



Consumer

Brand Identification and Social Media Influencer's Reputation on Brand Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Consumer Brand Engagement in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

This quantitative research article aims to: (1) test the influence of Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) and Social Media Influencer's Reputation (SMIR) on Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE); (2) test the relationship between CBE and Brand Loyalty (BL); and (3) investigate the mediating role of CBE in the relationship between CBI, SMIR, and BL. Data were collected via questionnaires distributed to consumer samples in China, resulting in 592 usable questionnaires for analysis. Data analysis utilized descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The empirical results supported all proposed hypotheses. Both CBI and SMIR were found to have a significant positive influence on CBE, which subsequently contributes to the enhancement of BL. The results confirm that CBE acts as a complementary partial mediator in the structural model. Specifically, SMIR was identified as the most prominent antecedent influencing CBE (Standardized Estimate = 0.795), emphasizing the critical role of influencer credibility in this context.

Keywords: Social Media Brand Communities, Consumer Brand Identification, Social Media Influencers' Reputation, Consumer Brand Engagement, Brand Loyalty

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Introduction

Social media platforms are valuable tools for brands to promote interactions and enhance brand awareness. As a fresh way to gather individual value and an important concept for understanding the current marketing and brand dynamics, CE is attracting great attention. Furthermore, extensive explorations on CE in SMBCs emerge in the research domain (Brodie et al., 2011). Consumer engagement (CE) is a context-based construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). Recently, numerous companies have turned to SMBCs as a platform to construct customer relationships. Studies on CBE in marketing mainly focus on two widely accepted aspects: brand and brand community (Baldus et al., 2015). In addition to providing companies with a marketing communications channel, these brand communities facilitate direct connections with their current and potential consumers on social media. These users participate in communities through online platforms and convey the brand-relevant information to others (Kang et al., 2014).

The cooperative and interactive characteristics of social media promote great opportunities for brands to interact with consumers (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This paper explores the impact of CBI and online influencers on CBE in online communities. This chapter reports on the scope of this research and discusses the implications and context for brand-related issues, social media influencers, and CBE in SMBCs. The rationale, objectives, and research questions are also presented. This chapter outlines the thesis structure.

Research Objectives

1. To test the direct and indirect impact of Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) on Brand Loyalty (BL).
2. To test the impact of both CBI and Social Media Influencer's Reputation (SMIR) on Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE).
3. To examine the mediating role of Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) in the relationship between its two antecedents (CBI and SMIR) and Brand Loyalty (BL).

Literature Review

1. Consumer brand identification (CBI).

CBI refers to the strength of the consumer-brand relationships. Previous studies have revealed that individuals enhance a sense of belonging to brand communities by considering themselves members of the in-group of the brand's consumers. Highly socially identified individuals are more inclined to participate in group activities (e.g., helping others and sharing knowledge). Brands have significant potential in assisting consumers in identifying with SMBCs. This is because when consumers develop a high sense of identification with a brand, it constructs a sense of community about the relationships with the product, the brand, the enterprise, or other individuals (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Social identity refers to the emotional connection or sense of belonging that consumers experience with a social group. Lam et al. (2011) define CBI as a psychological state manifested by one's perception, feelings, and evaluation of their own brand. Consumers develop their self-concept by interacting with brands. Brand community studies involve identification and apply it to offline scenarios.

2. Social media influencers' reputation (SMIR).

Reputation is an evaluation reflecting stakeholders' perceptions regarding the nature and behavior of a specific entity. This perception has gradually formed over time from the past. Moreover, reputation can positively impact economic or customer variables (e.g., consumer trust and loyalty). Since a good reputation has advantages and attractions, it is essential

for success (Balmer, 1998). Influencers' effect extends into social, cultural, and economic spheres. They should take responsibility for their actions and reputation to enhance value to their consumers as their influence grows (Ryu & Han, 2021).

