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Research Article
Impact of Brand Authenticity on Brand Attitude and Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Self-brand Connection

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Abstract

Background: This study investigates the linkage between brand authenticity, self-brand connection and brand attitude or loyalty to explore how various authentic characteristics of brands can be used for consumers to connect themselves to the brands and reinforce their identity. **Materials and Methods:** Brand authenticity was operationalized as consisting of factors: Originality, reliability, quality commitment, heritage and consistency. **Results:** Self-brand connection fully mediated the relationship between brand originality and consumer's brand attitude or loyalty and partially mediated the relationship between brand reliability or quality commitment and consumer's brand attitude or loyalty. Brand consistency did not significantly relate to self-brand connection but enhanced brand attitude. **Conclusion:** This study indicated that efforts to enhance brand authenticity may offer benefits by influencing consumer's sense of connection to the brand. Self-brand connection generated through perceived authenticity creates favorable responses.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly search for authenticity in brands and the quest for authenticity is well documented in a wide range of marketing settings: Luxury products[1], mundane objects and mass marketed products[2] and tourism sites[3]. Many studies were exploratory or quantitative research in specific industries. Recently, researchers have made efforts aimed at conceptualizing and operationalizing brand authenticity dimensions. Liao and Ma[4] identified six characteristics of authenticity: Originality, quality commitment and credibility, heritage and style persistence, scarceness, sacredness and purity. Bruhn *et al.*[5] identified brand authenticity as a construct consisting of four dimensions, namely continuity, originality, reliability and naturalness, while Napoli *et al.*[6] suggested three factors labeled quality commitment, sincerity and heritage. Although, literature has identified several properties of authenticity, the relative importance of each property and attribute in terms of influencing brand attitude or loyalty of consumers is yet to be determined.

This study proposes that brands perceived authentic are more likely to be self-related and a link may be forged between brand authenticity properties and the achievement of self-related goals. Authenticity is attributed to an object if it assists consumers in uncovering their true self through consumption[7]. Morhart *et al.*[8] suggested that brands that want to be perceived authentic should provide identity-relevant features and contribute to consumer's identity project. Although they showed that perceived brand authenticity positively relate to consumer's emotional attachment when authentic brands elicit higher levels of self-image congruence, they did not examine the differential effects of brand authenticity dimensions. Moreover, brand authenticity dimensions can help consumers to associate themselves with the brand to construct or communicate the self to others. These consumers can form a connection with the brand[9]. Self-brand connections are intended to measure the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept. It is a key antecedent of consumer-brand relationship strength, making it an important driver of downstream brand attitudes and behaviors[10]. Thus, this study focuses on finding out whether and how various brand authenticity dimensions are actually incorporated into consumer's self-concepts. As consumers seek authenticity in consumption acts[2] and desirable authentic features of a brand can be used as important symbolic resources for consumers to construct or reveal their identities, it is expected that consumers incorporate brand associations related to positive authenticity properties to their self-identities. Self-brand connection is an important driver of brand attitudes and behaviors[11]. Those who have linked authenticity associations of a particular brand to self-concepts may have more favorable attitude toward the brand[12]. When the level of self-brand connection is very high, consumers are more likely to be loyal and less likely to switch to competitor's brands. Given these findings, it is likely that the more people perceive a brand as authentic, the more they will incorporate it into their self-concept. The more consumers feel connected with authentic brands, the more likely they will prefer the brands. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Brand authenticity dimensions will be positively related to self-brand connection

H2: Brand authenticity dimensions will be positively related to brand attitude or brand loyalty

H3: Self-brand connection will be positively related to brand attitude and brand loyalty

This study investigates which authentic characteristics of brands can be used for consumers to connect themselves to the brands and reinforce their identity as well as whether this consumer-brand connection enhance favorable attitude and loyalty toward the brands.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design: This study examines factors labeled originality, reliability, quality commitment, heritage and consistency that correspond with a brand authenticity construct. In order to ensure that the consumer's notion of brand authenticity corresponds to the one that have been identified, respondents were asked to select a brand which they perceive highly authentic as well as a brand from an identical or closely related product category which they perceive inauthentic. Respondents were again asked to record how strongly they felt each item reflected their nominated brand. Respondents pointed out the degree to which the items describe the brands using a 5 point scale ranging from 1 indicating 'Described poorly' to 5 indicating 'Described very well'.

