The role of consumer-brand identification in building brand relationships: An empirical examination

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to investigate the link 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 and their commitment to a brand. Consumers who identify with a brand tend to commit stronger to a brand and generate positive word of mouth about it. Consumers’ identification was found to fully mediate the impact of value congruity on brand commitment, while brand commitment does not mediate the impact of consumers’ identification on generating positive word of mouth.

Keywords
Brand identification, consumer, value congruity, commitment, word of mouth.
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1. Introduction

In the past few years, there has been an increased academic and practitioner interest in the brand identification concept (Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Rodhain, 2006; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008; Tildesley and Coote, 2009). This interest is not surprising, since consumers’ identification with a brand is a strong behavioural process and an important subject of marketing research (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). In the time of great consumer scepticism toward the brands (Bailey, 2007), questions concerning brand identification, which refers to the psychological bonding between an individual and particular brand (Reade, 2001) and manifests as the consumer's perception of oneness with a brand, have become crucial for brand management.

Some previous research has already shown the importance of consumers’ identification. Positive consumer behaviours associated with strong identification include consumer buying-related decisions (Ahearne et al., 2005), brand preference (Tildesley and Coote, 2009), consumers’ loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2001), positive word of mouth (Rio et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008), consumers’ satisfaction (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008), consumers’ willingness to pay a price premium (Rio et al., 2001) and a higher possibility of repurchase (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). What is noteworthy, however, is that previous studies of consumers’ identification have been carried out mostly in organizational context investigating membership identification (Bhattacharya et al., 1995) and consumer–company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005) while only a few studies investigated consumers’ identification with a brand (Kim et al., 2001; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008; Tildesley and Coote, 2009).

Focus of our study is consumers’ identification with a brand. Our model includes the influence of congruity of consumers’ values and brand values as the source of consumers’ identification. In addition, brand commitment and positive word-of-mouth are also included in the model as the consequences of consumers’ identification. The influences between concepts are tested first, followed by the testing of consumers’ identification as a mediator of value congruity on brand commitment and brand commitment as a mediator of consumers’ identification on generating positive word of mouth. The study is concluded by discussion of important findings including implications for managerial activity.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Consumers’ identification with a brand

Even though the concept of consumer–brand identification is as yet only poorly investigated, there have been some efforts to define consumers’ identification with the brand (Kim et al., 2001; Rio et al., 2001; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). Most definitions derive from social identity theory that suggests brands are linked to the construction and communication of consumers’ own identity (Rodhain, 2006). Similarly, Rio et al. (2001) argue that there are two functions of a brand, i. e. the personal function, which implies the possibility that consumers identify themselves with some brands, and the social identification function, which refers to the brand’s ability to act as a communication instrument. In this view, consumers’ identification can be defined as the degree to which the brand expresses and enhances consumers’ identity (Kim et al., 2001).
Arguably the most important contribution to consumers’ identification comes from organizational identification theory implying that in articulating their sense of self, consumers identify and associate themselves with brands that reflect and reinforce their self-identity (Battacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). Organizational identification defined as the “sense of connection between an individual and an organization” (Ahearne et al., 2005) addresses similar theoretical problems as consumer–brand identification and can be an important basis for our definition. In accordance with Mael and Ashforth’s (1992, p. 103) definition of organizational identification we define consumers’ identification with a brand as consumer’s perception of oneness with a brand.

The second implication of organizational identification theory for understanding consumers’ identification with a brand is its distinction between two levels of identification—its group (identification with a group of co-workers) and its corporate level (identification with the company as a social entity) (Foreman and Whetten, 2000; Podnar, 2004). When applying organizational identification concept on consumer–brand identification, however, the focus will only be on the corporate level of organizational identification because consumers are not formal members of an organization and can not socially identify with a group of co-workers. What determines consumers’ identification with a brand is their perception of a brand as a social entity, which makes them identify with a brand even they are not formal members of an organization (Scott and Lane, 2000; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). Considering this theoretical background we argue that in today’s era brands that are important enough to the consumers can act as significant devices of consumers’ identification that help them satisfy their basic self-definitional needs (Battacharya and Sen, 2003, p. 77).