According to Ryu and Han (2021), influencer's reputations are measured by four factors. The first factor is communication skills, which are crucial elements that influencers should possess, as they are necessary for communicating with consumers. The second one is influence. The third one is authenticity. Previous research has proved its significant impact on influencer reputation. The fourth factor is expertise. Influencers lacking expertise cannot satisfy consumers and might be ignored. Table 1 presents all the scale items.

The SMIR, shaped by their perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and authenticity, is vital in affecting consumer perceptions and engagement behaviors. High-reputation influencers can enhance brand identity, deepen emotional resonance, and serve as credible brand-related information sources, promoting consumer engagement (Freberg et al., 2011).

SMIR refers to consumers' trust level and perceived credibility with that influencer. Highly reputable online influencers can often portray strong brand associations and emotional identities, making their followers more inclined to interact and engage with the brand. The SMIR includes four dimensions, each supported by strong standardized loading coefficients, confirming high measurement quality.

3. Consumer brand engagement (CBE).

Kahn's (1990) engagement theory indicates that individuals participate in the process of role performance by integrating their cognitive, affective, and physical resources into their work roles. Several scholars have adopted this theory to online brand communities and have revealed that highly engaged consumers channel their energy into interactions with the brand that has been formed around the community (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

It is a context-based construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). Recently, numerous companies have turned to SMBCs as a tool for constructing relationships with customers. According to consumer engagement research, brand and brand community are the most recognized interactive focus within SMBCs (Baldus et al., 2015). In addition to providing companies with a marketing communications channel, these brand communities facilitate direct connections with their consumers on social media. These consumers engage in community activities through social media platforms and convey brand-related information with individuals (Kang et al., 2014). Scholars have emphasized the need to explore consumer engagement in different backgrounds and countries (Brodie et al., 2011).

4. Brand loyalty (BL).

BL is calculated by how strongly consumers feel they belong to the brand and how often they engage in repeated purchases (Samarah et al., 2021). Repeated transactions represent consumers' BL. Attitudinal loyalty involves the consumer's preferences, commitments, or purchase intentions, which emphasizes the psychological dimension of BL.

Moreover, the composite approach considers loyalty as a biased purchase behavior generated by a psychological process (Jacoby, 1971). It is necessary to consider both attitude and purchasing behavior to evaluate consumers' BL, as the composite approach provides a comprehensive understanding of loyalty, which has been validated in multiple BL studies. Therefore, this study evaluates consumers' BL.

Emotional engagement means that during consumer-brand interactions, positive emotional feelings (such as "happiness" or "pride") will be generated. These emotions can trigger an emotional commitment, which helps to stimulate consumers' BL (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

CBE may be explained as the psychological contribution of the consumers throughout brand interaction, emotional, behavioral and cognitive (Hollebeek, 2011). CBE is typically considered to mediate between the properties of relationships and the signs of their strength (e.g., loyalty) (Read et al., 2019). To conclude, SMIR, consumer brand engagement, and BL are interdependent and have complex correlations. As far as communication skills, influence, authenticity, and the expertise are concerned, SMIR can maximize CBE activation, cognitive processes, and affection.

Conceptual Framework

This research is quantitative research. This study aims to uncover SMBCs embedded among online consumers. Antecedents, dimensions, and sub-dimensions of CBE provide a conceptual framework for the thesis. Research data were collected from users active in SMBCs, and evidence of engagement experiences was used to gain insight into the phenomenon of engagement in these communities.

This research examines CBE with online posts created by brands and others. This examination enables the advancement of a conceptual model that references the theoretical framework of CE research, SDT, and the U&G Theory, to categorize motivations into three different engagement types.

CBI refers to how consumers associate their identity with a brand. When consumers closely associate brands with their self-identity, they not only show high emotional commitments to the brand, but they also tend to show higher loyalty in brand interactions. Highly identified consumers tend to develop a strong emotional brand commitment, which promotes their BL (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

CBI enhances the emotional engagement with the brand and promotes CBE behaviors. Consumers tend to participate in online activities, social interactions, and product creation, thereby forming a deeper emotional and cognitive connection to the brand (Hollebeek, 2011). Through this brand engagement, their BL increases (Brodie et al., 2011).