Measurements: Originality items developed by Bruhn *et al.*[5] include "The brand is different from all other brands", "The brand stands out from other brands", "I think the brand is unique" and "The brand clearly distinguishes itself from other brands". Reliability items include "My experience of the brand shown me that it keeps its promise", "The brand delivers what it promises", "The brand's promises are credible" and "The brand makes reliable promises". Quality commitment

Table 1: Brand category descriptions

Brand category	Inauthentic brands (n = 204)		Authentic brands (n =225)		Total (n = 429)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Foods	52	25.5	28	12.4	80	18.6
Personal care goods	18	8.8	45	20.0	63	14.7
Clothing	29	14.2	46	20.4	75	17.5
Electronic appliances	50	24.5	58	25.8	108	25.2
Cars	16	7.8	9	4.0	25	5.8
IT services	18	8.8	9	4.0	27	6.3
Others	18	8.8	26	11.6	44	10.3

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Inauthentic brands		Authentic brands		Total brands	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Originality	2.31	0.94	3.37	0.95	2.87	1.08
Reliability	2.27	0.74	3.88	0.57	3.12	1.04
Quality	2.60	0.79	3.83	0.72	3.24	0.98
Heritage	2.43	0.89	3.04	1.00	2.75	0.99
Consistency	2.97	0.78	4.04	0.65	3.53	0.89
Brand attitude	2.30	0.88	4.39	0.55	3.39	1.27
Brand loyalty	2.13	0.93	4.41	0.65	3.33	1.39

items by Napoli *et al.*[6] include "Quality is central to the brand", "Only the finest ingredients/materials are used in the manufacture of this brand", "The brand is made to the most exacting standards, where everything the firm does is aimed at improving quality" and "It feels like artisan skills and customized manufacturing processes have been retained in the production of this brand". Heritage items include "The brand has a strong connection to an historical period in time, culture and/or specific region", "The brand has a strong link to the past, which is still perpetuated and celebrated to this day", "The brand exudes a sense of tradition" and "The brand reflects a timeless design". Consistency items include "The brand remains true to its espoused values", "The brand refuses to compromise the values upon which it was founded" and "The brand has stuck to its principles" from Napoli *et al.*[6] as well as "The brand is consistent over time" from Bruhn *et al.*[5]. Participants also rated the self-brand connection scale items by Escalas and Bettman[9] such as "The brand reflects who I am", "I can identify with the brand" and "I feel a personal connection to the brand". The Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 and these items were averaged. In terms of dependent variables, brand attitude was gauged along a 5 point, semantic differential scale with 3 items: Dislike/like, negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable (α = 0.84). Attitudinal measures of brand loyalty incorporate items referring to repurchase intention and word-of-mouth[13] (α = 0.85).

Statistical analysis: Mediation analysis was performed using the regression analysis steps recommended by Baron and Kenny[14]. Additional analysis was conducted to see if effects of authenticity attributes on self-brand connection vary across the product categories.

Sample: Data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire using undergraduate students in Korea. After eliminating data that could not be used due to incomplete responses, the final sample consisted of 227 respondents who evaluated 429 brands. The average age was 21 years, with a relatively even split between male (52%) and female (48%) respondents. Table 1 shows product categories of authentic and inauthentic brands. Many brands perceived inauthentic were from foods (25.5%) and electronic appliances (24.5%), while many brands perceived authentic were from electronic appliances (25.8%), clothing (20.4%) and personal care goods (20.0%). Descriptive statistics of authentic and inauthentic brands are in Table 2.

RESULTS

Table 3 suggests results of factor analysis. Items with a corrected item-to-total correlation of less than 0.4 were eliminated, resulting in the deletion of two items, one from originality, "The brand clearly distinguishes itself from other brands" and the other from heritage, "The brand has a strong connection to an historical period in time, culture and/or specific region".

The remaining scale items were then subjected to a principal components analysis with an oblique rotation. The

Table 3: Factor analysis

Factor items	--Factor loading--					Accumulated variance (%)
Reliability 2	0.856	0.045	0.151	-0.029	0.081	32.31
Reliability 3	0.846	0.086	0.035	0.059	0.032	
Reliability 1	0.782	0.188	0.143	0.073	0.170	
Reliability 4	0.734	0.250	0.119	0.110	0.132	
Quality 3	0.175	0.830	0.151	0.066	0.103	44.81
Quality 4	0.184	0.806	0.076	0.107	0.224	
Quality 1	0.209	0.760	0.130	0.044	0.089	
Quality 2	-0.026	0.669	0.027	0.300	0.230	
Consistency 4	0.099	0.117	0.845	0.063	0.016	55.79
Consistency 1	-0.084	0.019	0.803	0.198	-0.002	
Consistency 3	0.244	0.153	0.703	0.191	0.118	
Consistency 2	0.271	0.105	0.684	0.050	0.166	
Originality 2	0.071	0.208	0.194	0.866	0.073	63.60
Originality 1	0.112	0.130	0.026	0.850	0.138	
Originality 3	0.005	0.061	0.288	0.822	0.151	
Heritage 3	0.083	0.118	0.118	0.013	0.847	70.54
Heritage 4	0.118	0.182	0.001	0.203	0.798	
Heritage 2	0.176	0.268	0.125	0.173	0.664	

