

THE INTERPLAY RELATIONSHIP ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN CUSTOMER BRAND IDENTIFICATION, BRAND IMAGE, VALUE CO-CREATION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN STARBUCKS SOCIAL COMMUNITY PLATFORM: A NETNOGRAPHY-BASED RESEARCH METHOD APPROACH

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Abstract: This research acknowledges the exponential development of social media and application-oriented technologies on the Internet that propel the marketers to accept social media-driven brand community as a dominant platform for marketing campaigns and strategy implementation, in order to establish the favorable brand equity. To be specific, this research recognizes that consumers select the brand community to fit their identities that fulfill their cognitive and affective gratifications, which in turn benefit the company by enhancing the brand image perception. Specifically, social identity theory is exploited which guides the development of the conceptual model to address the research objective, while netnography-based research method is employed, as an exploratory research effort, to provide a rich picture and understanding to the conceptual model. This research provides numerous contributions to the research, in particular concerning the role of consumer brand identification (CBI) in the value co-creation, as well the use of value of co-creation in strengthening brand image, CBI and other sources of CBI such as benefits, emotional attachment, product preferences, and marketing strategies.

Introduction: Starbucks began in Seattle in 1971, but it was not well known until in 1987. Howard Schultz, who is the current Starbucks CEO, has come to control the company that transformed the brand into a cultural icon of America. During 1960s – 1970s, the coffee house was a venue for social causes, in California and other parts of the United States, which were greater importance than the coffee. Starbucks phenomenon appears to be different where the Starbucks customers' identifications seem to be greater and more important. These Starbucks customers' identifications may replace both social intercourse and the venue for social causes.

Starbucks does not only sell the beverages but has become the personal identification for many around the world. Therefore, it is the focal business for the researchers to pursue the social identity theory study. With the emergence of the Internet and the wide spread use of the social media nowadays, the netnography approach is used for this exploratory study for better understanding the social identity theory as well as the value co-creation which is embedded in the social media platform.

In another word, according to Tsiotsou (2016), "consumption is no longer viewed as purely personal or subjective experience but as a shared and collective experience that takes place in the presence of other consumers". However, the systematic study on social identity theory of the customers through the brand community behavior is lacking. Thus, this research attempts to study how value co-creation influences consumer brand identification (CBI) and perceived brand image which contributes brand loyalty.

To accomplish this, three research objective is established. First, this research aims to exploit the

social identity theory and its application to service marketing knowledge in developing a conceptual model of how value co-creation of the market players takes place in the brand community on the social media platform. Specifically, the study examines the influence of brand self-determination and brand image as the social identity factors. Second, this research uses netnography-based research method as an exploratory research effort to provide a richer but broader picture into value co-creation, particularly in areas of contents shared and created, and the perceived values revealed, including the influences of customer brand identification (CBI) and perceived brand image on value co-creation. Therefore, there are three significant research questions to be addressed in order to fulfill these objectives:

- Research Question 1: What role does customer brand identification play in the value co-creation and the reciprocity as well?
- Research Question 2: What is the nature of value co-creation in the Starbucks community platform?
- Research Question 3: How brand loyalty takes the position in this value co-creation process?

Literature Review: Value co-creation is the centered theme of the Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, which regards "service as the core reason for exchange, enabled primarily by operant resources such as knowledge and capabilities and actualized through value co-creation processes" (Karpen, Bove, Lukas, and Zyphur, 2015, p. 90). In social media-enabled brand community platform (cf. Gummerus, Lijander, Weman and Pihlstrom, 2012), the socio-cognitive enabled self-image and identification, known as the Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) in this research, would be studied for its role in influencing the value co-creation.

In addition, in this collective consumption platform – a “specialized, nongeographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’guinn, 2001, p. 412), Gummerus et al. 2012, p. 859) discover that it affects loyalty positively. The interplay relationship between value co-creation in the brand community platform and brand loyalty thus establishes the rationale in addressing the research question 3, while the role of CBI and value co-creation are addressed in research questions 1 and 2, respectively.