CBE is the psychological input of consumers during brand interactions, including emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions (Hollebeek, 2011). CBE mediates the relationship between CBI/SMIR and BL.

SMIR refers to the level of trust and perceived credibility that consumers have with that influencer. Highly reputable social media influencers are often able to portray strong brand associations and emotional identities, leading their followers to be more willing to interact and engage (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

In this study, CBI in online communities was used as the independent variable, with CBE and SMIR as mediating variables, and BL as the dependent variable. Details are as follows (Figure 1).

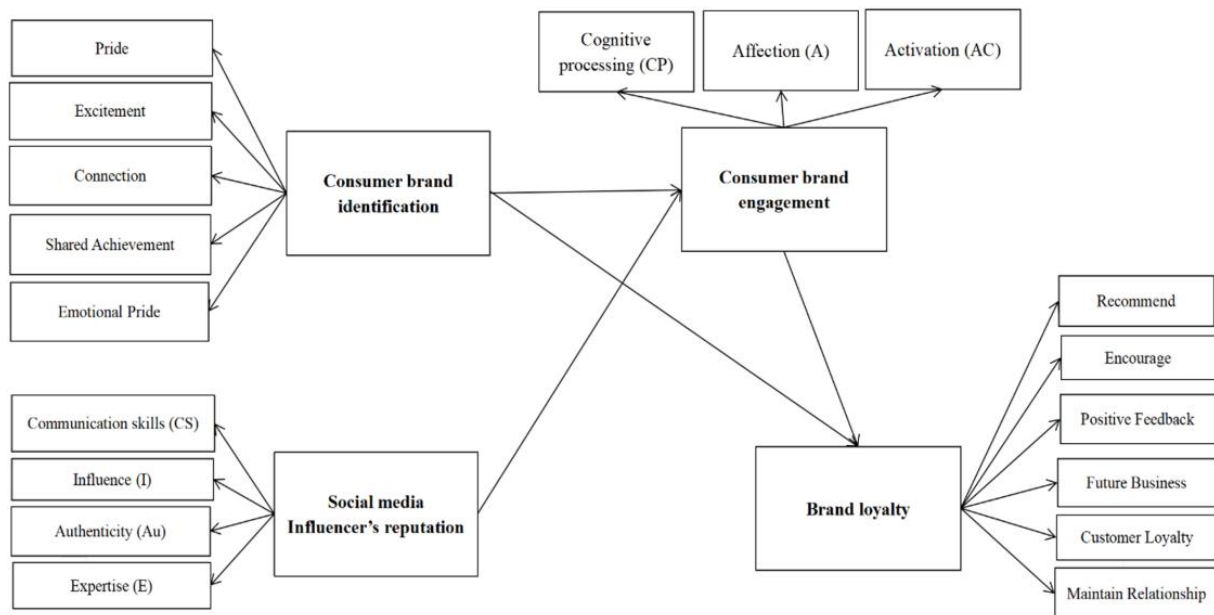


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study is a quantitative research. The design of the study was quantitative approach in order to measure the role of CBI, SMIR on CBE and BL. The scale of CBI was used from So et al. (2013) and measured with five indicators, which previously revealed good reliability. SMIR was adopted from Ryu et al. (2021) and measured with twenty-seven items. Hollebeek et al. (2014) point out that CBE has three dimensions. The scale consists of 10 items across three dimensions. The BL Scale was used from Rather (2017) and measured using six items. Before the formal questionnaire survey, a pilot-test was conducted with about 90 users who regularly participate in the community on Weibo. Namely, 629 questionnaires have been distributed in the first place, and the respondents have given the feedback about the interactions with the brand and social media influencers. Concerning the data cleaning, 37 invalid responses that had incomplete/ inconsistent answers were excluded in this study. Lastly, a total of 592 valid responses were obtained and effective recovery rate of up to 94.1 was achieved. Empirical analysis was carried out using the valid data so as to assure the final sample was representative and reliant.