Table 4: Standardized coefficients (p-value) of mediated regression analysis

		Brand attitude			Brand loyalty	
Variables	1: DV = Connection	2: DV = Attitude	3: DV = Attitude	2: DV = Loyalty	3: DV = Loyalty
Originality	0.18 (0.000)	0.10 (0.003)	0.03 (0.291)	0.09 (0.023)	0.02 (0.664)
Reliability	0.41 (0.000)	0.53 (0.000)	0.38 (0.000)	0.54 (0.000)	0.37 (0.000)
Quality	0.12 (0.027)	0.26 (0.000)	0.21 (0.000)	0.22 (0.000)	0.17 (0.000)
Heritage	0.16 (0.000)	-0.00 (0.943)	-0.06 (0.023)	0.00 (0.931)	-0.06 (0.054)
Consistency	0.03 (0.598)	0.08 (0.022)	0.07 (0.020)	0.05 (0.262)	0.04 (0.323)
Mediator			0.37 (0.000)		0.40 (0.000)
F-value	81.84	207.35	250.63	135.87	162.99
R^2-value	0.49	0.71	0.78	0.62	0.70

Cronbach's alphas for each of the dimensions fall within Nunnally[15] guidelines. The 1st factor corresponded with the originality dimension of brand authenticity ($\alpha = 0.85$), the 2nd captured the reliability dimension ($\alpha = 0.81$), the 3rd captured the quality commitment dimension ($\alpha = 0.83$), the 4th represented the heritage dimension ($\alpha = 0.77$) and the 5th was the consistency dimension ($\alpha = 0.81$). These items formed the basis for further hypotheses testing.

Table 4 illustrates three steps mediation process. Brand originality positively influenced self-brand connection in the first model (b = 0.18, p = 0.00) and brand attitude in the second model (b = 0.10, p = 0.03). In the last model, with self-brand connection included as a mediator, the effect of originality disappears while the effect of connection is significant (b = 0.37, p = 0.00) indicating full mediation. A similar pattern is observed for brand loyalty. Originality increased brand loyalty (b = 0.09, p = 0.02) and the effect of originality disappears with self-brand connection included.

Partial mediation is indicated when the independent variable's effect is reduced in magnitude, but is still significant when the mediator is controlled. Brand reliability substantially influenced self-brand connection (b = 0.41, p = 0.00). The

coefficient for reliability decreased from 0.53 (p = 0.00) to 0.38 (p = 0.00) in magnitude. Reliability increased brand loyalty (b = 0.54, p = 0.00) and the relationship between the two after controlling self-brand connection was also significant (b = 0.37, p = 0.00). Brand quality commitment increased self-brand connection (b = 0.12, p = 0.03). The relationship between quality commitment and brand attitude (b = 0.26, p = 0.00) remained significant even connection is included (b = 0.21, p = 0.00).

According to the finding, most of the authenticity dimensions except for consistency increased self-brand connection, partially supporting H1. Originality, reliability, quality commitment and heritage appear to be critical for establishing self-related feelings for the brand. Further exploratory analysis was conducted to lend insight into the specific product category, as effects of authenticity evaluations on self-brand connection can vary across the categories (Table 5). Regarding foods brands, originality (b = 0.16, p = 0.05), reliability (b = 0.34, p = 0.00) and heritage (b = 0.21, p = 0.03) influenced self-brand connection, while for personal care goods, reliability (b = 0.27, p = 0.07) and heritage (b = 0.20, p = 0.07) was marginally significant. With

Table 5: Standardized coefficients (p-value) on self-brand connection

| Variables | Product category | | | |
	Foods	Personal care goods	Clothing	Electronic appliances
Originality	0.16 (0.052)	0.14 (0.234)	-0.03 (0.802)	0.33 (0.000)
Reliability	0.34 (0.001)	0.27 (0.072)	0.41 (0.008)	0.47 (0.000)
Quality	0.15 (0.187)	0.24 (0.138)	0.30 (0.053)	0.03 (0.762)
Heritage	0.21 (0.025)	0.20 (0.070)	0.02 (0.889)	0.16 (0.044)
Consistency	-0.06 (0.621)	0.20 (0.279)	0.19 (0.138)	-0.010 (0.370)
F-value	14.17	11.87	14.50	19.59
R^2-value	0.49	0.51	0.51	0.49

regard to clothing brands, reliability (b = 0.41, p = 0.01) and quality commitment (b = 0.30, p = 0.05) seems important and originality (b = 0.33, p = 0.00), reliability (b = 0.74, p = 0.00) and heritage (b = 0.16, p = 0.04) increased self-brand connection for electronic appliances.

