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**TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING? CONSUMER RESPONSE TO STRATEGIC
CHANGES IN BRAND IMAGE**

Tarje Gaustad*

Associate professor of Marketing
Kristiania University College,
Kirkegaten 24-26, 0107 Oslo, Norway
Phone: +47 97724807, E-mail: tarje.gaustad@kristiania.no

Bendik M. Samuelsen

Professor of Marketing
BI Norwegian Business School,
0442 Oslo, Norway
Phone: +47 46410561, E-mail: bendik.samuelsen@bi.no

Luk Warlop

Professor of Marketing
BI Norwegian Business School
0484 Oslo, Norway
Phone: +47 46410738, E-mail: luk.warlop@bi.no

Gavan J. Fitzsimons

Edward S & Rose K. Donnell Professor of Marketing and Psychology
The Fuqua School of Business, Duke University
100 Towerview Drive, Durham, NC 27708
Phone: 919 660 7793, E-mail: gavan@duke.edu

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*Corresponding author

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Too Much of a Good Thing? Consumer Response to Strategic Changes in Brand Image

ABSTRACT

The current research investigates a potential disadvantage of building brand associations that resonate with consumers' identities and facilitate consumer-brand bonding. The authors propose a theory of consumer response to changes that either dampen or augment the associations central to brand image (e.g., due to brand acquisitions or repositioning). The results show that consumers with a high degree of self-brand connection respond more negatively than others do to changes that dampen brand associations. Counterintuitively, changes augmenting brand associations can also lead to unfavorable consumer sentiments in certain instances. When brand connection was linked to an ideal self-identity (i.e., self-enhancement motives), changes that augmented the brand image increased the brand's ability to signal an ideal identity. Conversely, when brand connection was linked to the actual self-identity (i.e., self-verification motives), augmenting brand image reduced the perceived similarity between the self and the brand, thus causing brand identification to deteriorate.

Keywords: Self-brand connection; self-identity; brand image change; dampened brand associations; augmented brand associations

Consumers are known to incorporate brands into their self-concepts and use those brands to reflect who they are or who they want to be (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). The value of such consumer-brand bonding is well documented (for an overview, see MacInnis, Park, & Priester, 2009). The current research investigates a potential disadvantage of strong consumer-brand bonding – namely, consumers’ responses to changes in brand image. In particular, we investigate the case of consumer responses to modifications in the magnitude of brand image associations. For example, Timberland can be considered a “rugged” brand. However, there are different degrees of ruggedness. While consumers may be likely to consider Timberland more rugged than Ralph Lauren, they may perceive Boulet (cowboy boots) as even more rugged than Timberland. Thus, managerial actions making Timberland products appear more or less rugged than they currently appear to be, represent a *de facto* change in that brand image.

In the current paper, we investigate consumer responses to changes that either dampen or augment a brand image. We argue that consumer responses to such changes depend on the degree to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their own self-concept (i.e., self-brand connection) (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). We expect consumers who have incorporated a brand into their self-concept will respond negatively to changes that *dampen* that brand image, as such changes reduce self-brand congruity and decrease the brand’s ability to express self-identity.

Intuitively, one might expect the opposite response to changes that *augment* a brand’s image. Such changes would appear at first glance to be non-controversial, and one might expect consumers to welcome them. However, we argue that consumer response to changes that augment brand associations not only depends on the degree of self-brand connection, but also on the part of the consumer’s self to which that brand connects. If the brand is connected to the consumer’s ideal self, then augmentation of that brand image increases the brand’s

ability to signal an ideal identity. Conversely, however, if the brand is connected to the consumer's actual self, then changes augmenting the brand's image can reduce the perceived similarity between the actual self and the brand. For example, suppose a consumer believes he is a somewhat rugged person without being an extremely outdoorsy tough, or rugged cowboy type. He might, accordingly, identify with the Timberland brand and feel that Timberland boots portray just the right degree of ruggedness to signal who he truly is (the actual self), while other brands, such as Boulet, portray too much ruggedness to fit well with his identity. In such instances, we expect that changes augmenting Timberland's brand image, increasing its ruggedness to be more similar to that of Boulet's, will reduce the consumer's perceived congruity between his actual self and Timberland. In other words, Timberland is no longer "like me" and the brand identification deteriorates.

In the next sections, we present the theoretical rationale for our predictions, report the results of three studies, and conclude with a discussion of the results and their practical and theoretical implications.

