

# Brand loyalty: Exploring self-brand connection and brand experience

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper determines one explanation for how the self-brand connection is associated with brand loyalty through the brand experience. Brand experience should verify the self-brand connection by acting as a mechanism through which a self-brand connection is associated with brand loyalty.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were obtained from 317 adults through paid Facebook Boosting of an online survey, and analyzed using structural equation modelling.

**Findings** – Analyses confirm that brand experience fully mediates the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty.

**Research limitations / implications** – Ensuring a positive brand experience is critical for brand managers opting to maintain consumers' self-brand connections and brand loyalty. Causality suffered owing to the cross-sectional design of the study.

**Practical implications** – Self-brand connection is viewed as consumer-driven. However, by identifying the brand experience to verify the self-brand connection and as a factor that mediates the self-brand connection-loyalty relationship of consumers, brand experience is recognized as a new factor which brand managers can control to manage self-brand connections and brand loyalty.

**Originality / value** – This paper is the first to apply self-verification theory to the self-brand connection-loyalty relationship by explicating brand experience as a mediator of this relationship. This paper argues self-verification is not context specific and lived experiences with the brand, irrespective of context, establish consumer-brand relationships. This paper confirms the second-order factor structure of the brand experience scale (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) as a mediator in this self-brand connection-loyalty model.

**Key words:** *Self-brand connection, brand experience, brand loyalty, self-verification theory*

**Article classification:** Research paper

## Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged the relevance of self-verification theory in saying, “Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony”. As consumers we strive for such consistency in our views of ourselves, that is, our self-concept. Brands which have been incorporated into our self-concept require that our resulting behavior and experiences must align with the self-concept to minimize psychological discomfort. Such self-verification provides a sense of prediction and control over the social environment, and is therefore important for establishing an accurate and reliable self-concept (Swann and Read, 1981).

Consumers have an innate drive to define and express themselves through the purchases they make. Based on McCracken's (1989) theory of meaning, meaning is transferred from the culturally constituted world to brands and then onto consumers. Seminal work has indicated that consumers direct their behavior to maintain or enhance their self-concept (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967), where self-concept refers to the way consumers think and feel about who, and what, they perceive themselves to be (Rosenberg, 1981). Consumers' self-concept can be linked to a brand, resulting in self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). These self-brand connections are very subjective, consumer-driven personal relationships.

Self-brand connection is defined as the degree to which consumers incorporate the brand into their self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman, 2003), which results in varied intensity levels of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). For example, a consumer with a strong self-brand connection to Apple may view himself as *thinking differently*, linking his behavior and self-concept to Apple's slogan, and may feel like an *innovator*, linking his status to Apple's as an innovation leader. He therefore adopts Apple as a way to create, portray and express these characteristics of the self-concept through consumption of the brand. So, consumers may describe the brand experience associated with brands through relationships (Schmitt *et al.*, 2015), thus demonstrating the association between self-brand connection and brand experience, although previously unexplored. Brakus *et al.* (2009:53) define brand experience "as subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." In this paper, the cumulative brand experience of brand-related stimuli, fully reflecting the total accumulation of ways consumers interact with and are affected by the brand, as recalled for a favorite brand, was considered. As illustration, a consumer's overall brand experience with Apple, and not one single discrete interaction with brand-related stimuli, such as using the iPhone 7 for the first time, is relevant for this paper. Both self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003) and brand experience (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) is positively associated with brand loyalty, which, in turn, also provides value to brands through continued and increased purchase intentions and behavior, price insensitivity and recommendations (Oliver, 1999).

It is argued that brand experience, being a personal response when interacting with the brand (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013), could be considered a self-verification process, as interaction provides opportunity for self-verification (Swann and Read, 1981). In keeping with self-verification theory, consumers act to validate and maintain salient self-concepts, such as the self-brand connection, to avoid cognitive dissonance about who they are (Swann and Read, 1981). Such self-verification would not only occur through the senses, or feelings, or behavior, or

thoughts, but includes the total experience accumulated through all of the dimensions of the brand experience when interacting with the brand stimuli.

The purpose of this paper is to test whether brand experience mediates the relation between self-brand connection and brand loyalty. As highly visible reputable brands are more likely to be used for self-concept expression (Gilovich *et al.*, 2015), this paper hereby considers how self-brand connections with favored reputable brands, brand experience and brand loyalty tie together for self-verification. On the other hand, a brand experience that challenges, rather than verifies the consumer's existing self-brand connection may erode the self-brand connection and weaken brand loyalty based on Swann and Read's (1981) finding that failure to self-verify can alter the self-concept.

This paper aims to extend research on consumer-brand relationships by considering one possible intervening variable (brand experience) in the self-brand connection-loyalty association, considering both the direct and previously unexplored indirect relationships. In addition, the validation of a scale for an important intervening variable - brand experience as a second-order construct - is delivered. Hereby, this paper aims to make three contributions to the branding literature. First, it is argued that an existing self-brand connection should be positively associated with brand experiences. Second, this paper explores the indirect association between self-brand connection and loyalty by being the first to apply a self-verification lens (Swann and Read, 1981) to this relationship. The implication is that brand managers should have agency in managing consumers' self-brand connections and loyalty through the brand experience. Third, brand experience is measured as a second-order construct composed of four underlying dimensions, confirming the dimensionality of brand experience for future brand experience studies.

This paper begins by describing consumer-brand relationships in terms of self-brand connections, arguing for its relation with brand experience and brand loyalty. The chosen method for investigating these relationships is detailed and results are discussed. After discussion, recommendations for brand managers are proposed and the paper concludes with the limitations of the study.

