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

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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., Donavan, 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.

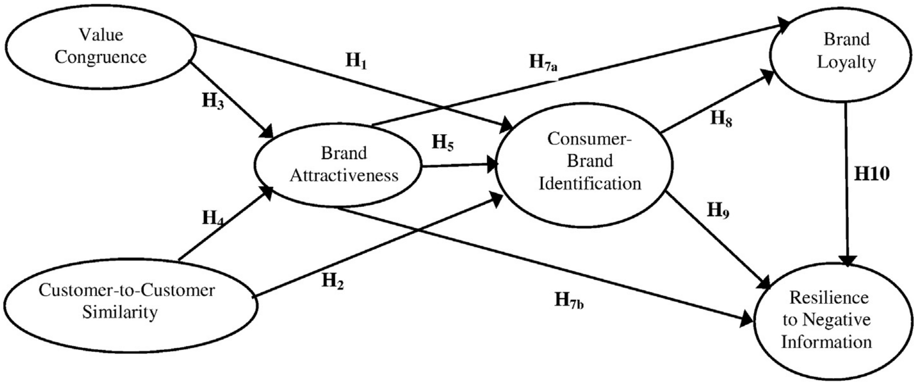
Value Congruence
H1
H7a
Brand Loyalty
H3
Brand Attractiveness
H5
Consumer-Brand Identification
H8
H10
H4
H9
Customer-to-Customer Similarity
H2
H7b
Resilience to Negative Information

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

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