



The missing link in building customer brand identification: The role of brand attractiveness



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Investigates the role of brand attractiveness in developing customer brand identification (CBI).
- Examines a model that includes traditional brand identity building blocks and brand encounter factors.
- Brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and memorable brand experiences affect CBI indirectly through brand attractiveness.
- The inclusion of brand attractiveness generates results challenging prior research findings on CBI development.
- This study advances theoretical and practical understanding of driving CBI development.

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ABSTRACT

The brand management literature has long acknowledged the strategic importance of managing brand identity. However, prior empirical research has largely ignored brand attractiveness in building such identity in the eyes of consumers. Focusing on the airline industry, this study investigates the role of brand attractiveness in fostering customer brand identification. The empirical testing of the conceptual model suggests that brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and memorable brand experiences have a significant indirect effect on customer brand identification through brand attractiveness, while brand social benefits contributes directly to such identification. The results also challenge prior literature by providing strong support for including brand attractiveness in identification development. When brand attractiveness is incorporated in the model, the effects of brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and memorable brand experiences became non-significant in predicting customer brand identification. The findings highlight the importance of projecting a brand identity that is attractive to target consumers in order to achieve customer brand identification.

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1. Introduction

The power of branding is well documented in tourism and hospitality, particularly in the airline industry, a sector that is highly competitive. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), about 1300 new airlines have been established in the last 40 years (Cederholm, 2014). While mergers of major U.S. airlines have reduced the number of key players from 11 in 2005 to just six in 2015, airlines based in the Persian Gulf are shaking up the

North American market by offering high-quality service at lower prices. In 2014, Emirates, Qatar Airways, and Etihad Airways boosted its number of U.S. flights by 47%, and now serve 11 cities (McCartney, 2014). According to a recent branding report, the most valuable airline brand in 2014 was Emirates, with a brand value of US\$6.6 billion, a 21 percent increase over 2013 (Brand Finance, 2015). Such brand proliferation, with new competitors evolving the traditional airline business model, suggests a stronger focus on the brand value proposition is needed for those airlines wanting to remain a viable entity.

A strong airline brand generates positive outcomes in terms of consumers' brand preference and purchase intention (Chen & Chang, 2008). As such, how to create a strong brand has been a

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recent topic of discussion in the literature (Lin, 2015; Voorhees, White, McCall, & Randhawa, 2015). While customer retention tactics, such as frequent flyer programs and other customer loyalty schemes, have been widely used to generate customer loyalty, the effectiveness of these practices has been questioned (Dowling & Uncles, 1997). Some researchers even describe frequent flyer programs as “a failure in competitive strategy” (Kearney, 1990, p. 31). More recently, scholars have suggested that managing the corporate brand identity represents a particularly important aspect of branding for airlines (Balmer, Stuart, & Greyser, 2009), as brand identity helps consumers develop a stronger relationship with the brand through customer brand identification (CBI).

The concept of CBI provides a comprehensive understanding of how customer–brand relationships develop (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; He, Li, & Harris, 2012). CBI is defined as a consumer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing belongingness with a brand (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010, 2013). The brand relationship literature suggests that consumers do not buy brands merely because they work well. People also buy brands because of the meanings the brands add to their lives (Fournier, 1998) and to express their self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). In the broader consumer context, empirical studies indicate that identification with a company or brand increases product use (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008) and repurchase frequency (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). Within hospitality research, recent studies demonstrate that CBI engenders positive consumer evaluation of, and satisfaction with, a hotel brand, ultimately increasing brand loyalty (Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt, 2011; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2013). Tourism research also supports the significant role of identity from the perspective of place (Hallak, Assaker, & Lee, 2015; Pike & Page, 2014; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001), thus emphasizing the broad impact of identification when explaining tourism phenomena.