Research population and sampling size

The sampling method applied in the process of data collection was Voluntary Sampling (VS), as a non-probability sampling method. In VS, the participants will be invited in the study, and the researchers will not select the respondents.

Questionnaires were given out by the researchers and any participant was free to complete them. This is the sampling technique that assures the sample will be grounded on the population that is actually interested in the topic of the research, but does not guarantee random sampling.

Research instrument and quality test

The questionnaire consisted of four major sections that targeted such important variables as CBI, SMIR, CBE, BL, and demographic data. Every section was meant to gauge certain constructs with reference to the study aims. The answers to the items were coded

according to the six-point Likert scale between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (6). The use of this scale was in an effort to minimize the chances of it being a neutral response and to make the respondents mark more definite attitudes in their responses giving

Statistic and Analysis

In this study data analysis used the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) statistical method, which is an effective way of studying the relationship between several variables. The SEM allows evaluating the direct, indirect, and total effects of significant variables, which allows gaining a thorough idea of the impact of CBI and SMIR on consumer engagement and BL.

Results

The descriptive statistical findings are in Table 5. On the gender aspect, 388 (65.54) participants were male and 204 (34.46) were female, and hence, the sample was dominated by males. In terms of age 93 (15.71) respondents identified themselves as being between the ages of 16-20, 243 (41.05) respondents identified themselves within the 21-25 age range, 192 (32.43) within the 26-30 range and 64 (10.81) within 31 and above range with a majority of the respondents falling in between 20-30. On educational level, 71 (11.99) respondents had high-school level education or lower, 377 (63.68) had undergraduate degrees, and 144 (24.32) had postgraduate education or above, indicating that the majority of the respondents consisted of undergraduate degree. There were also 417 and 374 individuals, who were brand-loyal customers and social media influencers, respectively, which implies a high level of BL and number of influencers.

Table 1 Descriptive statistical results of the questionnaire

Variable	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	388	65.54
	Female	204	34.46
Age	16-20 years	93	15.71
	21-25 years	243	41.05
	26-30 years	192	32.43
	Above 31 years	64	10.81
Education	High school and below	71	11.99
	University	377	63.68
	Postgraduate or above	144	24.32
Be loyal to a particular brand	YES	417	70.44
	NO	175	29.56
Follow any social media influencers	YES	374	63.18
	NO	218	36.82

The correlation analysis outcomes of the key variables indicated that there is a significant positive association between all the variables. The correlation between CBI and SMIR was found to be 0.463 ($p < 0.001$), which indicated that there was a moderate positive correlation. CBI was moderately positively correlated with CBE with correlation of 0.448 ($p < 0.001$) and the consumers who were more CBI were likely to have higher CBE. The correlation between CBI and BL was 0.408 ($p < 0.001$) implying that there was a moderate positive association and the consumers with greater brand identity were also more likely to

possess greater BL. In the case of SMIR, correlation with other variables showed positive significant relationships. Namely, SMIR and CBE had a correlation coefficient of 0.651 ($p < 0.001$), implying that the relationship between the two is significant and positive. SMIR and BL showed a moderate-strong positive correlation but not very high with a correlation coefficient of 0.542 ($p < 0.001$). Lastly, the correlation coefficient was 0.537 ($p < 0.001$) between CBE and BL indicating a moderate positive correlation.

On the whole, the correlation between CBI, SMIR, CBE, and BL was positive and significant indicating that there is a strong interrelationship between these variables.

