

Chapter 1

Consumer–Retailer Identification Enhancing Consumer Well–Being

Isabella Maggioni

ESCP Europe, Italy

ABSTRACT

Consumer-Retailer Identification (CRI) is a powerful tool for retailers to develop meaningful relationships and strengthen the emotional bond with their customers. Besides showing positive attitudes towards brands that reflect their self-concept, consumers prefer to engage with retailers that are more likely to express and enhance their identity. This alignment between a retailer's image and one's identity has been shown to positively affect consumers' sense of well-being and their overall quality of life. This chapter proposes a framework based on a review of past research on the role of consumer's self-concept in the promotion of consumer well-being in retail settings. Focusing on CRI, the chapter offers directions for future research while discussing emerging trends.

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 more consistent with their self-concept (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;

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1412-2.ch001

Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010). This customer-retailer identification process has been recognised to have a positive impact on both pre-purchase and post-purchase evaluations and behaviours and on the effective creation 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 a retailer's success.

Among these outcomes, an emerging stream of research is exploring the impact of consumer-retailer identification on consumer well-being (Sirgy & Lee, 2008; El Hedhli et al., 2013; El Hedhli et al., 2016; Ekici et al., 2017; Maggioni & Sands, 2018). Attributing more value to wellness and personal enhancement than to material objects, consumers are increasingly looking for meaningful experiences and are more concerned about how they invest their money to improve their lives. As consumers search for experiences that are consistent with their self-identities, it is important to further investigate the role of CRI in boosting customer experiences and enhancing the sense of consumer well-being, improving their overall quality of life.

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. Specifically, the chapter proposes CRI as a virtuous mechanism through which amplifying the positive effect of a successful customer experience on consumer well-being. This chapter also provides some insights for future research on CRI and well-being in retail settings by critically exploring the role of self-congruity and of customer-retailer identification in the development and management of retailer-customer relationships.

BACKGROUND

Consumer-Brand Identification in Retail

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 (Belk, 1988). 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; Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004) to the point that brands can be viewed as an extension of one's self (Belk, 1988) and the associated symbolic meanings help consumers in the development of a unique and visible representation of themselves (Ligas, 2000). Through brands individuals can show something personal about them to others, but they can also answer to their inner desire of defining themselves and communicating who they are to the society (Shembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). Thus, brands can act twofold: inward forming one's identity, and outward expressing who a person is and revealing what social groups a person aligns with (Shembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). The role of self-concept in consumer behaviour has been traditionally investigated by two complementary theoretical frameworks: the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986) and the identity theory (Stryker 1968; Stryker&Burke, 2000). Whereas social identity theory posits that the essence of one's self-identification relies on the membership to a social group (or groups) and also on the value and the emotional significance attached to such a membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), identity theory is more focused on individual behaviour and on one's private self, stating that identity is linked to the different social roles that a person can have in a social setting. Having multiple identities hierarchically organized, consumers perceive products and brands as similar or different from themselves according to which kind of identity is more salient in a

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