## **Literature review**

Theory relating to consumer-brand relationships is still evolving (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). Brands have more than just a practical product value; brands also offer symbolic value as they create a form of identity for the consumer and aid self-expressive goals (Chernev *et al.*, 2011; He *et al.*, 2012). Brands are a marketing tool to create experiences through relationships and attachments for consumers, be it private or social (Schmitt *et al.*, 2015). Some brands

communicate self-expressive messages desired by the consumer (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Highly visible goods are well suited to conveying consumers' self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Gilovich *et al.*, 2015).

Consumers often integrate brands into their self-concept, thereby resulting in a "*brand as self*" conceptualization (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). Unwittingly or not, they contribute to multiple levels or aggregate senses of self (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2013). When consumers integrate a brand into their self-concept, a self-brand connection is formed which, in turn, constructs consumers' self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). The strength of the self-brand connection is determined by the degree to which the brands are symbolic of the user, that is, they communicate something about the user (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Self-brand connection is conceptually different from brand engagement with self-concept (BESC), which captures a generic consumer propensity to use favorite brands in constructing the self-concept (Dwivedi, 2014; Harmon-Kizer *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, while self-congruity refers to the similarity between consumers' self-concepts and brand images (Sirgy, 1982), or congruence between consumers' self-concepts and the identity of relevant companies (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), self-brand connection encompasses the degree to which a given brand is *incorporated into* the self-concept (Dwivedi, 2014). Self-brand connection is thus considered as a self-concept connection which a specific consumer has with a specific brand.

Psychology informs us that using symbols, such as brands, to express self-concept may increase relational quality with such symbols (Mattingly and Lewandowski, 2013). Strong self-brand connections cause consumers to maintain affection for a brand even if the brand is associated with a negative consumer group by balancing the attributed symbolic meaning of that brand (Hammerl *et al.*, 2016).

### ***Self-brand connection and brand loyalty***

The relationship between consumers' behavior and their self-brand connections has been a vigorous area of scholarship in marketing. For example, self-brand connections affect private (Giroux and Grohmann, 2015; Randhawa *et al.*, 2015) and public (Ye *et al.*, 2015) consumer behavior including consumers' word-of-mouth (Kwon and Mattila, 2015; Sicilia *et al.*, 2016), personal brand relational quality (Dwivedi, 2014), and post-purchase behavior (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015; He *et al.*, 2015). Self-brand connections are expected to create enduring positive brand attitudes and brand loyalty (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). This paper proposes that one possible explanation for the association between the self-brand connection and loyalty is found in self-verification theory which stipulates that there is a strong drive to maintain self-conceptions (such as a self-brand connection) through feedback, interaction with others, and the recollection of aspects

of social interactions (Swann and Read, 1981). Self-verification theory is a prominent concept in consumer behavior literature (Escalas, 2013), where researchers often consider situations confirming conceptions of the self, for example through consumers engaging in charitable behavior (Winterech *et al.*, 2013) and positive attitude towards brand advertisements (Westjohn *et al.*, 2012), and the effect on brand relationships (Elbedweighy *et al.*, 2016) as well as identity threats (Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). Chosen brands can be used to substantiate, create and to (re)produce concepts of self (Fournier, 1998), and based on self-verification theory, consumers would maintain their relationships with brands which have been incorporated in their self-concepts, that is, brands with which consumers have self-brand connections, resulting in brand loyalty. Self-verification thus necessitates interaction with the brand, which should therefore be associated with brand loyalty as long as the relationship with the brand verifies the self-brand connection. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H1: Self-brand connection is positively associated with brand loyalty while controlling for self-verification.

The association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty may not only be direct as previous research proposed. While self-verification may be present through remaining loyal to a brand with which one has a self-brand connection, self-verification may work through a second, indirect route: brand experience may be an intervening variable through which self-brand connection is ultimately associated with brand loyalty. Brand experience may provide the consumer with an opportunity to self-verify. Self-transformational benefits are not sufficient to building lasting consumer-brand relationships; the brand experience must also be considered (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016b). Consumers form self-brand connections as a result of lived experiences (Fournier, 1998). Memorable, distinctive and affect-rich experiences have been found to influence consumer-brand identification, which in turn affects brand loyalty (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Consumers thus create attachment to the brand which is increased and reinforced (Granitz and Forman, 2015) through the self-verification process. Brand experience may therefore be important in understanding consumer-brand relationships (Schembri, 2009), specifically self-brand connections. Previous research has not examined the possibility of brand experience as a self-verification process and mediator between self-brand connection and brand loyalty.

### ***Self-brand connection, brand experience and brand loyalty***

Consumers do not simply acquire, use and dispose of products and services to satisfy needs, but also purchase brands for the experience associated with relationships and attachments to them (Schmitt *et al.*, 2015). This involves rational and goal-orientated responses to the brand, and also emotional processing of the total brand experience (Rose *et al.*, 2011).

Brand experience is collectively viewed as including sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions, which together reflect the overall degree of a brand experience (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Through consumption (interaction with the brand), consumers engage with numerous brand-related stimuli. Responses to brand stimuli enhance brand recall (Kumar *et al.*, 2013) and brand associations (Chang and Chieng, 2006). More experience with a brand (measured in terms of years of use) increases word-of-mouth (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016). Brakus *et al.* (2009) find brand experience, including sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions, is positively related to brand loyalty. All four dimensions of brand experience provide an overall experience. For example, sensory brand experience should result in aesthetic pleasure, enthusiasm, attractiveness and contentment (Schmitt, 1999), while intense positive emotions towards a brand can cause mental arousal (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011). Associating both the sensory and affective brand experience with intellectual brand experience, in turn, increases interest in the brand (Jung and Soo, 2012), and prompts behavior. However, just as all brands don't evoke all senses (an iPhone, for example, can't be smelled or tasted), it stands to reason that brands are experienced with different weights for each dimension of the brand experience.