2.2 Value congruity

Consumers are likely to find brand’s identity more attractive when it 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 (Battacharya and Sen, 2003, p. 80). This statement conforms to the self-congruity theory (Johar and Sirgy, 1991) that suggests consumer–brand identification can only occur if brand image corresponds to consumer’s self-concept. Moreover, because consumers have psychological needs for self-consistency and self-esteem, brands that can establish high self-congruity enhance the consumers’ positive attitude toward the brand (Hamilton and Xiaolan, 2005, p. 8), such as brand commitment. This is additionally confirmed by the organizational identity theory that suggests identity congruence has a significant effect on member commitment (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994).

This study defines brand image in terms of brand associations that consumers ascribe to brands (Aaker 2002; Keller 1993; Pitt in Katsanis 1995; De Chernatony in McDonald 2003; Hsieh 2002) or as the perception of brand’s core defining characteristics (Kapferer, 2003; Podnar, 2000; Rio et al., 2001; Chang in Chieng 2006). Such intangible image components that can be defined as basic constituents of brand’s and consumer’s image are brand values that several authors point out to be the basic linking element between consumers and a brand (Pitts and Woodside, 1983; De Chernatony and Riely, 1997; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Allen et al., 2002; Holt, 2004; Trout, 2006). A set of values of an individual can be very important in consumer activities since consumers use many products or brands because they believe these products or brands will help them attain their set of values (Solomon, 2009, p. 173). Hamilton and Xiaolan (2005) point out that for a brand to be successful, its images and symbols must relate to and indeed exploit values and life-styles of consumers in such a way that the meanings involved give added values, and differentiate the brand from other brands. In their study Battacharya and Sen (2003, p. 78) proposed that consumers identify with the subset of company associations that constitutes the company identity which is likely to
comprise traits that reflect company’s core values. Brand values that are in congruity with consumers’ values should therefore also be likely to lead to stronger identification and their commitment to a brand. We therefore hypothesize:
H1. Value congruity positively influences consumers’ identification with a brand.
H2. Value congruity positively influences consumers’ commitment to a brand.

2.3 Brand commitment
Consumers’ commitment to a brand is defined as an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand 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). The main distinction between commitment and identification is that commitment represents positive attitude toward the brand but with consumers’ self and the brand remaining separate entities (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 333). On the other hand, consumers’ identification defined as a perceived oneness with the brand necessarily implies consumer’s self-concept. Brand commitment is also closely related to but different from brand loyalty (Assael 1998; Aaker, 2002; Warrington in Shim 2000). While brand loyalty refers to the behavioural perspective and reflects mainly in the repeated purchase of a particular brand (Assael, 1998) and consumer's need to reduce effort and simplify decision making processes (Warrington and Shim, 2000), brand commitment is viewed from an attitudinal perspective. This is the reason why »brand commitment is a better indicator of consumer satisfaction with brand choice« (Mitchell, 1998) and is therefore the variable of interest in this study.

Some previous studies have shown that consumers’ identification may have a favourable impact on brand loyalty and brand commitment (Kim et al., 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Brown et al., 2005). The impact of identification on commitment on the other hand was more frequently researched in organizational commitment context (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Hogg and Terry, 2001; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Podnar, 2004) suggesting that identification positively influences the degree of organizational commitment. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003, p. 83) claim that identification causes people to become psychologically attached to and care about the organization, which motivates them to commit to the achievement of its goals. Such consequences of identification can also be discussed in consumers’ identification with a brand. We therefore hypothesize:
H3. Consumers’ identification with a brand has a positive influence on brand commitment and is a mediating variable between value congruity and consumers’ commitment to a brand.

