Consumer-Brand Identification: Conceptualization, Antecedents and Consequences

Abstract
Despite the surge in interest in research on organizational identification, little attention has been paid to investigating the notion of identification in the branding context. Moreover, consumer-brand identification has been conceptualized and operationalized equally as organizational identification while ignoring both the shortcomings of organizational identification measures and the differences between the two contexts. Drawing on social identity theory and marketing literature, the authors develop a theory-derived definition of consumer-brand identification distinct from organizational identification. Additionally, the authors propose a conceptual model of the different antecedents and consequences of consumer-brand identification, including product involvement as a key moderating variable. The findings of this study would benefit the managers to gain a better understanding of the factors that are valuable for consumers, thereby increasing both in-role and extra-role behaviour.

Key words: Social identity theory, Consumer-brand identification, Consumer behaviour, Branding, Self-image congruence, Loyalty.

Introduction
Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and organizational identification research (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) in their seminal paper argued that a key to the formation of strong relationships between consumers and companies is based on the concept of identification where consumers associate and identify themselves with companies to satisfy one or more of their self-definitional needs. However, only a handful of studies have incorporated consumer brand identification (henceforth referred to as CBI) in their conceptual models and tested it empirically (Tildesley & Coote, 2009 e.g. Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; 2010). Nonetheless, these studies have conceptualized CBI equally as organizational identification (henceforth referred to as OI) i.e. they replaced the word organization by brand. Perhaps, one major drawback is that most studies in the marketing field have a cognitive emphasis ignoring the evaluative and emotional facets of identification.

Moreover, CBI has been measured using scales adapted from OI research (e.g. Mael & Ashforth, 1992). However, OI scales suffer from serious shortcomings. First, they do not represent some of the unique aspects that bind consumers to brands (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2008). Second, OI scales lack validity and fail to reflect the multidimensional nature of identification as indicated by Tajfel’s (1981) original definition of social identity (Edwards & Peccei, 2007). As indicated by Rikketa (2005) in his recent meta-analysis of OI, lacking a clear, precise and agreed conceptualization and operationalization of identification can hinder empirical progress in the field. Therefore, there is a need for rigorous operationalization of CBI, with precise and clear theoretical conceptualization, related and linked to how the construct is defined. In light of these shortcomings, the aim of this research is twofold: First, we build on social identity theory (henceforth referred to as SIT) to develop a clear theory-derived definition of CBI. Second, we propose a conceptual model that explores the antecedents and consequences of CBI.

Social Identity Theory and its applicability in a branding context
The main assumption of SIT (Tajfel, 1978) is that the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity encompassing specific personal attributes and a social identity defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p.255). This social categorization allows individuals not only to cognitively segment, classify and order the social environment but also provide them a means to define themselves and others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The other part of the theory is the tenet that individuals strive to achieve a positive self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) either by trying to enhance their personal identity and/or their social identity (Edwards, 2005). In line with SIT, OI research proposed that formal membership is not a prequisite for identification (Scott & Lane, 2000) as in the case of consumers and their companies (Bhattacharya &
Sen, 2003). Thus, Bhattarchya and Sen (2003) proposed that consumers may identify with companies that embody attractive social identities to satisfy one or more of their key self-definitional needs. Following the same logic, the concept of identification can be extended to consumer-brands relationships given the following reasons. First, brands can represent positive, attractive and meaningful social categories to which consumers can identify with or classify themselves as belonging to (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Second, brands may be more appropriate than companies for consumers to identify with given that brands are more familiar to consumers than companies. In addition, a company may have multiple brands with different personalities so the focus of identification in case of companies may not be obvious (Tidesley & Coote, 2009).

Reconceptualization of Consumer-Brand Identification

Following from an earlier discussion; within the social identity definition, three components of identification can be distinguished: (1) a cognitive component which is the sense of awareness and acceptance of being a member of a social group, (2) an evaluative aspect which is the sense that this awareness of membership is related to some value connotations assigned to the group, and (3) an emotional dimension which describes the emotional investment in this awareness and evaluations (Tajfel,1982). In addition, Tajfel elaborated that in order to achieve the stage of identification with a social group, the cognitive and evaluative components are necessary and the emotional component is frequently associated with them. Therefore, based on the preceding literature and upon reflection of SIT, CBI is defined in this research as the extent to which the brand is incorporated into one’s self-concept through the development of cognitive connection with the brand, valuing this connection with the brand, and the emotional attachment to the brand.