By definition, brand experience relates to the consumer's internal, personal response when interacting with a brand (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). In addition, social interaction is an opportunity for self-verification (Swann and Read, 1981). Thus, interaction with brand stimuli, which would be described as the brand experience, including the sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions (Brakus *et al.*, 2009), would serve as a type of self-verification process. Such self-verification would occur through the combination of experienced brand stimuli through one's senses, feelings, behavior and thoughts which one seeks, elicits and recalls for self-verification purposes. For example, when thinking about your experience with a favorite brand, it is not only the brand color, or feelings and thoughts associated with the brand, or the behavior directed to the brand, but all of the dimensions combined which culminate in a total brand experience. The cumulative brand experience of a favorite brand is relevant for this paper due to the theoretical foundation of self-verification, which necessitates prior knowledge of and interaction with the brand. This paper argues that the brand experience is a way of verifying the self-brand connection, as self-verification theory stipulates that interaction (in our context, the brand experience of a favorite brand) is used to verify the self-concept (Swann and Read, 1981). As brands can be considered relationship partners, interactions with brand stimuli provide "feedback" to the consumer through the brand experience that consumers use to verify their self-concepts. This is because self-verification includes seeking information, eliciting reactions and recalling self-verifying feedback (Swann and Read, 1981). Similarly, subjective sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual responses to brand related stimuli during exposure to brand stimuli when, for example, searching or shopping for (seeking or eliciting phases of self-verification) and consuming

(eliciting or recalling phases of self-verification) brands as described by Brakus *et al.* (2009), where the brand is used as an interaction partner, can therefore verify existing self-brand connections. This paper argues that there is a positive relationship between an existing self-brand connection and the brand experience which verifies such a self-brand connection through interaction with brand stimuli. It is, therefore, hypothesized that:

H2: Self-brand connection is positively associated with brand experience.

Consumers will act to create a reality for themselves and in the social environment to verify their opinions or views of themselves (Swann and Read, 1981). One such view may be their self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Although consumers with a strong self-brand connection use self-governing processes maintaining their self-brand connections to manage the interaction with the brand (Cheng *et al.*, 2012), strong self-brand connections do not always protect the brand from negative information (Angle and Forehand, 2015; Camurdan *et al.*, 2015). The inability to self-verify may result in changing the self-concept (Swann and Read, 1981) which would negatively impact the self-brand connection-loyalty association. However, self-brand connections provide consumers with a sense of security (Rindfleisch *et al.*, 2009), which, if perceived to be verified by the brand experience as a self-verification process, would reinforce this sense of security. The overall cumulative brand experience one recalls would therefore serve as self-verification process. Therefore brand experience could be viewed as the mechanism intervening in the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty.

Studies on the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty argue for the consideration of mediation effects in the form of relationship quality (Francisco-Maffezzolli *et al.*, 2014) and affective commitment (Iglesias *et al.*, 2011), supporting this paper's contention that the consumer's sense of relation to the brand in terms of self-brand connection should play a central role in determining brand loyalty. However, it is argued here that the brand experience as a self-verifying process accounts for the reason why the self-brand connection-loyalty association occurs. Recently proposed as antecedent to consumer-brand relationships (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016b), brand experience could thus be a mechanism determining whether the self-brand connection and resulting brand loyalty is maintained or eroded based on self-verification theory. Should the consumer's brand experience verify the self-brand connection, brand loyalty will most likely be maintained. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H3: Brand experience mediates the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design***

Following past brand experience research (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016a) an on-line cross-sectional survey was used to obtain data concerning the purchase of respondents' favorite brands. For the purpose of this paper, product category was not deemed important as the evaluation of targets applies irrespective of product category (Zhang and Aggarwal, 2015).

### ***Sampling and data collection***

An online purchase necessitates the search for specific items, which may be branded, and involves risk. To minimize risk, consumers purchase known brands to which they are loyal as a form of risk aversion (Matzler *et al.*, 2008). Thus, this paper contends that there is a high likelihood of purchasing a favorite brand online, with minimal risk if the consumer has an ongoing, trust-based relationship with the brand. This study concerns consumer-brand relationships specifically with regard to self-brand connections. In the absence of a sampling frame for respondents who have favorite brands (and possible existing self-brand connections), the researcher utilized Facebook's consumer behavior analytics, specifically targeting individuals who had purchased online, in order to increase participation in this study. The target population for this paper encompassed South African adults, eighteen (18) years and older, who had an active Facebook account, whose demographic information on Facebook showed an interest in online shopping and who had purchased a brand online within the past six (6) months (to ensure that top of mind recall of brands purchased online would be possible).

Respondents were invited to participate in the study through a paid Facebook advertisement on targeted individuals' Facebook feeds, linking back to the Facebook page of a local online business. This process of paying for advertisements on Facebook is referred to as *Boosting*. Using Facebook's advertising tools, the specific Facebook post containing the link to the Qualtrics survey was *Boosted* three times over a six week period at two week intervals. The Facebook post included an incentive for participating in the study, with respondents being entered into a lucky draw to win an iPad Mini 16GB. The researcher ensured that the *Boost* complied with Facebook's rules and policies regarding advertising, as well as the ethical guidelines of the institution employing the author of this paper. To minimize the cost of *Boosting*, and as the researcher knew that an iPad Mini 16GB would be a sufficient incentive for the context, only South African Facebook users were targeted. Furthermore, South Africa is one of the BRICS nations, each of which has its own idiosyncrasies (Sreejesh *et al.*, 2016), not least of which is that the country has a mixture of different cultures reflected in its 11 official languages (Tibane, 2016). South Africa thus provides a



rich, amenable environment for considering consumer-brand relationships in a multicultural developing country, answering the call for research in such a context (Stockburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). In this context, significant socioeconomic, cultural and regulative departures are evident in the institutional assumption of Western developed countries, which impact relationships and constructs (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006).