2.4 Positive word of mouth
Word of mouth (WOM) is becoming a notable tool of integrated marketing communication because it plays an important role in shaping consumers’ attitudes and behaviours (Brown and Reingen in Harrison-Walker, 2001). Recent studies in relationship marketing suggest that word of mouth may be among the most important responses that can emerge from efforts directed at relationships with consumers (Brown et al, 2005, p. 123). For this reason, the findings of several previous studies in consumer research suggesting that consumers’ identification has a positive impact on generating positive word of mouth (Kim et al., 2001; Rio et al., 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008) are also important. It has been confirmed that identified consumers tend to promote the company to significant others (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, p. 83), recommend the company’s products more often (Ahearne et al., 2005, p. 580) and make supportive and positive recommendations about the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Not only identification but commitment as well reflects favourable attitudes toward the company or the brand (Ellis, 2000; Casaló et al., 2008; Harrison-Walker, 2001). It has been established that loyal customers usually promote the company by emphasizing the main
attributes of their products or services (Casaló et al., 2008, p. 403–404). It has also been confirmed that affective loyalty in particular has a strong and positive influence on word of mouth (Ellis, 2000; Hagenbuch, 2006; Nusair, 2007). The direct link between identification, commitment and generating positive word of mouth is suggested by the majority of present day research. However, Brown et al. (2005, p. 124) proposed that effect of identification on positive WOM is more complex because it is mediated by commitment. We hypothesize:

H4. Consumers’ identification positively influences positive word of mouth.

H5. Consumers’ commitment to a brand has a positive influence on positive word of mouth and is a mediating variable between consumers’ identification and positive word of mouth.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

First we conducted a pilot study with 15 respondents to evaluate our questionnaire. Two indicators were found to be redundant and were excluded from the study. Data to verify suggested hypotheses were collected with quantitative research method using nonprobability snowball sampling. Data were gathered among Slovene population with a web-based questionnaire that was used to survey consumers’ attitudes about their favourite brand. The first group of around 120 units was approached by an e-mail, while the second group of 100 units was contacted using social network Facebook.

The final sample size consisted of 596 units. The sample is 70 per cent female with 46 per cent respondents aged less than 25 years, 27 per cent respondents aged between 26 and 35 years, and 26 per cent of respondents aged over 35 years. Respondents are well educated – 52 per cent of respondents have completed secondary education, and more than 44 per cent have higher education or university degree. The respondents reside mainly in urban and suburban areas (83 per cent).

3.2 Measures

All constructs in our theoretical model are measured using multi-item scales. All items in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale with an option “I have no opinion” (9). To measure consumers’ identification with a brand we had to adapt existing measures to suit the particular context. Eight items were adapted based on Cheney’s instrument for measuring organizational identification (Cheney in Rubin et al., 1994, p. 271), one indicator was formulated according to corporate identification measure designed by Podnar (2004, p. 150), another is based on the research by Kim et al., (2001), and the last two were developed from a measuring scale by Cho and Boster (2005). The measure of consumer’s identification with a brand was found to be a one-dimensional concept composed of 12 indicators forming a reliable measuring instrument (Crombach alpha = 0.85). Value congruity was measured using two scales – one for measuring consumer’s values and another for brand values. Both scales contain 3 items that were taken from The Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1968, p. 1974). A variability analysis was conducted for a computed variable named as value congruity (Crombach alpha = 0.79). To measure brand commitment, a measuring instrument designed by Ellis (2000) was used to measure affective and social compliance commitment. The reliability analysis revealed that both measures were reliable (Crombach alpha = 0.90 for affective commitment, and Crombach alpha = 0.76 for social compliance commitment). A five-item scale constructed from various measuring instruments (Ellis, 2000; Casaló et al., 2008; Cheney 1983; File et al., 1992; Kim et al., 2001; Harrison-
Walker 2001) was used to measure positive word of mouth and was also found to be reliable (Crombach alpha = 0.86).

