of the mediating role of brand attractiveness in satisfying consumer's self-verification needs and CBI. Although Bhattacharya and Sen propose that identity attractiveness fully mediates the relationship between consumer identification and its antecedents, the current results do not provide support for this supposition. Specifically, for publicly and privately consumer products, we find that brand attractiveness does not mediate the relationship between value congruence and CBI or between customer-to-customer similarity and CBI.

Brand attractiveness is an important predictor of both brand loyalty and resilience to negative information. These findings show that consumers' positive perceptions of the brand's central, distinctive, and enduring associations and characteristics play a crucial role in deriving in-role and extra-role consumer behaviors. Brand attractiveness, through the fulfillment of consumers' key self-definitional needs, enhances consumers' favorable behavior toward the brand. Contrary to expectations, CBI influences consumers' resilience to negative information but does not directly influence brand loyalty. Furthermore, the effect of CBI on resilience to negative information is stronger for privately than publicly consumed products. The lack of a direct effect of CBI on brand loyalty is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Kim et al., 2001). The impact of CBI on resilience to negative information likely arises because consumers have a vested interest in the success of the brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and thus are likely to support the brand by downplaying any negative information received. These findings are in line with Rickett's (2005) meta-analysis, which demonstrates that organizational identification is associated more with extra-role than in-role performance. Finally, the results reveal that brand loyalty does not have a direct influence on consumers' resilience to negative information, indicating that not all loyal customers are likely to dismiss negative information received about their favored brand.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study advances the understanding of consumer-brand relationships in four main ways. First, we add to the body of research on consumers' relationships with brands by proposing and empirically testing relationships among relatively under-explored constructs. Addressing the relationships among these variables helps shed light on how to build consumer-brand relationships through identification. The findings highlight the importance of both brand traits (e.g., brand values, brand attractiveness) and entities in the surrounding social environment (e.g., other brand users) as effective precursors that enhance consumers' identification with the brand. Thus, the study supplements previous research on brand identification by introducing value congruence and customer-to-customer similarity as drivers of CBI. More important, the study findings lend support to self-verification theory arguments (Swann, 1983) that consumers are willing to form enduring relationships with a brand that verifies and validates who they are. These findings also provide a possible explanation for the growing importance of an authentic approach to branding among academics (Malar et al., 2011).

Second, we provide an explanation of why consumers are attracted to some brands and not others by applying the similarity-attraction paradigm (Bryne, 1971) to branding. We demonstrate that consumers' perceptions of similarity to the brand's values as well as to other brand users play a role in their attraction to a particular brand. This study is the first to investigate the mediating role of brand attractiveness in the linkage between both value congruence and customer-to-customer similarity and CBI. The study also represents an initial effort to broaden understanding of the relationship between CBI and its

antecedents. Specifically, following Cooil, Keiningham, Aksoy, and Hsu (2007), we demonstrate the importance of understanding differences among customers and the effects of such differences in delineating the relationship between CBI and its antecedents.

Third, unlike previous studies that focus on the role of brand attractiveness as a driver of consumer identification (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Currás-Pérez et al., 2009), we highlight the role of brand attractiveness as a crucial driver of consumer in-role and extra-role behavior. Fourth, this research joins other studies (e.g., Lam et al., 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) in identifying CBI as a promising construct that influences consumer behavior. The sense of belongingness to a brand is critical in triggering consumers' extra-role behavior. Specifically, consumers who identify with a brand are more likely to downplay negative information about the brand and forgive the brand for mistakes. Organizational behavior researchers underscore the importance of individuals' psychological attachment based on identification (e.g., Johnson, Morgeson, & Hekman, 2012; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Finally, most prior studies primarily focus on examining the antecedents and consequences of identification for conspicuous products. The results of the current study extend brand identification research to privately consumed products. As a result, the study contributes to a better understanding of the determinants of CBI as well as how CBI influences consumers across product categories.

6.2. Managerial implications

The results have important implications for companies in developing enduring and committed relationships with consumers. First, we confirm that consumers can identify with a brand that satisfies their self-verification needs, which in turn enhances their attitudes and behavior toward the brand. Thus, the results provide building blocks on which managers can engender CBI and increase the likelihood of experiencing extra-role behavior from customers. Value congruence has a significant direct effect on brand attractiveness and CBI, and thus managers should explore how to create the greatest possible congruence between the values of the target market and the brand. Marketing activities could position the brand as a salient category in the minds of consumers by, for example, (1) communicating the brand's values that appeal to and are consistent with consumers' values, (2) emphasizing favorable comparisons with other relevant brands in reference to values or beliefs considered important for the brand's actual and/or potential customer base, and (3) taking initiatives to make the brand more appealing and attractive to target consumers to satisfy their self-verification needs.

Second, we highlight the importance of accounting for the impact of other customers when developing targeting and positioning strategies because these customers can act as informational cues about the brand's identity. For example, managers could offer venues for customers to engage in sincere and friendly communications with other brand users both offline (e.g., Harley-Davidson rally) and online (creating social media platforms connected with the brand). In this respect, it is important to understand that developing CBI requires bespoke strategies, and one size fits all type of solutions cannot be prescribed. Given the differential impact of antecedents on the extent to which consumers identify with the brand across product categories, positioning strategies require careful thought. For publicly consumed products, the study suggests that managers should consider emphasizing the attractiveness of the brand on dimensions that target consumers' value, to successfully enhance CBI. For privately consumed products, managers should consider the importance of other customers when developing their strategies.

Third, negative information is likely to exert a negative impact on the brand's associations, thereby reducing the brand's revenues and market share (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Einwiller et al., 2006). We show that investing in strategies that aid in building strong CBI can mitigate the effects of negative information. We further demonstrate that enhancing brand attractiveness is likely to favorably

influence consumers' loyalty to the brand. Given the complexity of building enduring relationships with consumers, managers should identify customer segments according to their psychological and situational characteristics, because such customers are more receptive to forming meaningful relationships with brands.

7. Limitations and further research

This study reports important findings on consumer–brand relationships across two product categories, though several limitations exist. First, recent research refers to the limitations common to regression-based techniques, especially when the correlations are in the 0.3–0.7 range, and recommend testing theory using algorithms (Woodside, 2013). Although the current approach of testing the hypotheses with data from multiple settings helps achieve common objectives of robust designs, such alternative tests would help improve the validity of results. Furthermore, use of cross-sectional survey data can be helpful in understanding directional relationships among constructs, but they do not allow for causal inferences. Such inferences are best confirmed with longitudinal designs. Second, we examined consumers' behavior only with respect to their favorite brands, which should be taken into account when generalizing the results. Research exploring the extent to which consumers identify with specific brands would offer insights into the robustness of the relationships we advance. Third, replicating the model on different types of categories and settings, such as luxury brands, service brands, and online service providers, could serve to further generalize the results. Future studies could also apply this framework to other cultural contexts and consumer characteristics. Fourth, we designated mobile phones to represent publicly consumed products and TVs to represent privately consumed products. However, interpreting product differences in terms of public versus private consumption could be confounded with other differences between mobile phones and TVs. Thus, research could employ a broader range of private and public products to delineate the source of differences. Measuring consumers' perceptions of how public and private the products are could be informative. Finally, research could also examine the antecedents of CBI experimentally.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments from Son K Lam on earlier versions of this paper.

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