Value co-creation in the social brand community has emerged to be a significant value-generation process which can be derived by prosumers (both consumers and producers), and thus, it is seen as new source of capabilities and competence for the brand organization (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 79). Specifically, value co-creation is “the joint, collaborative, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically” (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014, p. 644). Thus, through this inference and due to a lack of research in the area of CBI, this research attempts to study the interplay relationship between value co-creation and brand image, consumer brand identification (CBI) and any other emerging factors influencing CBI, and customer loyalty. The overall architecture of the interplay relationship is given in the preliminary conceptual model shown in Figure 1. The direct relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty is exploiting, for instance, the existent literature (cf. Gummerus et al. 2012). Values highlighted in the value co-creation are dominantly product and service improvement-driven (Nambisan, 2002).

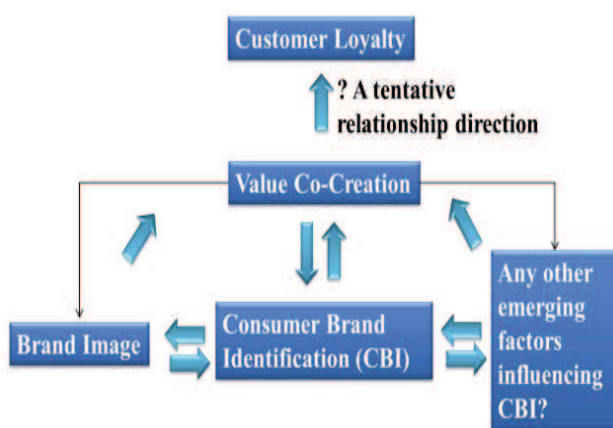


Figure 1: The Preliminary Conceptual Model

To study the role of consumer brand identification, this research exploits the social identity theory, as presented in the sequel. Nevertheless, based on social identity theory, which states a clue-driven symbiotic image formation, this research also considers brand

image as well as any other emerging factors which influence CBI. The latter is to be revealed from the outcome of the netnography method by the use of grounded theory study of the data.

Social Identity Theory: Social identity theory stresses on the responsiveness of the self to immediate contextual cues (Burke, 1998), in which the contextual cues that exist in the brand community environment in social media could be stimulated by contents co-created by the online network partners or market actors (Chou, Lin and Huang, 2016). The responsiveness is characterized by the socio-cognitive processes of customer evaluation of the co-creation's valuable experiences with the brand, product, and services, which relates to the literature of service marketing discipline such as customer satisfaction or expectation dissonance reduction (Burke, 1991). Expectations could be reflected in the common or shared outcomes in the brand community group as drivers to enact the formation of identity in the social context. Turner et al. (1994) reiterate that the self-identity formation in the social context is a result of the socio-cognitive processes of the self in relation to others. Thus, one of the core themes in the social identity theory is the identification of the social cognitive process of self-evaluation or appraisal. According to Bandura (1969), in his pioneering concept of social learning theory, he states that identification constitutes “an integral element of socialization and refers to a process in which a person patterns his thought, feelings, or actions after another person who serves as a model.” (p. 214). Brewer (1991) extends the identification to social identity formed in association with the community.

Consumer Brand Identification (CBI) and Brand Image: As reckoned in Hiscock (2001), developing an intense bond between the customers and the brand is an ultimate goal of marketing, and this research would study the role of CBI in enabling this bond. In CBI research, customers attempt to maintain consistency between the self-identity and brand identity, which share the theoretical explanatory backgrounds of self-congruence theory (Landon, 1974) and balance theory (Heider, 1958). In other words, the key rationality behind the role of consumer brand identification (CBI) is that consumers use brands for identity (Belk, 1988), being associated, for instance, with brand image, in satisfying self-motives and espoused values as shown in the conceptual model, Figure 1.

Brand image is broadly defined as the perceptions of (Keller, 1993), and thoughts and feelings (Roy and Banerjee, 2007) of the customers towards the brand, which could be enabled by marketing-oriented factors (Aaker, 1996) or knowledge and beliefs of the customers towards the brand (Lee, Lee and Wu, 2011).