A total of 1059 surveys was started by respondents who accepted the terms and conditions of the survey and competition, and 664 respondents (63%) answered “Yes” to the screening question as to whether they had engaged in purchasing brands online within the last six (6) months. Finally, a realized sample of 317 respondents was deemed sufficient for data analyses based on exclusion of cases of extreme missing values. Extreme missing values could be due to respondents starting the survey because of a desire to qualify for the research incentive (an iPad Mini 16GB) but abandoning it due to survey length. The realized sample size was comparable to that of previous studies investigating similar constructs (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016a).

### **Survey design**

In order to identify possible survey problems, the survey was pretested by means of a link to the survey on Qualtrics among 30 respondents representing our target population. Based on the pre-test, to help respondents gain a better understanding of what was defined as a brand, examples were presented in both the screening question of the survey (for example, Apple, Le Creuset, Country Road, Nike, Nine West, Russell Hobbs, Guess) as well as with each question relating to brands in the survey.

The final survey was divided into three sections. Section A gathered information through multiple choice questions regarding each respondent's online shopping habits, such as the reasons why online purchases were made. In this section, an open-ended option for each question allowed respondents to indicate their reason through selecting ‘Other’ if not listed as one of the specified options. Section B measured the respondent's brand experience, self-brand connection and brand loyalty with regard to their favorite brand purchased online. Section B utilized a seven point Likert scale in which 1 represented *Strongly disagree* and 7 represented *Strongly agree*. Self-brand connection was measured by adapting the items used by Escalas and Bettman (2003) to use the same Likert scale throughout the questionnaire, and dividing the double barreled statement *I consider Brand X to be ‘me’ (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others)* into two separate statements. Self-brand connection was therefore measured with eight statements. Brand experience was measured by adapting the items used by Brakus *et al.* (2009) and consisted of twelve statements. The items were adapted to rephrase previously

reverse scored items in the same direction as other items, as done by Trudeau and Shobeiri (2016a). Lastly, brand loyalty was measured by the items used by Keller (2001) and consisted of seven statements. All items were rephrased to apply to respondent's favorite brand purchased online. Section C collected demographic information such as gender and the average amount spent per online brand purchase.

### **Data analyses**

Descriptive statistics were calculated in SPSS Version 23 (IBM SPSS, 2015). Reliability and validity of the measures were analyzed through confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS Version 23 (IBM SPSS Amos, 2015). To test the hypotheses, structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS Version 23 (IBM SPSS Amos, 2015) was done. By examining curve estimation in SPSS the linearity of relationships between self-brand connection and brand experience, brand experience and brand loyalty as well as self-brand connection and brand loyalty were examined, and all relationships were found to be linear ( $p < 0.005$  for all three relationships). Bootstrapping with the bias-corrected confidence interval was used owing to non-normal data to correct for the possible inflation of results (Enders, 2005). Bollen-Stine bootstrapping was used to reflect the asymmetry of the data (Bollen and Stine, 1990).

The model fit indices included the normed Chi-square, with guidelines ranging between a 2:1 and 3:1 ratio (Kline, 2011), the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), where a value of 0.90 or higher is satisfactory (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with values ranging up to 0.08 considered as appropriate (Van de Schoot *et al.*, 2012). Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested in the same model, followed by mediation analysis to examine Hypothesis 3. For the mediation analysis, the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty was first determined by eliminating the path from self-brand connection to brand experience, after which the indirect effect was considered. The conditions for mediation recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) were applied for this paper, and SEM was used to address possible measurement error (Baron and Kenny 1986). In this way, the relation between self-brand connection and brand experience was determined, and similarly, the relation between brand experience and brand loyalty was determined. And when controlling for these associations, the previously significant relationship between self-brand connection and brand loyalty became non-significant. Competing models were considered until a final conclusion was made about the best model based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) values, which considers the balance between fit and complexity, and therefore the model with the lowest BIC is considered to be the best (Posada and Buckley, 2004; Van de Schoot *et al.*, 2012).

## Results

### **Sample profile**

The majority of respondents were female (85.5%). This was anticipated, owing to the fact that online shoppers in South Africa tend to be predominantly female (Van Zyl, 2015). A majority of female participants would not hinder the investigation of the hypothesized relationships. With regard to age, respondents selected the year in which they were born with the youngest respondent being born in 1997 and the oldest respondent in 1953 (mean age = 44 years old). As demonstrated from the mean for the average spend per online purchase of a brand (R2244.96), and the mean for gross income reported (R27200.70), respondents could and did spend money on reputable brands. However, the majority of respondents were not regular online shoppers of reputable brands, with 5.4% purchasing bi-weekly, 19.6% purchasing monthly, and 73.2% purchasing every few months, while only 1.9% purchase reputable brands online on a weekly basis. Three main reasons for purchasing reputable brands online from a multiple choice multiple option question included convenience and being able to shop when they want to (77.9%), time efficiency in comparison to visiting brick and mortar shops (57.4%) and the availability of products which can't be found elsewhere (49.5%), while discrete shopping (9.8%) and reviews from other shoppers (19.9%) were some of the least selected options chosen as reasons for purchasing reputable brands online. Two postgraduate students examined respondents' listed favorite brands, and verified that all chosen brands could be considered as reputable brands.

