Global brand ownership: The mediating roles of consumer attitudes and brand identification

Fabian Bartsch [a,*], Adamantios Diamantopoulos [a], Nicholas G. Paparoidamis [b], Ruben Chumpitaz [b,c]

[a] Department of International Marketing, University of Vienna, Oskar-Morgenstern Platz 1, 1090 Vienna, Austria
[b] Marketing and International Negotiation Department, IESEG School of Management, CNRS-LEM (UMR 9221), 3 Rue de la Digue, Lille 59000, France
[c] ESAN University, 1652 Alonso de Molina, Lima, Perú

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ABSTRACT

The branding literature repeatedly emphasizes the role brands play in shaping consumer identities. In this context, the rise of global consumer groups gives global brands a prominent role as potential tools for consumer identification. Specifically, consumer segments that idealize global communities and/or hold positive attitudes toward various aspects of globalization are particularly prone to using global brands in order to strengthen their identification with the global world. Against this background, this paper empirically investigates the mediating roles of (a) consumer attitudes toward globality and (b) identification with global brands on the relationship between consumer orientations toward globality and global brand ownership. Findings from a study with 300 French consumers provide evidence of full mediation in line with the theoretically derived causal structure linking consumer orientations to brand ownership through consumer attitudes and brand identification. The paper discusses implications of the findings for theory, practice and future research directions.

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1. Introduction

Marketing literature repeatedly emphasizes the role brands play in shaping consumer identities (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012, Whan Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Indeed, consumer behavior is to a big extent identity-driven in that consumers choose brands that match their idealization of self-concept (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). In this context, the rise of global consumer groups (Keillor, D'Amico, & Horton, 2001) and the emergence of a global consumer culture (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999) gives global brands a prominent role as potential tools for consumer identification (Özsomer & Altaras, 2008), the latter capturing "consumers' perceived state of oneness with a brand" (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012, p. 407). In particular, consumer segments that idealize global communities and/or hold positive attitudes toward various aspects of globalization are particularly prone to using global brands to strengthen their identification with the global world (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2011). Such consumer groups are characterized by positive dispositions toward globality as reflected in having a global identity (Zhang & Khare, 2009), displaying positive attitudes toward globalization (Spears, Parker, & McDonald, 2004), or being susceptible toward a global consumer culture (Zhou, Teng, & Poon, 2008).

Surprisingly, however, studies addressing the impact of positive consumer dispositions toward globality on consumer identification with global brands are scarce (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008), despite the obvious role global brands play as symbols of a global consumer culture (e.g., Alden et al., 1999, Cayla & Arnould, 2008, Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004). The same applies to studies investigating consumer dispositions toward globality as potential predictors of *actual* consumer behavior (e.g., Cleveland, Laroche, & Hallab, 2013; Cleveland, Rojas-Méndez, Laroche & Papadopoulos, 2016). Prior relevant research has sparingly examined ownership of global brands, despite its managerial relevance. (Bartsch, Riefler, & Diamantopoulos, 2016). Moreover, extant literature provides only limited insight into the *joint* predictive ability of different dispositions toward globality as drivers of consumer behavior. To date, only a few isolated research attempts exists that take into consideration multiple dispositions simultaneously to predict outcomes such as global brand attitude (Guo, 2013) or purchase intentions for global brands (Riefler, 2012). Overall, the relationships between different dispositional characteristics remain an untapped research topic.

Against this background, the present study empirically examines the mediating roles of (a) attitudes toward globality and (b) identification with global brands on the relationship between consumer orientations toward globality and global brand ownership. Our intended contribution is twofold. From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on social identity theory and investigates a causal structure linking consumers' positive dispositions toward globality to ownership of global brands as identity-congruent symbols of a global consumer culture. From a managerial perspective, this study offers empirically based

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: fabian.bartsch@univie.ac.at (F. Bartsch), adamantios.diamantopoulos@univie.ac.at (A. Diamantopoulos), n.paparoidamis@ieseg.fr (N.G. Paparoidamis), r.chumpitaz@ieseg.fr (R. Chumpitaz).

insights into the impact of such dispositions on consumers' actual buying decisions for global brands, while highlighting the importance of brand identification as a driver of brand ownership.

2. Positive dispositions toward globality

During the last 15 years, international marketing researchers conceptualized consumer dispositions toward globality in an effort to capture changes in consumer characteristics as a result of globalization (Arnett, 2002). Consequently, marketing literature offers a range of constructs capturing such dispositions, which are used in substantive research efforts (see Table 1).

Consumer dispositions toward globality are conceptualized either as *orientations* defined as "set of values, opinions, and competencies held by certain individuals" (Cleveland, Laroche, Takahashi, & Erdoğan, 2014, p. 269) or as *attitudes* defined as "learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 10).