Table 2 Correlation analysis between the main factors

	CBI	SMIR	CBE	BL
CBI	1			
SMIR	0.463***	1		
CBE	0.448***	0.651***	1	
BL	0.408***	0.542***	0.537***	1

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

The results of the correlation analysis of regression of the sub-dimensions revealed that there were high positive correlations between all of the dimensions where majority of the correlations were moderate. All the coefficients of CBI with the others were positive implying the presence of significant positive correlations with communication skills (0.304), influence (0.399), authenticity (0.345), expertise (0.387), cognitive processing (0.358), affection (0.361), activation (0.373) and BL (0.408). There was the highest correlation between CBI and BL. The correlation coefficients between communication skills and the other dimensions were positive with particularly positive correlation with influence (0.428), authenticity (0.470), expertise (0.484) and BL (0.430). The influence proved to have a very strong positive association with such dimensions as authenticity (0.528), expertise (0.468), and BL (0.427), which means that influence has a great impact on such aspects of BL and other dimensions. Correlation coefficient authenticity versus expertise = 0.461 which is moderate positive correlation, and strongly correlated with cognitive processing (0.406), affection (0.381) and activation (0.429). Expert knowledge and cognitive processing (0.451), affection (0.453), and activation (0.486) had a significant correlation, indicating the importance of expertise in the results of CBE and BL. The correlation coefficients were 0.525 (affection and cognitive processing), 0.478 (activation and affection), and 0.471 (activation and cognitive processing), where the coefficients value is low, indicating that there is a strong interrelationship between the dimensions. The dimensions were also correlated with BL (0.427 average) though the core correlations were strong with the communication skills (0.430), influence (0.427), expertise (0.455) and activation (0.450) showing that the dimensions are critical in consumer loyalty formation. In general, there was extensive positive correlations between the sub-dimensions and the majority of the correlations between the dimensions were moderate, which shows that the relationships between CBI, SMIR, CBE, and BL are strong.

Table 3 Correlation analysis between the sub-dimensions

	CBI	communication skills	Influence	Authenticity	Expertise	Cognitive processing	Affection	Activation	BL
CBI	1								
communication skills	0.304***	1							

	CBI	communication skills	Influence	Authenticity	Expertise	Cognitive processing	Affection	Activation	BL
Influence	0.399***	0.428***	1						
Authenticity	0.345***	0.470***	0.528***	1					
Expertise	0.387***	0.484***	0.468***	0.461***	1				
Cognitive processing	0.358***	0.375***	0.410***	0.406***	0.451***	1			
Affection	0.361***	0.365***	0.377***	0.381***	0.453***	0.525***	1		
Activation	0.373***	0.395***	0.384***	0.429***	0.486***	0.471***	0.478**	1	
BL	0.408***	0.430***	0.427***	0.370***	0.455***	0.436***	0.423**	0.450**	1

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

The analysis of SMIR of the SEM path indicates that SMIR has a considerable, positive, effect on CBE (standardized estimate = 0.795, $p < 0.001$) and on BL (standardized estimate = 0.286, $p = 0.017$). The influence of CBE on BL is also great and positive (standardized estimate = 0.357, $p = 0.003$). In addition, CBI has a strong effect on brand engagement (standardized estimate = 0.107, $p = 0.033$) and it also has strong effect on BL (standardized estimate = 0.100, $p = 0.036$). The significance of all the paths was established and indices of model fits met the advised limits, thus establishing that the data are valid to the establishment of structural relationships between SMIR, CBI, CBE and BL.

Table 4 SEM path analysis

Path			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Std.Estimate
SMIR	→	CBE	1.061	0.111	9.569	***	0.795
CBI	→	CBE	0.079	0.037	2.127	0.033	0.107
SMIR	→	BL	0.488	0.204	2.388	0.017	0.286
CBE	→	BL	0.457	0.156	2.925	0.003	0.357
CBI	→	BL	0.095	0.045	2.098	0.036	0.1

Significantly*** $p < 0.001$

In assessing the fit of SEM, the metrics are generally classified into three categories. Absolute fit indices assess the degree of correspondence between the data and the model, with commonly used measures including the GFI and the RMSEA. Incremental fit indices evaluate model improvement relative to a baseline model, with key indicators such as the IFI and the CFI. Parsimonious fit indices account for model simplicity, with representative measures including the CMIN/df and the PGFI. Collectively, these indices provide a comprehensive evaluation of model fit, ensuring that the model adequately explains the data. The adaptation criteria of each indicator can be found in Table 4.45. As presented in the table below, the majority of indices in this study—CMIN/df, GFI, RMSEA, CFI, NFI, TLI, and IFI—satisfy the recommended thresholds, thereby demonstrating an excellent overall model fit.