4. Results

The means for the variables studied show that on average all measures but one are quite high, averaging above 3 on the five-point Likert-type scale (Table 1). Correlations among all concepts are, as expected, positive and significant (Table 1). Consumers’ identification has the strongest relationship with affective brand commitment. As presumed, value congruity positively influences brand identification and brand commitment. Strong and positive correlations among identification, both dimensions of commitment and positive WOM are also in accordance with our presumption that brand commitment and brand identification have a positive influence on positive word of mouth.

INSERT TABLE 1

Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses concerning the key influences among variables, while the suggested mediation effects among concepts were additionally confirmed using Sobel test (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Results obtained with regression analysis showed that the first two hypotheses (H1 and H2) can be confirmed because of a positive influence of value congruity on brand commitment as well as on consumers’ identification with a brand. Using regression analysis we can only partly confirm our third hypothesis (H3) but can establish that consumers’ identification really has a strong and positive influence on brand commitment. The suggestion that consumers’ identification with a brand serves as mediator of the effects of value congruity on brand commitment was supported with Sobel test.

INSERT FIGURE 2

As noted in Table 2, value congruity was significant predictor of brand affective (t=6.0*) and social compliance commitment (t=4.0*). When consumers’ identification with a brand was added to the model, the effect of the value congruity on affective commitment (t=1.3) as well as on social compliance commitment (t= 1.0) decreased and became insignificant, indicating full mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Sobel test also confirmed full mediation effect of consumers’ identification in both cases (t1=5.3*; t2=4.5*). The third hypothesis (H3) can therefore be fully confirmed. It was established that consumers’ identification positively influences consumers’ intentions to generate positive word of mouth about the brand, which confirms our fourth hypothesis (H4). Identification but also consumers’ commitment to a brand were both found to positively influence word of mouth, although the latter influence is weaker. Our last hypothesis (H5) can therefore be partly supported. To test the mediation effect of consumers’ commitment we checked if the effect of consumers’ identification on generating positive WOM (t=10.7*) decreased when affective commitment (t=7.1*) and social compliance commitment (t=6.6*) was added to the regression model. We can see that in both cases the effect of consumers’ identification on WOM remained high and still statistically significant, which indicates there is no mediation. Sobel test also confirmed that in the case of affective commitment the degree of mediation is none (t=1.0), while social compliance commitment mediates the effect of identification on positive WOM (t=4.2*). The effect of social compliance commitment is therefore established as partial mediation but brand commitment as a whole can not be confirmed as a mediator of identification on positive WOM. Our last hypothesis (H5) can therefore be only partially confirmed.
Our study contributes to the growing research on consumers’ relationships with a brand (Fournier, 1998; Aaker, 1997; Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Wertime, 2002; McEwen, 2005; Thomson et al., 2005) by highlighting the importance of brand identification as the basic psychological process that enables formation of deep, committed and meaningful relationships with consumers. Based on organizational identification theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Podnar, 2004) the concept of identification was applied to the consumer–brand relation by removing the group identification dimension. Our results suggest, in accordance with some previous research (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008), that not only organizations and companies but also brands can help satisfy individuals’ self-definitional needs. This is an important finding to apply to psychology literature demonstrating that identification can be an important and relevant concept even where there is no interpersonal connection.

With our empirical evidence on some antecedents and consequences of consumers’ identification with a brand we also contribute to the Bathacharya’s and Sen’s (2003) theoretical findings. This study provides important empirical evidence by revealing that consumers do identify with their favourite brands and therefore perceive the brand as a part of their self-concept. Specifically, we demonstrate that the stronger consumers identify with a brand, the stronger they tend to commit to this brand and more likely will they generate positive word of mouth. Results also indicate how important it is that brand values match the values of brand’s target group of consumers. In accordance with findings of research on identity and image congruence (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994; Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Hamilton and Xiaolan, 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) value congruity was found to positively influence consumers’ identification as well as their commitment to a brand. As predicted, we found that consumers’ identification with a brand fully mediates the impact of value congruity on brand commitment. On the other hand, contrary to our assumption and in contradiction with the findings of Brown et al. (2005) it was found that consumers’ commitment does not mediate the impact of consumers’ identification on generating positive word of mouth. It was rather revealed that consumers’ identification with a brand positively and directly influences brand commitment and has a positive and direct effect on positive word of mouth as well. Based on these results, our study provides strong evidence that consumers are willing to become great supporters of a brand if they identify with it.