### **Confirmatory factor analysis**

In order to investigate convergence in measurement and discriminant validity of the scales used in this paper, a confirmatory factor analysis was done. To determine the appropriate factor structure for the brand experience scale, two measurement models were compared. The measurement model with brand experience as a second-order reflective construct with four underlying dimensions used as indicators, namely sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual (BIC = 954.415), was compared to the measurement model with the sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions as first-order reflective constructs (BIC = 955.471). Owing to the BIC value being smaller and indicating the best model fit (Posada and Buckley, 2004; Van de Schoot *et al.*, 2012), brand experience was included in the model as a second-order reflective construct with the four underlying dimensions (as proposed by Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Sample results support the validation of brand experience as a second-order reflective construct with four underlying dimensions. Previously, individual thematic interviews were used to examine brand experience (Lundqvist *et al.*, 2013). In the majority of quantitative studies, the dimensions of brand experience have been used to profile consumers through cluster analysis (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010), to

examine social currency as antecedent to brand experience (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016a), as well as to examine brand experience as antecedent to brand equity (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013), satisfaction and loyalty (Walter *et al.*, 2013). Nysveen *et al.* (2013) found “acceptable but not very good model fit” when using brand experience as proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) as a second-order construct in their structural model. Although it is stated by Iglesias *et al.* (2011) that brand experience was used as a second-order construct in their model, the standardized item squared loadings for the four dimensions’ items are presented separately, and not as indicators of brand experience. Examining brand experience as a second-order construct was not only theoretically supported in our model but is also an important empirical contribution of this paper.

Three items from the self-brand connection measure with low standardized weights negatively affecting reliability were removed from further analyses. The average variance extracted (AVE) for all factors were above 0.5. The standardized weights (S.W.) and AVE for all factors are presented in Table 1.

Further results of the confirmatory factor analysis (descriptive statistics, reliabilities, square root of the Average Variance Extracted and correlations) for the three main constructs of our study, namely self-brand connection, brand experience and brand loyalty are provided in Table 2.

From Table 2 it is evident that all values for scale reliability, that is, Cronbach’s alphas and Jöreskog’s rho, were above 0.7, indicating good reliability (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all factors was above 0.5, an acceptable amount of variance explained (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), indicating convergence in measurement (Bagozzi, 1981). It can be deduced that large, positive correlations (Cohen, 1988) exist between self-brand connection and brand experience ( $r=0.824$ ), and between brand experience and brand loyalty ( $r=0.575$ ), while a medium positive correlation between self-brand connection and brand loyalty was found ( $r=0.495$ ).

To investigate discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE should be higher than the correlation between two factors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Although the correlations between the four brand experience dimensions and self-brand connection (sensory  $r=0.628$ ; affective  $r=0.697$ ;

**Table 1: Standardized weights and AVE of all factors**

Factor	Item	S. W.	AVE
Self-brand connection	This luxury brand reflects who I am	0.864	0.630
	I can identify with this luxury brand	0.824	
	I feel a personal connection with this luxury brand	0.802	
	I use this luxury brand to communicate who I am to other people	0.722	
	I consider this luxury brand to reflect who I consider myself to be	0.747	
Sensory brand experience	This luxury brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses	0.658	0.628
	I find this luxury brand interesting in a sensory way	0.906	
	This luxury brand appeals to my senses	0.794	
Affective brand experience	This luxury brand induces feelings and sentiments	0.805	0.637
	I have strong emotions for this luxury brand	0.878	
	This luxury brand is an emotional brand	0.701	
Behavioral brand experience	I engage in physical actions and behaviours when I use this luxury brand	0.857	0.621
	This luxury brand results in bodily experiences	0.768	
	This luxury brand is action oriented	0.733	
Intellectual brand experience	I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this luxury brand	0.889	0.758
	This luxury brand makes me think	0.943	
	This luxury brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving	0.771	
Second-order brand experience	Sensory brand experience	0.763	0.520
	Affective brand experience	0.846	
	Behavioral brand experience	0.623	
	Intellectual brand experience	0.628	
Loyalty	I consider myself loyal to this luxury brand	0.724	0.536
	I buy this luxury brand whenever I can	0.717	
	I buy as much of this luxury brand as I can	0.702	
	I feel this is the only luxury brand of this product I need	0.693	
	This is the one luxury brand I would prefer to buy/use	0.708	
	If this brand was not available, it would make a big difference to me if I had to use another luxury brand	0.740	
	I would go out of my way to use this luxury brand	0.830	

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics, reliabilities ( $\alpha$  and C.R.), square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) and correlations**

Construct	Mean	SD	$\alpha$	C.R.	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1)Self-brand connection	3.919	1.595	0.893	0.894	0.793*		
(2)Second-order brand experience	4.083	1.236	0.754	0.810	0.824	0.721*	
(3)Loyalty	4.335	1.522	0.888	0.889	0.495	0.575	0.732*

Note:  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha; C.R. = Jöreskog's rho (composite reliability); \*values in the main diagonal are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE); values below the diagonal are correlations.

behavioral  $r=0.513$ ; intellectual  $r=0.517$ ) were lower than the square root of the AVE for self-brand connection, the discriminant validity of self-brand connection and the second-order brand experience factor should be further investigated as this correlation ( $r=0.824$ ) was larger than the square root of the AVE. Therefore, a Chi-square difference test, as proposed by Shiu *et al.* (2011), between the unconstrained and constrained model was considered to confirm whether self-brand connection and the second-order brand experience are in fact two separate constructs. A value larger than 3.84 with the 1 degree of freedom (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), along with the confidence interval for the correlations which does not contain unity with correlations significantly different from 1.00 at the 0.05 level (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991), is sufficient proof that self-brand connection and the second-order brand experience are distinct constructs and would thus indicate discriminant validity (Shiu *et al.*, 2011). The Chi-square difference test (Chi-square difference = 53.314,  $df = 1$ ) and bias corrected confidence interval for the correlation (BBCI Lower = 0.753, BBCI Upper = 0.877) therefore confirm discriminant validity between self-brand connection and the second-order brand experience (which is from here on referred to as brand experience in this paper).