Self-congruence theory (Landon, 1974), or alternatively known as the self-verification theory, instead, postulates that “individuals are motivated to verify, confirm, and maintain both their positive and negative self-concepts” (Swann, 1983, cited in Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby and Elsharnouby, 2016, p. 2902). To measure value congruence driven self-image, Elbedweihy et al. (2016) introduce consumer-brand identification (CBI) measurement as indicated in Figure 2. The respondent is asked, “Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with [brand X] image. Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at the right represents [Brand X] identity” (Elbedweihy et al. 2016, p. 2905). Nevertheless, Elbedweihy et al. (2016) did not include brand image as the construct in the study, and this research fills this gap as by doing so, it brings to cognitive consciousness of the respondents, firstly, the perceived brand image. Thus, for netnography-based method, it is vital that brand image is studied which provides the value congruence background for studying consumer brand identification. In this way, it addresses analytically and deductively the research question 1, while the empirical rich picture is to be examined through netnography-based data collection.

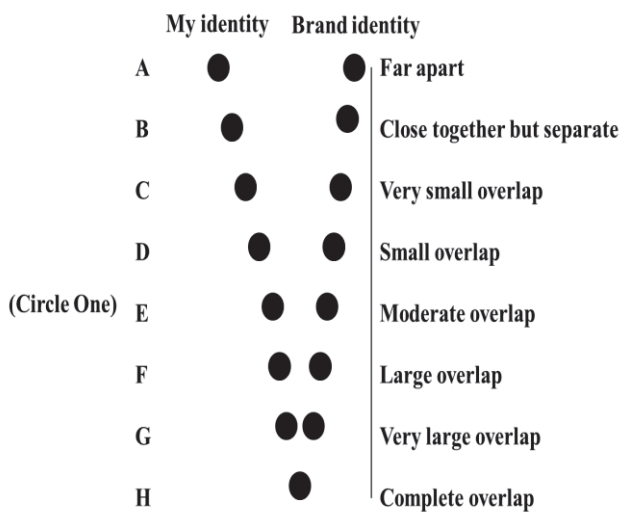


Figure 2: Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI)

Methodology: This research uses grounded theory with a netnography-based approach to collect the data and to determine other factors that might be significantly important to fill the gap in the existing literature. This approach will help reflect the characteristics of social identity theory, by borrowing the insights of Bandura, Ross and Ross (1963) which recognizes the ability of the observer to provide meaningful sense making through observation that is no direct interaction with the market actors. Moreover, this approach enables researchers to study

within the limited time-bound. In this study, the researchers have observed for a long time the source of the data collection by using netnography to enhance reliability in capturing or retrieving from the Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, MyStarbucksidea.com, Twitter etc. The researcher selected the data in random with certain criteria: the duration of the posts, relevant topics or customer comments in the period between 2014 and 2016. The data that researcher selected from Facebook, Pantip.com, Instagram and twitter should be the top comments and must have a large number of Likes. If in the case of Mystarbucksidea.com or elsewhere, the data retrieved for the analysis and discussion of this research shall be the most recent ideas or Ideas in Action or in criteria of a popular issue. The researchers used the triangulation (i.e. inter-raters, analytical generalization) in data collected in order to encourage the credibility in the detail of the evidence. **Data Analysis:** The case-by-case data analysis was used for this research study in order to better understand the theory thoroughly.

Case 1: A Starbucks’ customer posted: “I’m so sad that my local Starbucks don’t carry my flavors anymore!!!! Bring them back!!!! The honey latte was amazing but the smoked butterscotch was out of this world! Since those flavors came out I have been going every day consistently and getting two so I can be happy throughout the day! I don’t think I’ll be back since there is nothing at Starbucks that can compare to those drinks flavors”. After that Starbucks officer replied: “Hi Sara, you can request for drink to go on the permanent menu at mystarbucksidea.com so others can also vote on it!” Upon receiving the suggestion in the replied message, the same customer posted her idea on My Starbucks idea community. This case shows the significant role of customer brand identification. The customer identification previously matched with the brand identification. However, because of the disappearance of her preferred product: the smoked butterscotch flavor, makes her customer brand identification in the perspective of dis-identification highlighted. Accordingly, this leads her to participate in the value co-creation process to notice the brand as she mentioned: “I’m so sad that my local Starbucks don’t carry my flavors anymore!!!! Bring them back!!!!”. Within the value co-creation process, the brand shows its empathic listening to the customer opinion and suggests the customer to leave the message in mystarbucksidea.com for sharing the idea and getting the support from the other customers. Mystarbucksidea.com is a value co-creation platform that the brand introduces in order to facilitate this process between the brand and its customers. In mystarbucksidea.com, the brand allows the customers to behaviorally engage by sharing their