The H2 was partially supported because brand heritage was not related to brand attitude or brand loyalty. Heritage increased self-brand connection (b = 0.16, p = 0.00) but did not have significant effect on brand attitude or loyalty. While brand consistency did not significantly relate to self-brand connection, it directly affected brand attitude (b = 0.08, p = 0.02). In addition, these results were not particularly different across product categories.

The H3 was supported as self-brand connection increased brand attitude (b = 0.37, p = 0.00) and brand loyalty (b = 0.40, p = 0.00) after controlling effects of authenticity. The impact of only self-brand connection on brand attitude (b = 0.76, p = 0.00) and brand loyalty (b = 0.74, p = 0.00) is substantial if authenticity variables are not taken into account.

DISCUSSION

Consumers are increasingly seeking authenticity in consumption acts these days. Empirical research on brand authenticity is recent, offering limited insights into the antecedents and consequences of this construct. Whereas, previous study mainly focused on finding out authentic brand characteristics, the proposed model establishes and tests a process that self-brand connection construct plays a significant role in authentic brand's success, including positive brand attitude and loyalty of consumers. This study is the first empirical study that identified the roles of various brand authenticity dimensions related to self-brand connection as well as brand attitude or loyalty. The results confirm the importance of brand authenticity dimensions in terms of the influence on consumer-brand relationships.

Results show that brand authenticity dimensions such as originality, reliability, heritage and quality are significantly related to self-brand connection of consumers. These results clearly indicate the importance of the brand authenticity in reflecting, participating in or creating consumer's identity. The results are in line with the literature that perceptions of brand quality or uniqueness of a brand can enhance self-brand connections[9,16]. Moreover, as the impact of authenticity dimensions can also depend on the characteristics of market offerings, additional exploratory analysis was conducted. Results suggest that the impact of brand authenticity on self-brand connection may not be the same across product categories. It seems that originality, reliability and heritage evaluations were relevant for both foods and electronic appliances. For personal care goods, the impact of reliability and heritage was marginally significant in increasing self-brand connection. With regard to clothing brands, reliability and quality commitment seem important aspects. This may lend insight into the brand authenticity cues and specific product categories for which authentic positioning strategies are desirable. It is also important to recognize that the impact of reliability aspect was shared among different categories of market offerings.

Brand heritage increased self-brand connection but did not have significant effect on brand attitude or loyalty. One of the possible reasons for the insignificance is that the products or brands under consideration were parts of markets where heritage are not often used in marketing campaigns. Alexander[17] suggested that mass-market products are less easily associated with connotations of heritage. Brand consistency directly affected brand attitude but did not significantly relate to self-brand connection or brand loyalty. It is possible that consistency is the least self-referential perceived brand authenticity dimension. The lack of a direct effect of heritage and consistency may arise partly because some brands with heritage or consistent brands are perceived as not prepared to accept major changes to consumer's needs or competitor's innovations in a fast changing market. While changes in a brand's original logo or product design patterns, especially if unexpected, may conflict with consumer's idealization, expected or reasonable changes can be tolerated without significantly degrading brand performances.

CONCLUSION

It is indicated that efforts to enhance brand authenticity may offer benefits by influencing consumer's sense of connection to the brand. Self-brand connection generated through perceived authenticity creates favorable responses. By understanding what dimensions of brand authenticity contribute to self-brand connection and brand attitude or loyalty, marketing managers also have several options to ensure that their brands remain powerful. As reliability turned out as one of the most influencing factor for self-brand connection, brand attitude and loyalty, brand managers have to put efforts to deliver on brand promises and work to develop reliable brand images. The development of sound self-brand connections through brand authenticity associations will have important implications for many business managers who need to understand how consumers can express themselves and reflect their identities through their brand consumption.

SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS

The present study contributes to the brand authenticity literature by providing self-brand connection as a route to understand how consumers utilize various brand authenticity dimensions. This study provides insights on specific dimensions of brand authenticity that contribute to enhancing self-brand connection as well as brand attitude or loyalty. Additional analysis was conducted to see if effects of authenticity attributes vary across the product categories.

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