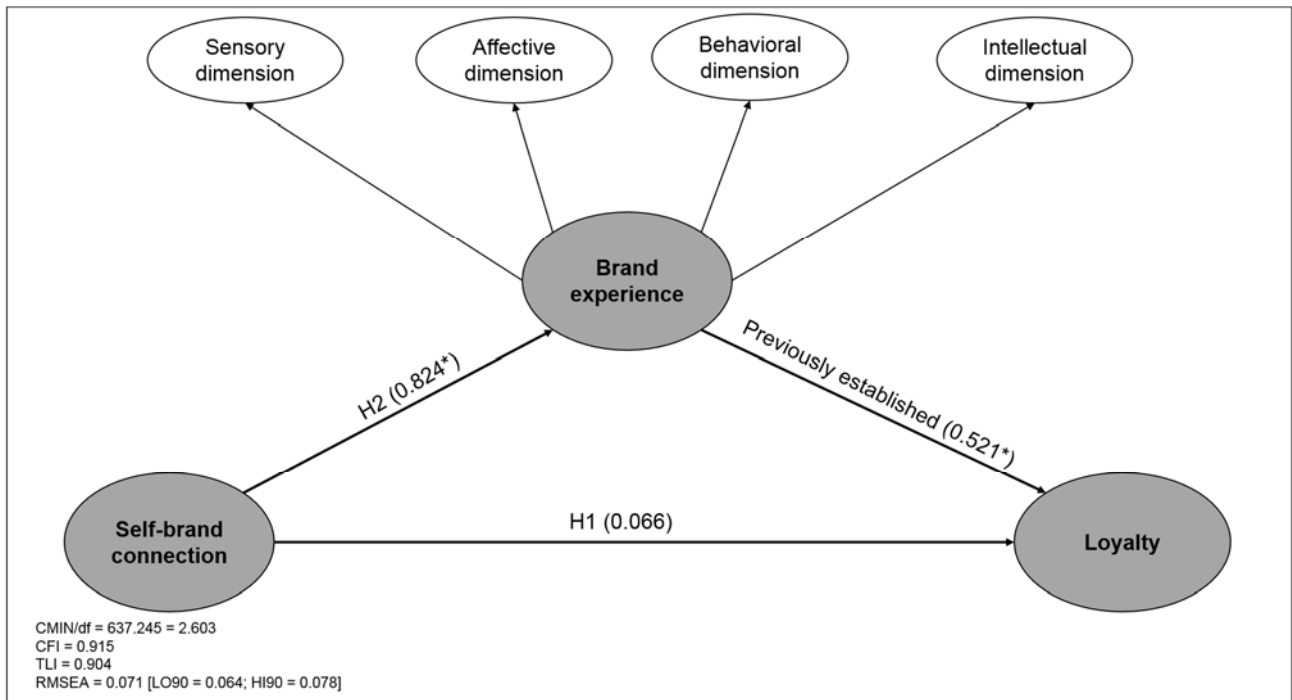
The measurement model was found to fit the data acceptably. The relative Chi-square ( $CMIN/df = 637.676/245 = 2.603$ ) was below 3. The CFI (0.915), TLI (0.904) and RMSEA (0.071, [LO90 = 0.064; HI90 = 0.078]) indicated good model fit.

### **Testing hypotheses 1 and 2**

To examine the relationships between self-brand connection and brand loyalty (H1), self-brand connection and brand experience (H2), as well as brand experience and brand loyalty (previously established), structural paths were added to the model. The non-normal distribution of the data necessitated the use of the Bollen-Stine bootstrap and the bias corrected confidence interval (BBCI) to assess significant effects during model estimation (Bollen and Stine, 1990; Enders, 2005). The results of Hypotheses 1 and 2 are presented in Figure 1.

The structural model presented in Figure 1 to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 (Model 1, see Table 3) resulted in good overall model fit ( $CMIN/df = 637.676/245 = 2.603$ ; CFI = 0.915; TLI = 0.904; RMSEA = 0.071 [LO90 = 0.064; HI90 = 0.078]). By including the structural path from self-brand connection to brand experience, the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty was non-significant (0.066; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.635 [BBCI Lower = -0.253; BBCI Upper = 0.362]). H1 stating that self-brand connection is positively associated with brand loyalty while

**Figure 1: Hypotheses 1 and 2 (hypothesized model) with path estimate results**



Note: Estimate provided in brackets; \* = significant,  $p < 0.05$

controlling for self-verification is therefore not supported. However, brand experience had a significant positive association with brand loyalty (0.521; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.004 [BBCI Lower = 0.260; BBCI Upper = 0.850]). Furthermore, self-brand connection had a significant positive association with brand experience (0.824; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.007 [BBCI Lower = 0.754; BBCI Upper = 0.878]). H2 stating that self-brand connection is positively associated with brand experience is therefore supported. Results reflect that self-brand connection is not directly associated with brand loyalty when the path from self-brand connection to brand experience is included in the model. Also, brand loyalty does not directly reflect the self-brand connection when controlling for self-verification through brand experience.