own ideas regarding the Starbucks products and services. The other customers can engage with the post by sharing the additional comments, by expressing whether they agree or disagree with this particular idea interactively. Once the particular post can reach the certain level on notification, the brand will take the ideas for further consideration.

Case 2: A customer created the request of Almond milk in 'mystarbucksidea.com' stated: "Not everyone loves coconut milk. Almond milk (vanilla unsweetened or otherwise) is a healthy alternative to cow's milk and is calorie smart and delicious with coffee. I get the nut allergy thing - but those people deal with their allergies daily - they know how to work around it. I hate coconut milk but can no longer have cow's milk. Please don't make me go elsewhere! I love you too much, Starbucks!" Surprisingly, Almond milk is now available on sales.

The significant role of customer brand identification, in this case, can be manifested in several ways. The customer is matching his own image with the brand image through the previous image of product attribute, emotion, preference, and lifestyle. From this case, the customer stated that "I hate coconut milk but can no longer have cow's milk," interpreting that the customer dislikes the product attribute which mismatches with his preference and his previous image on the product attribute: almond milk. Accordingly, once his identity mismatches with the brand identity, he tends to dispatch himself with the brand as mentioned that "Please don't make me go elsewhere!" However, this customer still has the emotional binding with the brand as can be seen from the quote "I love you too much, Starbucks!" Moreover, his emotion is also matching with the previous product attribute as he said "I get the nut allergy thing - but those people deal with their allergies daily - they know how to work around it". Accordingly, to preserve his identification, the customer engaged into the value co-creation process by suggesting his idea and expressing his preference and concern of possible nut allergy situation to the brand.

This customer uses his cognitive and agentic resources in informing the brand on the product attribute concerning the types of milk which could also impact the health of the consumers due to nut allergy as he mentioned that "Not everyone loves coconut milk. Almond milk (vanilla unsweetened or otherwise) is a healthy alternative to cow's milk and is calorie smart and delicious with coffee. I get the nut allergy thing - but those people deal with their allergies daily - they know how to work around it". Finally, the value co-creation leads to the availability of almond milk on sales.

Case 3: A Starbucks' customer suggested the brand on "Levels of Caffeine & Sugar", posted on my

starbucksidea.com: "Starbucks should also be considerate of their customers with certain needs and preferences. I suggest that there should be levels of caffeine for their caffeinated drinks and levels of sugar for their non-caffeinated drinks, wherein customers could choose from a range of, let's just say, 4 levels of preference. Level 1 for the smallest amount of sugar/a completely decaffeinated drink. Level 2 for a slightly more amount of sugar/ caffeine. Level 3 for a fair amount of sugar for non-caffeinated drinks and a fair amount of caffeine for caffeinated drinks, and so on. This would offer a more convenient way of allowing customers to get their preferred taste on their Starbucks drinks."

As a result, numerous customers posted and shared the ideas and feelings toward the caffeine and sugar level regarding Starbucks's product. One comment demonstrates that the value co-creation process enables to accentuate the other sources of the customer brand identification as stated that: "This is an outstanding innovation idea. This will truly boost up Starbucks' lover satisfaction". Another customer also joined the discussion and agreed on the shared idea, written that: "This is really helpful to the people suffering diabetes". Accordingly, the customer brand identification is also associated with other factors, such as benefits and emotions. This customer uses her cognitive resources in suggesting the brand on the product attribute concerning the level of Caffeine & Sugar of which could also impact preferred taste of the consumers as she mentioned that "I suggest that there should be levels of caffeine for their caffeinated drinks and levels of sugar for their non-caffeinated drinks, wherein customers could choose from a range" and uses her agentic resources to concern with the other customer experience as she mentioned that "This would offer a more convenient way of allowing customers to get their preferred taste on their Starbucks drinks".