The marketing literature suggests that the extent to which a consumer identifies with a brand is directly influenced by two categories of factors. The first category includes brand characteristics reflected in the brand’s identity, most predominantly brand prestige (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Carlson, Donovan, & Cumiskey, 2009; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012) and brand distinctiveness (e.g., Carlson et al., 2009; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). These factors represent deliberate organizational marketing actions or brand management activities aimed at creating and communicating a favorable identity of the brand. The second category involves factors that are primarily salient through customer–brand interactions including social benefits (e.g., Coulter, Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998) and memorable brand experiences (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013), which represent experiences that customers have with a service brand. Although these factors have received relatively little attention in the context of CBI, they are particularly important in understanding CBI with service brands where the transactions are fundamentally characterized by human interactions.

While the literature tends to support the influence of these factors on CBI, the assumption that these factors are relevant to all consumers may not be entirely reasonable. For example, the prestige of a brand such as Emirates Airlines or the distinctiveness of a brand such as Southwest Airlines may not necessarily lead directly to CBI for all airline consumers. Theoretical reasoning holds that before identifying with the brand, the individual must first perceive it to be attractive (Marin & de Maya, 2013). However, in the competitive airline industry, how to create an attractive brand in such a price-driven industry remains unanswered. Furthermore, although the strong, loyal, and active customer base of Emirates and Southwest Airlines suggests that customers are drawn to

certain airline brands, the brand elements that contribute to CBI for these brands are unclear. For CBI to develop, brand attributes, such as brand prestige and distinctiveness, must first be perceived as attractive (Ahearne et al., 2005; Marin & de Maya, 2013). Furthermore, for an experiential brand, such as an airline, perceptions of the brand’s ability to provide opportunities for social interaction (benefits) and memorable experiences are also believed to be core attributes that enhances brand attractiveness and subsequent CBI, however empirical evidence to support is currently lacking.

Brand attractiveness is consumers’ positive evaluation of the brand’s identity in relation to how it helps consumers fulfil their self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, & Alvarado-Herrera, 2009; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Therefore, brand attractiveness represents a fundamental aspect of the identification process. While prior research tested a conceptual model of CBI that includes brand attractiveness and some of its predictors (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009), the indirect or mediating effect of brand attractiveness was not hypothesized nor empirically evaluated. However, such knowledge can advance theoretical understanding of the role brand attractiveness plays in building CBI, as well as how it interacts with other established CBI-related factors. Furthermore, brand attractiveness insight can also inform practitioner thinking with respect to key drivers that underpin a customer’s connection to a brand. Building on previous research (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; So et al., 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), this study empirically examines the role of brand attractiveness on a customer’s identification with an airline brand. On the basis of the above discussion and review, we propose a conceptual model to guide this research (Fig. 1).

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer brand identification

The tourism and hospitality industry has extensively adopted branding strategies to set products and services apart from competitors (Choi & Chu, 2001; So & King, 2010), emphasizing the particular relevance of CBI in examining customer–brand relationships. However, tourism and hospitality scholars have described CBI as “an important but underutilized construct” (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013, p. 91), representing a strong psychological attachment that is potentially enduring and indicative of future behavior (So et al., 2013).

The conceptual root of CBI lies in social identity theory, which holds that the self-concept consists of a personal identity that includes idiosyncratic characteristics such as abilities and interests and a social identity that encompasses salient group classifications (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Identification is essentially a perceptual construct implying identity fit and identity matching, with individuals developing a social identity by classifying themselves and others into social categories (e.g., organizational membership and sport clubs) (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Identification occurs when an individual sees him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the characteristics of the group. Social identity theory posits that three components typically constitute identification: A cognitive component (i.e., cognitive awareness of membership), an evaluative component (i.e., positive or negative value connotations attached to membership), and an emotional component (i.e., affective investment in the awareness and evaluations) (Tajfel, 1978). Consistent with this theory, we integrate the multidimensional perspective into our conceptualization of CBI (Lam et al., 2013).

The notion of extending the self-concept is evidenced in Belk’s (1988) work, which supports the compelling premise that possessions are a major contributor to, and reflection of, consumers’

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