Orientations are rather general manifestations of the consumer self-concept and do not relate to a concrete stimulus object (Hogg & Smith, 2007); they merely depict consumers' identifications and associations with a hypothesized global world. More specifically, *identification with the global community* (GCOM) (Westjohn, Arnold, Magnusson, Zdravkovic, & Zhou, 2009) describes identification with humankind in general rather than with a particular set of countries. Similarly, *global identity* (GI) (Zhang & Khare, 2009) captures consumers' self-identification with a global world or community by focusing on the similarities of people around the world. Finally, *global connectedness* (GC) (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013) conceptualizes an individual's attachment and belongingness to a global world. Although the three constructs are conceptually overlapping in that they all conceptualize positive group identities toward globality (Bartsch et al., 2016), the international marketing literature is lacking empirical evidence about potential differences in their predictive ability regarding the formation of consumer attitudes.

Attitudes toward globality, on the other hand, by definition involve a concrete stimulus object, which becomes the focus of an evaluative judgment (Ajzen, 1991). They depict consumers' positive stances toward either the economic consequences of globalization (e.g., freedom of choice, availability of products) or several aspects of global brands and resulting lifestyle choices. Thus, *globalization attitude* (GA) (Spears et al., 2004) captures an individual's beliefs about the (un)favorable economic consequences of globalization, while *susceptibility to global consumer culture* (SGCC) (Zhou et al., 2008) conceptualizes consumers' desire to acquire global brands as a function of their (a) superior quality, (b) social prestige, and (c) conformity to consumption trends.

Understanding the distinction between consumer orientations and attitudes leads to a clearer recognition of their distinct roles each plays in influencing consumer behavior. For instance, consumers identifying with the global community may behave under the premise that their behavior strengthens group identification. By contrast, the behavior of consumers holding a positive globalization attitude may be merely grounded in their positive evaluations of the economic consequences of globalization, rather than a result of their identity-confirming mechanisms.

2.1. The mediating roles of consumer attitudes and brand identification

Fig. 1 proposes a serial mediation model that conceptualizes a causal sequence between consumer orientations and consumer attitudes toward globality and links these to global brand ownership through global brand identification. The proposed model conceptually draws from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which seeks to explain the "aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging"(Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). In developing our hypotheses, this study draws upon social identity theory with regards to the formation of consumer attitudes (Hogg & Smith, 2007) and the process of identity confirmation under the premises of the identity-relevance principle (Reed et al., 2012).

Consumers' orientations toward globality (i.e., *identification with the global community*, *global identity*, and *global connectedness*) draw from social identity theory, which suggests that a consumer's reference group is not domestically anchored but rather emerges in reference to a global world (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013; Westjohn et al., 2009; Zhang & Khare, 2009). According to social identity theory, social categorization and depersonalization are the processes through which consumers categorize people not as individuals but as members of a group and, subsequently, form expectations about their attitudes and behavior. Thus, the individual identity takes a less prominent role, while group identification becomes the dominant driver of behavior based upon an in-group vs. out-group distinction. As part of this depersonalization process, consumers adopt a stereotypical view of their in-group identification and seek to strengthen this identification by embracing group norms (Hogg & Smith, 2007). For instance, consumers who strongly identify with a hypothetical group will imagine a stereotypical role model for that group and, as a consequence, their identification seeks to confirm such (positive) stereotypical views of group members. Consumer attitudes toward globality, as Table 1 illustrates, represents positive evaluations of different aspects associated with a given global society (e.g., the belief in positive consequences of economic globalization or belief in a global lifestyle). This study therefore argues that consumers' orientations toward globality, as reflected in conceptualizations of global group identities, are likely to positively impact the formation of more specific consumer attitudes that are perceived as being representative of an imagined global community.

H1. *Consumers' orientations toward globality positively impact their attitudes toward globality.*

Drawing from attitude theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), attitudes toward a specific object reflect positive or negative evaluations of the object and influence subsequent behavior. Hence, positive consumer attitudes toward globality (i.e., *globalization attitude*, *susceptibility to global consumer culture*) translated into positive evaluations of global brands as representative manifestations of globality (Alden et al., 1999; Cayla &

Table 1
Conceptualizations of consumer dispositions toward globality.

Category	Constructs	Conceptual definition
Consumer orientations toward globality	Identification with the global community (GCOM)	"Captures the degree of psychological and emotional investment one has to the global world" (Westjohn et al., 2009)
	Global identity (GI)	"Being global means identifying with people around the world" (Zhang & Khare, 2009)
	Global connectedness (GC)	"An individual's overall attachment and belonging to the global world" (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013)
Consumer attitudes toward globality	Globalization attitude (GA)	"Support or opposition to globalization based upon the individuals belief about the economic consequence" (Spears et al., 2004)
	Susceptibility to global consumer culture (SGCC)	"Consumer's desire or tendency for the acquisition and use of global brands" (Zhou et al., 2008)