Case 4: A Facebook user posted a message said: "Starbucks is a HUGE advocate for our military. My spouse is in the Navy, and Starbucks sent me an apron with an American flag on it, as well as "Navy spouse" under my name. Also, they offer a 40k and pay for college tuition for their employees. They offer health insurance, sick leave, and vacation pay. So those of you who are hating, I suggest educating yourselves. Starbucks, thank you for having me as a partner, and changing my life! I'm now a student at Arizona State because of you!"

Then, Starbucks replied to the post, written: "C, it's partners like you who make Starbucks great. Thank you!" This post reviews the customer brand identification that the brand provides social responsibility towards the military families. This leads the customer to establish the affectionate and associative attachments with the brand. For the quote

stated "So those of you who are hating, I suggest educating yourselves" represents the attitudinal loyalty that customer displays her protection on the brand reputation by providing the informational value to another customer based on her story.

This customer uses her agentic behavior to tell the good things about the brand, for instance, "Starbucks is a huge advocate for our military. My spouse is in the Navy, and Starbucks sent me an apron with an American flag on it, as well as "Navy spouse" under my name". Moreover, she also uses cognitive behavior in providing the information regarding the sentence stated "they offer a 401k and pay for college tuition for their employees. They offer health insurance, sick leave, and vacation pay", as well as she mentioned "Starbucks, thank you for having me as a partner, and changing my life! I'm now a student at Arizona State because of you!" Furthermore, this customer displays her identity which attaches with the brand identity as she said that "Starbucks, thank you for having me as a partner". The value, for this case, is co-created in the perspective of customer relationship and the social responsibility in the perspective of brand reputation. Accordingly, the customer brand identification associates with brand image and other factors, such as, benefits and emotions that lead to the customer loyalty.

Case 5: A member of pantip.com created a discussion forum concerning the brand experience, narrated: "If you want to know why Starbucks is different from the other, it is because they not just sell coffee but sell the experience of drinking coffee. This quote has many definitions. On other hands, it means the brand knowledge, such as the process of making coffee, types of coffee, machine and tools, and decoration concept. These all are the Starbucks template. So this template takes a long time to created, not only a week or month but it takes many years. This guarantees the customers that every branch they visit, they will get the same taste of coffee and similar atmosphere. This is different from the local coffee shops that the taste of coffee is unstable, depending on the barista. The customers might get to drink 'too sweet' coffee on someday, the coffee is lacking on the aromatic smell, or even too much ice is put in the cups. If these local coffee shops can provide the consistency as Starbucks does, they may be able to sell a cup of coffee worth THB 50-60. Combining with the great atmosphere as Starbucks offer, they might be able to charge for THB 80-100 a cup which is not much different from the Starbucks' prices. In my point of view, Starbucks charges the acceptable price comparing to its quality standard and its premium coffee".

From this case, customer-brand identification is matching well with the customer identity through product attribute, and the standards of brand as he

said "In my point of view, Starbucks charges the acceptable price comparing to its quality standard and its premium coffee". The customer uses his agentic behavior to acknowledge other customers by providing the information to others as he mentioned that "If you want to know why Starbucks is different from other, it is because of they not just sell coffee but sell the experience of drinking coffee. This quote has many definitions. On other hands, it means the brand knowledge, such as the process of making coffee, types of coffee, machine and tools, and decoration concept. These all are the Starbucks template. So this template takes a long time to created, not only a week or month but it takes many years. This guarantees the customers that every branch they visit, they will get the same taste of coffee and similar atmosphere. This is different from the local coffee shops that the taste of coffee is unstable, depending on the barista. The customers might get to drink 'too sweet' coffee on someday, the coffee is lacking on the aromatic smell, or even too much ice is put in the cups."

Moreover, the customer uses cognitive resources in encouraging others to change perceptions and attitudes toward the brand by comparing the standard of Starbucks with other coffee shops as the customer said: "If these local coffee shops can provide the consistency as Starbucks does, they may be able to sell a cup of coffee worth THB 50-60. Combining with the great atmosphere as Starbucks offer, they might be able to charge for THB 80-100 a cup which is not much different from the Starbucks' prices."