Table 5 Model Fit

Indicator Category	Indices	Adaptation Criteria	Test Result	Fit Status
Absolute Fit Indices	GFI	>0.9	0.935	Acceptable
	AGFI	>0.9	0.927	Acceptable
	RMSEA	<0.06	0.011	Acceptable
Incremental Fit Indices	NFI	>0.9	0.944	Acceptable

Indicator Category	Indices	Adaptation Criteria	Test Result	Fit Status
	IFI	>0.9	0.996	Acceptable
	CFI	>0.9	0.996	Acceptable
	RFI	>0.9	0.94	Acceptable
Parsimonious Fit Indices	CMIN/df	<3	1.073	Acceptable
	PGFI	>0.5	0.837	Acceptable

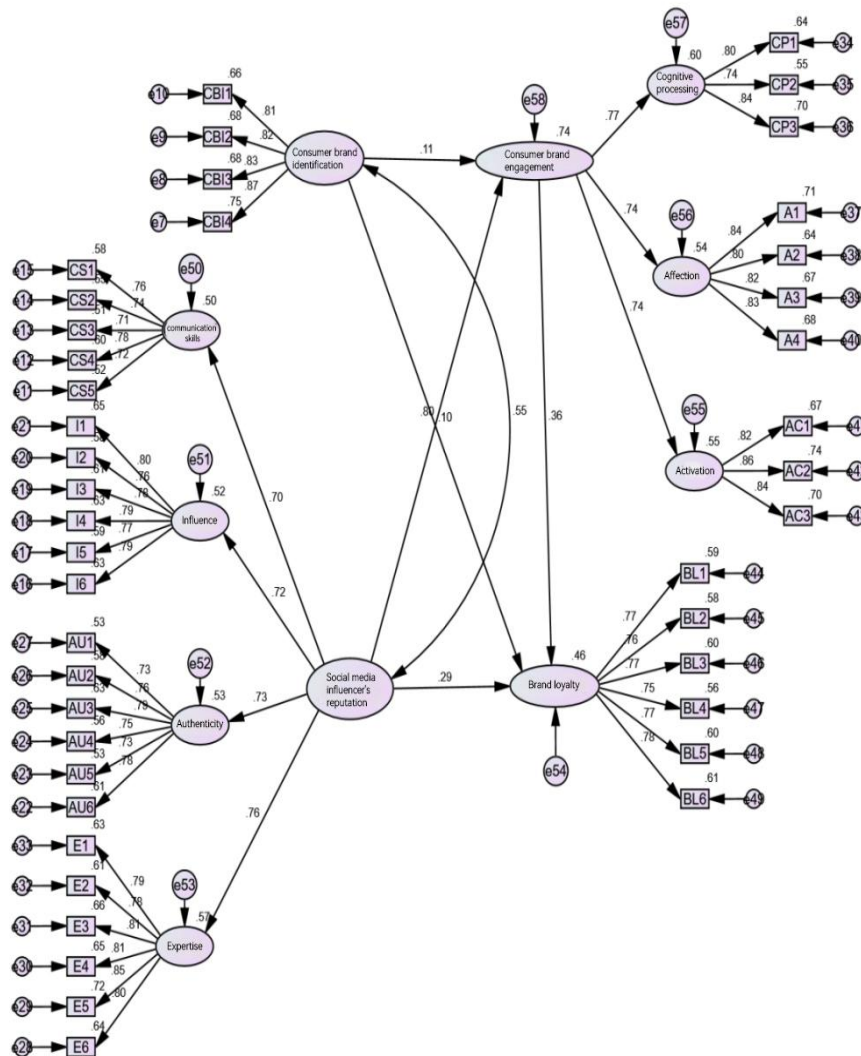


Figure 2 Structural Equation Model (SEM)