Limitations of the study include nonprobability sampling and correlations among independent variables that could result in multi-collinearity. One of the key limitations refers to its general perspective because the study focuses only on consumers’ identification with their favourite brand and not on a specific brand. The study can therefore confirm only that consumers identify with their favourite brands in which case it is more likely to perceive oneness with the brand. The study of consumers’ identification with a brand applied to a specific brand is therefore a very worthwhile future research. Moreover, it will be necessary to empirically test some other important antecedents and consequences of consumers’ identification with a brand and check whether there are some differences in the degree of consumers’ identification comparing product, service, and retail brands. Longitudinal and qualitative studies would also add some valuable information.

6. Managerial implications
Our research could add important knowledge to managers’ understanding of possibilities they have on building strong and lasting relationships with their customers by focusing on consumers’ identification with their brand. Results suggest that managers should focus on increasing identification of their target consumers because it leads to some important and desired consequences. Consumers’ identification was found to engender consumers’ commitment and stimulate consumers to generate positive word of mouth about the brand. Brand managers should therefore pay a lot of attention to the factors that influence consumers’ identification with a brand. According to the findings of this study, these factors are especially the fundamental and intangible characteristics of the brands, such as brand values. Brand values were found to play an important role in influencing consumer behaviour (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003), especially if they are in congruency with the values of the consumer target group. Core values of the brand should therefore be carefully defined and communicated uniformly through all tools of integrated marketing communication. This finding highlights the importance of brand communications because it shows that consumers are more likely to identify with the brands that provide relevant information and consistently communicate core brand values. A successful brand should therefore have and maintain such brand values that match as much as possible the values of their target consumers. Such communications will have a positive impact on consumers’ identification with a brand.
7. References


Appendix: figures and tables

Figure 1: Theoretical model of consumers' identification with a brand

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach alpha (α)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Consumers' identification</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Affective brand commitment</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.67*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Social compliance brand commitment</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
<td>0.48*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Positive WOM</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
<td>0.45*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Value congruity</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.35*</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.01 level.

Figure 2: Regression model – regression influences among concepts

Table 2: Mediation effects calculated with regression and Sobel test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable (IV)</th>
<th>Moderating variable (DV)</th>
<th>Dependent variable (DV)</th>
<th>Effect of IV on mediator</th>
<th>Effect of mediator on DV</th>
<th>Direct effect of IV on DV</th>
<th>Indirect effect of IV on DV</th>
<th>Sobel test</th>
<th>Degree of mediation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value congruity Identification</td>
<td>Affective commitment</td>
<td>β=0.35</td>
<td>β=0.67</td>
<td>β=0.30</td>
<td>β=0.07</td>
<td>t=6.1*</td>
<td>t=5.3*</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value congruity Identification</td>
<td>Social comp. commitment</td>
<td>β=0.35</td>
<td>t=6.1*</td>
<td>β=0.50</td>
<td>β=0.11</td>
<td>t=4.0*</td>
<td>β=0.06</td>
<td>t=4.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Affective commitment</td>
<td>Positive WOM</td>
<td>β=0.67</td>
<td>t=16.5*</td>
<td>β=0.38</td>
<td>t=10.6*</td>
<td></td>
<td>t=1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Social comp. commitment</td>
<td>Positive WOM</td>
<td>β=0.50</td>
<td>t=10.4*</td>
<td>β=0.50</td>
<td>t=10.6*</td>
<td></td>
<td>t=0.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.01 level.