Accordingly, the brand standard and product attributes are the brand identifications that associate with the brand image where the customer attaches with their personal identifications. Furthermore, the sentence stated "If you want to know why Starbucks is different from the other, it is because they not just sell coffee but sell the experience of drinking coffee," presents that differentiation marketing and branding strategy of Starbucks is successful in encouraging the customers to purchase the products in compliance with their attitudes toward the brand as a premium coffee provider.

Case 6: Starbucks official Facebook fan page posted a picture of Starbucks cup in collection that was not available for sales with the caption written as: "Take your love wherever you go. #gotmine #dotcollection". A Facebook user replied to this post of Starbucks, by expressing her feeling as follows: "I don't know why but I want I love this cup so much. I will eventually have to buy it," while another Facebook user said: "Love this cup so much~ very nice design". Yet, another one Facebook user replied accordingly: "Agree with everyone else, Starbucks where can we purchase this tumbler?! It's not on your website! Your fans neeeeed this!"

Since several online voices-of-customers which revealed the intention to purchase this collection, Starbucks finally launched this new collection ahead before the Christmas. This interaction within the Facebook-based brand community shows precisely that the customers' identification are attached to their product preferences and marketing strategy. The caption of Starbucks stated "Take your love wherever you go" displays the identity of brand image that the brand wants to send the message to customers through the word "your love". Moreover, this word works to attract customer identification that matches right to the brand identification. It can be seen in the customers' comments, written "I don't know why but I want. I love this cup so much. I will eventually have to buy it," which represents the customer identification and emotion. Thus, the marketing strategy that exploits the product attributes that match customer preferences is attractive for customers and they will match with their identification, as mentioned: "Love this cup so much~ very nice design".

The engaged customers on brand's Facebook fan page use agentic resource in suggesting the brand to make the product available on shelf, as seen in this following sentence: "Agree with everyone else, Starbucks where can we purchase this tumbler?! It's not on your website! Your fans need this". Finally, the value co-creation leads this collection to be available on shelf in Starbucks' stores.

Conclusion and Implication: This research contributes to identifying the roles of CBI, brand image and other sources of CBI in influencing value co-creation participation of the different stakeholders, predominantly the customers and the marketers in Starbucks brand community on the social media platform. CBI strengthens the psychological state of the consumers in self-image or identity that is associated with brand image, and is attached with the product preferences and marketing strategies. In short, there are both material and symbolic identification scopes, which match with the concept of value co-creation in that "the joint, collaborative, peer-like process" produces "new value, both materially and symbolically" (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014, p. 644). In addition, it also is identical with the core identity and the textual or completeness elements of brand identity, in that the former illustrates the essence of the brand image (i.e. Michelin as in knowledgeable tires, Johnson & Johnson as in trustfulness in over-the-counter medicines) and the latter "fills the picture, adding the details that help to portray what the brand stands for" (Aaker, 1996, p. 88). In this way, consumer brand identification also connotes an identification that satiates self-motives (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002) through self-congruence (i.e. representing who

I am, is part of my sense of who I am, helps me express my identity, and feel personally connected to, Wolter et al. 2016, p. 792) between the brand identity and the self-identity (Elbedweighy et al. 2016). This thus addresses the research question 1 with a significant contribution to the existent body of knowledge in consumer brand marketing and value co-creation. In other words, apart from brand image influences consumer brand identification, there are other sources as well, such as the benefits received, emotion established, of the attachment of the customers towards the products and the marketing strategies.

Research question 2 is an attempt to study the nature of value co-creation in the context of the social media-driven brand community. Following the Service-Dominant (S-D) logic of concepts, value is the key focal area rather than products and networks (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In other words, the research studies the nature of the value co-creation as well as the values-in-context (cf. Vargo and Lusch, 2008), in which customers play a significantly dominant role in the value creation (Gronross and Voima, 2013). The netnography-based data analysis indicates different types of value co-creation, predominantly as follows:

- Informative- to inform or to notice to the brand organization about the perceptions of the services and products.
- Empathic listening – such as to empathically listen to the customer opinion.
- Behavioral engagement – for instance, by sharing ideas, expressing opinions and feelings on the products and services.
- Uses of cognitive and agentic resources in informing the brand on the product attributes, and to share experiences with other customers.
- Emotional attachment
- Expression – such as to express intention to purchase and thus the brand organization would know the areas for improvement, and areas of product preferences and thus to help design appropriate marketing strategies.