Discussion

The initial subject was to determine whether and how CBI in SMBCs promotes BL. Based on the Social Identity Theory, CBI instills brand into individual self-concept and thus enhancing the congruence of values and supporting brand commitment. The empirical findings supported the fact that CBI has both direct and indirect influence on BL. In particular, the direct way between CBI and BL was important, which indicates that consumer loyalty can be

supported with the help of identification only. In addition, the effect of indirect identification via CBE was substantial with CBE transferring identification to advanced cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement with the brand.

The second aim was to establish the conceptual scopes and scales of CBE in SMBCs in Chinese social media and to provide tests on how it serves as an antecedent outcome, as well as a predictor of loyalty. As was previously conceptualized, CBE was confirmed to be a multidimensional construct. Employing empirical analysis on the subject proved that CBI is an important predictor of CBE, which supports the argument that identity-related antecedents are structural to engagement. Also, CBE has had a considerable positive impact on BL that highlights its importance as a proximal growth of loyalty, which goes beyond attitudinal favoritism to behavioral fidelity. All these results support the idea that CBE is a mediating factor between identity-based antecedents and the results of loyalty.

The third aim was to test the causal pathway of the relations existing between CBI and BL via CBE and evaluate the supplementary impact of SMIR. The models of CBI and SMIR were based on the S-O-R model, CBI and SMIR become stimuli, CBE is taken as the state of an organism, and BL becomes the behavioral response. The results showed that SMIR has a highly favorable impact on CBE and BL that supplements the actions of CBI. More to the point, CBI and SMIR both had direct and indirect effects on FL via CBE as the mediation effects were established as complementary partial mediation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study can provide great value to brand managers in their quest to ensure that there is an increase in the relationship with consumers as well as ensuring that there is an increase in consumer engagement with the brand. The initial point is the need to focus on brand identification (CBI). The brands are to orient on the creation of emotional relationships with customers by establishing identification with the target group. When a buyer connects well with a brand, he/she is inclined to interact with it emotionally resulting to improved BL and sustained relationships.

Secondly, it is important to use social media influencers to facilitate interest. The experiment demonstrates that perceived authentic, knowledgeable, and effective communicators may be of a great help in enhancing the levels of consumer trust and interest. The brands need to collaborate with influencers whose values are similar to those of the brand so that the posts can connect with the intended consumer. Niche but highly engaged micro-influencers can actually add even greater value than even bigger and less engaged celebrities.

Lastly, to establish good relationships with consumers, it is critical to adopt co-creation and the engagement of the community. Brands can harness the consumer loyalty and ingenuity by encouraging consumers to engage in the brand experience with a sense of active participation. One of the most effective methods to create engagement is to create SMBCs in which consumers would be able to communicate with the brand and each other. Besides, two-way consumer-brand communication aids in developing feelings of belonging together and reciprocation. The brands which enable their consumers to participatively create products or campaigns or provide a platform to share their views and content will not just result in more engagement but also transforms their consumers into strong brand advocates.

Recommendations

Future studies can examine the varied effects of different aspects of congruence which include value congruence (common principles) aesthetic congruence (similar visual and

stylistic features) and audience congruence (demographic or psychographic similarity) on CBE outcomes. Additionally, the outcomes of incongruence also deserve future research, especially its possibility to undermine consumer trust, cut engagement, or result in a backlash, when it seems either inauthentic or opportunistic. Scholars can also test the hypothesis that the effect of congruence can be different between the types of products (e.g., hedonic and utilitarian), or the group of consumers

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