### ***Testing hypothesis 3***

In order to explore further the direct and indirect relations between self-brand connection and brand loyalty mediated through brand experience, the relation between self-brand connection and brand loyalty was first determined by eliminating the path from self-brand connection to brand experience (competing Model 2, see Table 3), after which the indirect association was considered (Model 1, see Table 3). With regard to the direct relationships, results indicated a significant positive relationship between self-brand connection and brand loyalty when the path from self-brand connection to brand experience was excluded (0.254; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.02 [BBCI Lower = 0.061; BBCI Upper = 0.407]). As evident from testing Hypotheses 1 to 3, when considering Baron and Kenny's (1986) conditions for mediation, the relation between self-brand connection and brand experience was significant (0.824; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.007 [BBCI Lower = 0.754; BBCI Upper = 0.878]), the relation between brand experience and brand loyalty was also significant (0.521; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.004 [BBCI Lower = 0.260; BBCI Upper = 0.850]), and when controlling for these effects, the previously significant relationship between self-brand connection and brand loyalty became non-significant (0.066; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.635 [BBCI Lower = -0.253; BBCI Upper = 0.362]). Bootstrap results of the indirect relationship also revealed a significant association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty mediated through brand experience (0.429; two-tailed  $p$ -value = 0.004). H3 stating that brand experience mediates the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty is therefore supported. Based on Zhao *et al.*'s (2010) classification, this paper found support for indirect-only mediation, or full mediation as Baron and Kenny (1986) originally classified this type of mediation, whereby the association of self-brand connection and brand loyalty is mediated through brand experience.

### ***Competing models***

The hypothesized and tested model was compared to three competing models owing to the fact that full mediation was observed during the data analyses and that previous studies have used the



**Table 3: Competing models**

Fit indices	Competing models			
	Model 1: Hypothesized mediation model	Model 2: Direct paths of self-brand connection and brand experience to loyalty	Model 3: Brand experience dimensions as mediators	Model 4: Full mediation model (no direct path from self-brand connection to loyalty)
<b>CMIN/df</b>	637.676/245 = 2.603	841.747/246 = 3.422	688.670/243 = 2.834	637.915/246 = 2.593
<b>CFI</b>	0.915	0.871	0.903	0.915
<b>TLI</b>	0.904	0.855	0.890	0.905
<b>RMSEA</b>	0.071 [LO90 = 0.064; HI90 = 0.078]	0.088 [LO90 = 0.081; HI90 = 0.094]	0.076 [LO90 = 0.070; HI90 = 0.083]	0.071 [LO90 = 0.064; HI90 = 0.078]
<b>BIC</b>	954.415	1152.728	1016.927	948.895

brand experience dimensions separately rather than as loadings on a second-order construct in data analyses (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016a; Walter *et al.*, 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010). The first competing model (Model 2) had no path from self-brand connection to brand experience, and only included the paths from self-brand connection and brand experience to brand loyalty. The second competing model (Model 3) used the four underlying brand experience dimensions as separate mediators between the association of self-brand connection and brand loyalty. The third competing model (Model 4) was the full mediation model as supported in our hypotheses testing, with no direct path from self-brand connection to brand loyalty in the model. The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) values for each of the competing models were considered, where the model with the lowest BIC is considered to have the better balance between fit and complexity (Posada and Buckley, 2004; Van de Schoot *et al.*, 2012). All model fit indices including the BIC values of the hypothesized model and the three competing models are presented in Table 3.

Following the analyses and as indicated in Table 3, although the fit indices of Model 1, our hypothesized model and Model 4, the full mediation model are very similar, owing to the BIC value of Model 4 being the smallest (BIC = 948.895), the full mediation model is the model of best fit. In the full mediation model, self-brand connection had a significant positive relationship with brand experience (0.828; two tailed *p-value* = 0.005 [BBCI Lower = 0.766; BBCI Upper = 0.884]), brand experience had a significant positive relationship with brand loyalty (0.583; two tailed *p-value* = 0.007 [BBCI Lower = 0.490; BBCI Upper = 0.665]), and Bootstrapping results for the indirect relationship also revealed a significant association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty mediated through brand experience (0.483; two-tailed *p-value* = 0.006). Results support the conception that the self-brand connection-loyalty association is better understood by including brand experience as self-verification process and thus as mediator for this association.

## **Discussion and recommendations**

Maintaining consumers' self-brand connections would benefit brands in the modern competitive marketing environment. Previous research on self-brand connection established relational outcomes thereof (Dwivedi, 2014). However, self-brand connection entails that consumers themselves either incorporated the brand into their self-concepts, or not (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). This paper's model supports that brand experience – importantly, which is adaptable by brand managers – plays a role in transferring the effects of self-brand connection onto brand loyalty.

In contrast to previous findings (Escalas and Bettman, 2003), results from this paper indicated that brand experience fully explains the relation between self-brand connection and brand loyalty, that is, this is a fully mediated relationship. Extant research shows a direct relationship between self-brand connection and brand loyalty. This relationship is reexamined here to include a potentially important but previously unexplored mediator – brand experience – as self-verification process. When disregarding the brand experience, self-brand connection is positively associated with brand loyalty, as found in previous studies. However, self-brand connection is not directly associated with brand loyalty when taking into account the brand experience. Instead brand experience is associated with brand loyalty, and self-brand connection is associated with brand experience and works through self-verification that can arise from the brand experience to be associated with brand loyalty. While building strong relationships with consumers is important, brand loyalty may not necessarily occur. Brand experience will determine whether the self-brand connection is maintained or abandoned, and whether self-brand connection is associated with brand loyalty. Brand experience intervenes in the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty. Omitting brand experience will result in inaccurate conclusions about the nature of the self-brand connection-loyalty relationship.