Thus, clearly, consumers, the brand organization, and other stakeholders would cognitively, affectionately, behaviorally and agentially invest their resources, in different manifestations, to co-create values. While the existent literature indicate that value co-creation can deliver values such as functional value (task-related), monetary value (compensation), emotional value (intrinsic rewards), and social value (relational) (Grace and Iacono, 2015), this research identifies additional values, as shown in Figure 3, that is the strengthening of brand image, CBI and other sources of CBI such as benefits, emotional attachments, and product preferences.

Furthermore, this research discovers that value co-creation has no direct relationship to customer

loyalty, but mediated through brand image, CBI and other sources that induce CBI, as shown in Figure 3. Thus, to induce co-creation opportunities, it implies to the marketers and the brand organizations to derive strategies to stimulate CBI, brand image and other CBI-associative mechanisms such as marketing strategies, benefits, emotions and product attributes. When all these fundamental social identity foundations are established, it leads to value co-creation, as shown in Figure 3, which aligns with the

assertion by Professor Ramaswamy that the next frontier in the wider co-creation movement is “seeing the enterprise as a nexus of engagement platforms” (Leavy, 2014, p. 10), in which, as a result of the value co-creation process, customers and other stakeholders in the community platform would “individually and collectively become both the means and end of their own value creation process” (Leavy, 2014, p. 13).

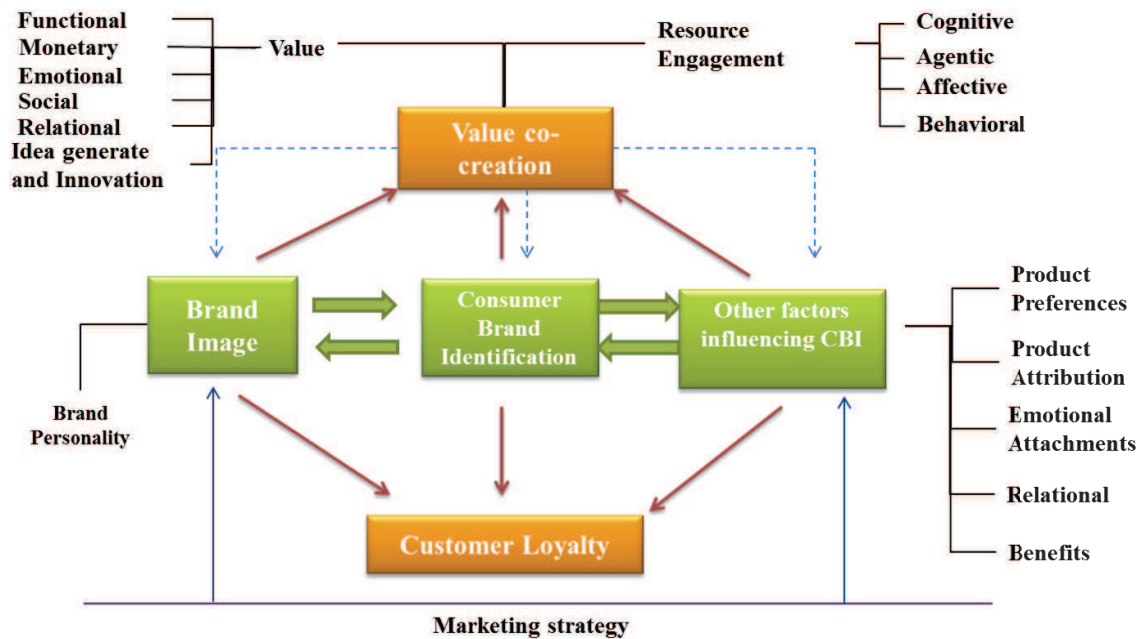


Figure 3: The Final Model

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