

Chapter 2

Identity–Based Consumer Behaviour, Self–Congruity, and Retailer–Consumer Relationships: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) has been identified as an important antecedent of consumer-brand relationships. Consumers show positive attitudes towards brands that reflect their self-concept and are more likely to express and enhance their identity. In this sense, Consumer-Retailer Identification (CRI) represents a powerful tool for retailers to develop meaningful relationships by strengthening emotional connections with their customers. This chapter proposes a literature review of previous research on the role of consumer's self-concept in the development of retailer-customer relationships. Focusing on identity-based consumer behaviour, the chapter provides a comprehensive picture of the past research and the emerging trends on CBI and then proposes a conceptual framework of CRI.

INTRODUCTION

Quoting Belk (1988), “we are what we have... our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities” (p. 139).

Besides providing functional benefits, brands enable experiential opportunities through their use (Holbrook, & Hirschmann, 1982; Arnould & Price, 1993). Through brands individuals can

show something personal about them to others, but they can also answer to their inner desire to define themselves and to communicate who they are to the society (Shembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). Consumers have a natural affinity for brands that match at best their self- and social-identities and they are steadily involved in a matching process, aimed at identifying which brands are better consistent with their self-concept

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(Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy et al., 2000; Reed et al., 2012; Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010). In particular, brands act twofold, expressing who a person is and revealing what groups a person belongs to and aligns with (Shembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). In this sense, brands play a key role in the communication of individuals' self-image (Belk, 1988; Arnould, & Thompson, 2005; Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010).

This customer-retailer identification process has been recognized to have a positive impact on both pre-purchase and post-purchase evaluations and behaviours and on the effective building and management of relationships with brands (Tuskej et al., 2013). It is argued that the identification of a customer with a retailer crucially impacts on retailer's success. Moreover, it has several managerial implications related to the promotion and to the communication of a retail brand based on the symbolic cues associated with desirable consumer identities.

Although the paramount attention given to identity-based consumption, the retail literature lacks in exploring this topic. This chapter aims at reviewing previous research on the role of consumer's self-concept in the development of brand-customer relationships, extending the consumer-brand identification theory to retail settings and proposing a theoretical framework for consumer-retailer identification. In particular, this chapter provides a comprehensive picture of the past research, as well as of the emerging trends in identity-based consumer behaviour literature. The literature review has been carried out following the recommendations of Baker (2000) and mainly considering scientific journal articles on the topics of self-concept in consumer behaviour and brand-consumer identification. This chapter also provides some insights for future research on identity-based consumer behaviour in retail settings by critically exploring the role of self-congruity and of customer-retailer identification in the development and in the management of retailer-customer relationships.

BACKGROUND

Products and brands play multiple roles in consumers' lives. According to Fournier (1991), brands and products can offer functional benefits, provide experiential opportunities through their use (Holbrook, & Hirschmann, 1982; Arnould & Price, 1993), and assist with establishing and defining consumer's identity (Levy, 1959; Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1988; Ligas, 2000; Fournier, 2009). It is argued that consumers purchase goods not just for functional reasons, but also because they represent a vehicle for self-expression, acting as an extension of one's self-concept (Levy, 1959; Belk, 1988). Starting from Levy (1959), the role of self-concept in consumer behaviour has been explored by several researchers.

Besides providing functional benefits, products enable experiential opportunities through their use and carry a variety of symbolic meanings (Keller, 1993; Levy, 1959, Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004).

In particular, brands and in general possessions can be viewed as an extension of one's self (Belk, 1988; Gardner & Levy, 1955) as symbolic meanings associated with a brand or a product help consumers in the development of a unique and visible representation of their selves (Ligas, 2000). In his study on consumers' goals and products meanings, Ligas (2000) highlights how consumers try to achieve three different levels of goals through products, namely (1) having, (2) doing, and (3) being goals.

Whereas functional product meanings correspond to consumers' having- and doing- level goals, symbolic product meanings play a key role in achieving being-level goals and doing-level goals mainly related to intangible experiences involving personal values (Ligas, 2000). Through products individuals can show something personal about them to others, but they can also answer to their inner desire to define themselves and to communicate who they are to the society (Shembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010).

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