Self-brand connection is, however, positively related to brand experience. These results mean that should consumers have self-brand connections, their brand experiences would serve as a self-verification process. Brand experience can thus be considered as a self-verification process. Respondents who integrated the brand into their self-concepts positively associated the brand experience with such self-brand connections, which provides preliminary evidence of a previously unrecognized but important role of brand experience. Consumers have self-concepts that they want to verify, and through the brand experience they get the opportunity to do so. Hereby the brand experience may be elicited, used for feedback and selectively recalled to form a positive experience with the brand, which in turn, reinforces the self-brand connection. The reason behind consumers choosing to maintain self-brand connections and brand loyalty only with certain brands is further explicated through the mediated association the brand experience provides. Practically, consumers' self-verification through the brand experience thus afford brand managers the opportunity to further benefit from self-brand connections. Not only will consumers maintain their relationships with brands, but their brand experience would be perceived in a rose colored manner by selectively viewing the brand experience to self-verify existing self-brand connections. Although self-brand connection and the perceived brand experience are subjective for each consumer, brand experience has a dual role, which can be leveraged by brand managers: by maintaining self-brand connections and/or by being positively perceived based on self-brand connections. An optimal brand experience would be the mechanism through which self-brand connection is associated with brand loyalty.

Moreover, brand experience was positively related to brand loyalty, as proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009). It is recommended that enhancing brand experience should be a priority to obtain brand loyalty, and for brands wishing to move their transactional consumers, supporting the brand as and when it is deemed necessary instead of building relationships with brands, to relational ones who invest in maintaining the relationship with the brand, by capitalizing on consumers' possible self-brand connections. Functional brands can be positioned by using emotional appeals, while symbolic, emotionally laden brands in turn could utilize some utility component (Iyer *et al.*, 2016), to enhance the sensory, affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of consumers' brand experiences, resulting in a total brand experience.

Furthermore, in support of the argument that weak consumer-brand relationships should receive attention (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Fournier, 1998), it is advised that brand experience could also be used in weak consumer-brand relationships to strengthen the bond between the consumer and the brand. Although self-brand connection is an internal cognitive process, brand managers may use the brand experience to their advantage; if brand managers can create multi-dimensional brand experiences that enable consumers to verify existing self-brand connections, brand loyalty should be positively affected through the proposed indirect association where brand experience intervenes between self-brand connection and loyalty. The implication is that brand managers should have agency in managing consumers' self-brand connections and loyalty through the brand experience. When a brand such as Apple then creates a logo with the clear image of an apple which can be seen, and the iPhone which is touched (sensory dimension), establishing an emotional connection with current customers as the iPhone is used in one's personal and professional capacity when making memories, and amongst other things, capturing these with photos (affective dimension), pushing the consumer to utilize the camera (behavioral dimension) and creates excitement by stimulating curiosity about the unveiling of the new iPhone 7 (intellectual dimension), four dimensions work together to create a brand experience not easily forgotten.

By identifying brand experience as mediator for consideration in future research examining the self-brand connection-loyalty association, the importance of validating a scale to measure brand experience is paramount. Successfully validating brand experience as a second-order construct in this paper is another important contribution. Depending on theories they employ, future scholars may investigate relations between brand experience as a second-order construct including sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions, and other constructs as done in this model. Or, they may wish to propose relations between specific dimensions and various other constructs of interest.

## **Contributions**

Theoretically, this paper positioned brand experience as a self-verification process which explained the association between self-brand connection and brand loyalty. In other words, self-verification is the underlying principle governing the self-brand connection from the consumer's perspective. This paper contributes to literature on self-brand connection by theoretically accounting for its relations with brand experience and brand loyalty. This paper therefore extends previous research on consumer-brand relationships to include brand experience as mediator between consumers' self-brand connections and brand loyalty. Furthermore, a scale for brand experience as second-order construct is validated. In contrast to most previous studies on brand experience (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016a; Walter *et al.*, 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010), the dimensionality of brand experience is confirmed as a second-order construct with four underlying dimensions, namely, sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual. Such a multi-dimensional view on the brand experience can accommodate all brand inquiries considering the total consumer brand experience, instead of framing the experience based on a singular experience dimension relating to a particular context. The use of the scale proposed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) in the context of this multicultural developing country, South Africa, validates the scale further. In sum, this paper revealed brand experience fully explained the relationship between self-brand connection and brand loyalty, thereby providing one avenue for brand managers to consider when attempting to maintain or enhance consumers' self-brand connections and brand loyalty.

## **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

While the cross-sectional design may reduce external validity and prohibits causal inferences, the use of Facebook advertisements through Boosting is proposed as a data collection method for developing countries where obtaining sampling frames remain challenging and resources are constrained. The results may have been more conservative in a more gender-balanced sample as previous research found females to have stronger self-brand connections (Moore and Homer, 2008). Owing to the exploratory nature and theoretical contribution of this paper, it is recommended that future research should address validity concerns, in line with the recommendation of Taylor and Asmundson (2008). Furthermore, brand trust also influences brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; He *et al.*, 2012). Before consumers will form any kind of relationship with a brand, such as a self-brand connection, brand personality should engender trust (He *et al.*, 2012). Trust could in future be considered as moderator for the relationships between consumers' self-brand connections, their brand experiences and brand loyalty. Also, the volatility of these relationships with regard to negative discrete brand experiences did not fall within the scope of this paper; the question as to how one would manage negative discrete brand experiences with self-verification motives is still unanswered. Future research could shed light on the point where

discrete negative brand experiences would overshadow the cumulative brand experience and where such failure of verifying the self-brand connection would result in abandoning the self-brand connection and brand loyalty. Arguably, self-verification theory (Swann and Read, 1981) would have us believe that one would first look for alternative and other/more methods of verification for the self-brand connection if brand experience fails in one discrete instance, but that continuous failure to self-verify would have detrimental consequences for the self-brand connection. Despite external validity concerns, this paper contributes to understanding consumers' self-brand connections and illuminating a way for brand managers through brand experience to manage such self-brand connections. Evidence confirming brand experience to be a second-order construct with four underlying dimensions is also provided.

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