Specifically, this definition reflects the three aspects of identification indicated in SIT which, when taken together, define the extent to which the consumer incorporates the brand into his or her self-concept. It overcomes the shortcoming of the previous conceptualizations that focused only on either the cognitive aspect or the emotional component of identification. On the basis of SIT and the proposed CBI definition, it is argued that CBI can be represented in terms of three dimensions, namely, cognitive CBI, evaluative CBI and affective CBI. In terms of dimensionality, CBI is a second order construct with three first order dimensions. All these dimensions are assumed to be conceptually distinct but highly interrelated; it is probable that an individual who perceives that his organization is positively evaluated from others also shows emotional attachment to social category (Van Dick, 2001).

Proposed Components of Consumer-Brand Identification

Cognitive CBI:

According to SIT, the cognitive component of identification refers to the individual’s self-categorization to a social category (Van Dick, 2001) which provides a partial definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the group (Hogg et al., 1995). There appears to be a consensus that as a result of this self-categorization, a cognitive connection is developed between the individual and the social category to which one belongs (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). It has also been argued that when brand associations are used to construct the self-concept or communicate it to others or to themselves; a cognitive connection is formed with brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). For instance, professionals buy Mercedes and BMW cars while outdoorsy people purchase Subarus and Utes cars. Hence, a measure of CBI should consider the consumers’ cognitive connection to the brand to reflect their social identity and social categorization. Cognitive CBI in this research refers to the extent to which consumers’ categorize themselves in terms of a particular brand and label themselves as an exemplar of that category.

Evaluative CBI:

Social identities have self-evaluative consequences i.e. social categories to which one belongs carry different degrees of positive and negative value for the self (Turner et al., 1994). Social identities may be positive or negative based on how one evaluates one’s social group and how one perceive others’ evaluate those groups (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Dutton et al. (1994) proposed that organizations
can have positive and negative effects on a member’s sense of self. Research also suggests that people disassociate themselves from brands with negative meanings as identifying with those brands will result in negative evaluations for one’s self (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Therefore, a CBI measure should take into account the impact of consumer’s connection to a brand on self-evaluation. Evaluative CBI in this research refers to the degree to which consumers’ value their connection with the brand and the perceived value placed on this connection by others.

Affective CBI:
The emotional component of identification, which is frequently associated with the other two aspects, refers to the emotional attachment to the group and to those evaluations associated with the group (Tajfel, 1982). In line with this proposition, Park and colleagues (2010) proposed that emotions are evoked when self-brand connection is strong including sadness from self-brand separation and happiness from self-brand proximity. Additionally, it has been argued that emotional attachment tends to be stronger in more positively evaluated groups as these groups contribute more to positive social identity (Ellemers et al., 1999). Fournier (1998) proposed that emotional relationships emerge only when brands become integrated into consumers’ lives and identity projects. Therefore, a measure of CBI should consider the emotional attachment the consumer develops with the brand. Affective CBI in this research refers to the individual’s feelings toward the brand and toward others’ evaluations of the brand.

Conceptual Framework
The conceptual framework proposes that brand prestige and brand distinctiveness will motivate the extent to which consumers identify with the brand to satisfy their self-enhancement and self distinctiveness needs. Additionally, self-image congruence and functional congruence will enhance consumers’ identification with the brand. Further, it posits that consumers are more likely to identify with the brand under high product involvement conditions and CBI will result in both in-role and extra-role behaviors.

Antecedents to Consumer-Brand Identification

**Brand Antecedents:**
SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that individuals strive to enhance their self-esteem which is based on the degree that one’s social groups are valued and compared favourably relative to relevant out-groups. The notion that consumers buy products to enhance their self-esteem is well acknowledged in consumer behaviour literature (e.g. Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). In line with this, Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) propose that members’ fulfil their self-enhancement needs if they perceive that important others believe that their organization is well regarded (i.e. respected,
prestigious, and well-known). In other words, people identify with prestigious companies to maintain a positive social identity and enhance their self-esteem by viewing themselves in the company’s reflected glory (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Therefore, the greater the brand is perceived as prestigious by consumers, the more likely consumers identify with the brand to enhance their self-esteem. Hence:

**H1:** The greater prestigious the consumers perceive a brand, the higher the identification with that brand.

Distinctiveness relates to how the organization is different from other organizations thus providing a more salient definition to its members (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). SIT posits that people seek to maintain and enhance their social identity by associating with groups that are perceived to be positively differentiated or distinctive from relevant out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Borrowing from SIT, Dutton et al., (1994) asserted that organizational members who believe that their organization is distinctive relative to other organizations are more likely to identify with their organization. Hence, consumers should perceive a stronger identification with distinctive brands. Therefore:

**H2:** The greater distinctive the consumers perceive a brand, the higher the identification with that brand.

**Individual Antecedents:**

Self-image congruence refers to the match between the consumer’s self-concept and the brand’s personality (Kressman et al., 2006). Self-congruity is guided by self-consistency motives, whereby the greater the similarity between the brand user-image or brand personality and the consumer’s self-concept the higher the self congruity. In OI research, Dutton and colleagues (1994) have indicated that people generally want to maintain self-consistency over time and across situations. Self-consistency allows people not only to process and understand the information easily but also provides easy opportunities to express themselves. They proposed that the more similarity between the individuals’ self-concept and the organizational identity, the more they identify with the organization. Analogously, it is proposed here that the greater the self-congruity, the more likely consumers identify the brand to maintain their self-consistency. Based on the preceding, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** The greater the self-congruity with a brand, the higher the identification with that brand.

Functional congruity refers to the extent to which functional attributes of the brand matches the consumer's expectations regarding how the product should perform to accomplish the central goal of the product (Kressman et al., 2006). Functional congruity is guided by utilitarian motive. Mael and Ashforth (1992) have found that satisfaction with the alma mater’s contribution to the attainment of students’ goals is associated with identification. Bhattacharya et al., (1995) argued that the more the organization fulfills the members’ personal goals, the greater is the identification. Thus, it is proposed here that the greater the functional congruity with a brand, the more likely to identify with a brands. Therefore:

**H4:** The greater the functional congruity with a brand, the higher the identification with that brand.

The extent to which both brand antecedents and individual antecedents contribute to brand identification is likely to be accentuated when consumers are highly involved with the product category. For example a consumer who is highly involved with cars is more likely to identify with a brand like BMW to satisfy one or more of his self-definitional needs than a consumer who is not highly involved with cars in general. As such:

**H5:** Product involvement moderates the effect of (a) brand prestige, (b) brand distinctiveness, (c) self-image congruence and (d) functional congruence on consumer-brand identification.
Consequences to Consumer-Brand Identification
SIT proposes that individuals tend to choose activities that are congruent with important aspects of their identities and support institutions that reflect those identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Additionally, Park et al., (2010) extended self-expansion theory and proposed that the more the brand is incorporated in the self, the more likely consumers expend their own social, financial and time resources in the brand to maintain this brand relationship. In what follows, some consequences that might apply to the consumption context are examined.

Brand Loyalty: Researchers (e.g. Bhattacharya et al., 1995) have argued that identification is associated with members’ commitment in terms of reduced turnover in organizations and extra role behaviour in terms of financial support in the context of non-profit institutions. Analogously, consumers who identify with brands are more likely to support their brand by repurchasing the brand, long-term preference for the brand and willing to pay a price premium, as they have a vested interest in the success of their brands for the benefits that accrue to them. Therefore,

H6: The greater the consumer-brand identification, the higher the brand loyalty.

Brand Advocacy: Brand advocacy refers here to positive word of mouth and recommendation behaviour (customer recruitment). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed that identifiers have a clear stake in the success of the company, driven by their self-enhancement, self-distinctiveness and self-consistency needs, and thus are more likely to promote the company socially by initiating positive word of mouth about the company and its products. In line with this, Mael and Ashforth (1992) found that OI is significantly related to the member’s willingness to advise others to join the university. Hence, it is proposed that CBI should be positively related to positive word of mouth and recommendation behaviour. Therefore:

H7: The greater the consumer-brand identification, the higher the brand advocacy.

Resilience to negative information: People generally seek to maintain self-consistency over time (Dutton et al., 1994). Therefore, consumers who seek continuity in identifying with a particular company are more likely to dismiss any negative information they may receive about the company (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Moreover, they argue that consumers are willing to forgive the company they identify with just as they will forgive themselves for minor mistakes. Hence, it is proposed that consumers demonstrating high level of identification with a particular brand will be more resilient to negative information about that brand. Therefore:

H8: The greater the consumer-brand identification, the higher the resilience to negative information

Conclusions
Theoretical Contributions: This study will contribute towards a clear theory-derived definition of CBI building on SIT, an important step towards enriching the identification theory in the marketing area and understanding the motives behind building strong relationships with brands.

Managerial Contributions: The findings of this study will provide marketers a better understanding of the strong relationship consumers builds with brands for the purpose of fulfilling their self-definitional needs. Moreover, this study would benefit the managers to gain a better understanding of the characteristics that are valuable for consumers and drive beneficial outcomes.

Directions for Future Research: Future research could develop and validate a scale which will capture the proposed conceptualization of CBI. Furthermore the proposed hypotheses advanced in the present study could be tested empirically.
References