CONSUMER RESPONSE TO CHANGES IN BRAND IMAGE

Consumers are known to incorporate particular brands into their own identity and categorize them as part of the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Lay understandings might favor the more image-based or conspicuous brands as being more self-defining; yet, research has demonstrated that people also relate strongly to mundane brands. In her seminal article, Fournier (1998) portrays how people use a vast array of different types of brands in their identity projects (ranging from Reebok running shoes, Miracle Whip salad dressing, and Palmolive soaps to Estée Lauder perfumes, General Electric, and many others) and how brands might play different roles in a person's life.

Researchers have investigated the formation and benefits of self-brand connections – that is, the degree to which the consumer incorporates the brand into the self (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). From the company perspective, the literature shows that consumers’ self-brand connection promotes loyalty (Lam et al., 2010; Park et al., 2010) and safeguards the brand from the consequences of transgressions and negative information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012; Gaustad, Utgård, & Fitzsimons, forthcoming; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007).

In contrast to the previous research, however, we do not study how self-brand connections can safeguard the brand from the consequences of inherently negative failures and transgressions. Rather, we investigate consumer responses to a *change in the meaning* of an important identity marker caused by managerial actions intended to strengthen the brand.

Brand image can change in different ways. What quickly comes to mind are changes in the constellation of associations linked to a brand. This could be caused either by incorporating new associations in brand image or omitting existing salient associations in the brand’s image (Gaustad, Samuelsen, Warlop, & Fitzsimons, 2018). However, brand image might also change without alterations in the actual constellation of brand associations but through changes in the *degree* of associations. In the current paper, we investigate changes in the degree of existing salient brand associations, either through dampening or augmenting. For example, suppose that the association most strongly linked to Mountain Dew is “exciting.” Both managerial actions that make Mountain Dew appear less exciting (i.e., a change from 70 to 60 on a 0-100 scale of “exciting”) and actions that make the brand appear even more exciting (i.e., a change from 70 to 80 on a 0-100 scale of “exciting”) represent a change in that brand image.

We argue that changes in the degree of existing brand associations are neither positive nor negative in themselves. Becoming more or less “rugged” or “exciting” is not necessarily for the better or worse; rather, it depends on consumers’ idiosyncratic preferences. However, we theorize that consumers’ felt brand connection might lead to different responses to the dampening versus the augmentation of brand associations.

Changes that Dampen Brand Associations

It is not uncommon for brands to struggle to keep their positioning in the market. In some cases, transgressions and scandals can alter consumers’ perception of a brand, or the brand might simply get old and be unable to maintain its image with a new generation of consumers. In other cases, managers may dampen brand associations deliberately to accommodate changing consumer preferences and adapt to new markets. One recent example is Dunkin’ Donuts’ decision to change its name to Dunkin’. The name change was a move to dampen associations to donuts. Dunkin’ is still going to sell them, but they want to be known by more than merely donuts (Wiener-Bronner 2018).

We argue that consumers’ responses to changes that dampen brand image depend on the degree to which these consumers feel connected to the brand. Central to self-brand connection is the perceived ‘me-ness’ of the brand – that is, the degree of congruence between the self and the brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995). Sirgy (1982) defined self-brand congruence as the degree of fit between consumers’ self-concepts and a brand’s image. Given that the specific associations signaled in a brand image are important to consumers, brand congruity has been shown to influence behavior across several situations (Aaker, 1999; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

For those consumers who feel a low degree of self-brand connection, brand image is not identity relevant. Brand image is neither descriptive of these consumers nor important in their identity projects (Markus, 1977). Thus, responses from consumers that have a low

degree of self-brand connection are not influenced by identity, but rather depend on consumers' idiosyncratic preferences for these specific associations.

For those consumers who feel a high degree of self-brand connection, however, changes that dampen brand image have identity implications. Such consumers have actively chosen the specific brand due to its current image and use that brand as a self-identity marker. Hence, brand image is highly descriptive of and important to those consumers with a high degree of self-brand connection, as the brand helps construct and/or signal identity (Markus, 1977). Changes that dampen brand image will decrease congruency between the brand's image and consumer identity and decrease the brand's ability to serve as an identity marker.

The response of Porsche owners to the launching of the Porsche Cayenne is illustrative. The Cayenne enabled Porsche to reach new customer segments and resulted in increased market share and sales success (Avery, 2012). Nonetheless, existing Porsche owners opposed the Cayenne (which came to be known as "the SUV for soccer moms"), arguing that it contaminated Porsche's brand image. Typical drivers of the Cayenne tended to be safety conscious, family oriented, and conservative, which conflicted with and dampened Porsche's established associations of speed and masculinity (Avery, 2012).

We expect consumers to cope with such change not only through negative attitudes toward the change itself, but also by reducing their felt brand connection and thus the prominence of the brand as a vehicle for their own self-expression. Therefore, we expect self-brand connection to negatively influence consumer responses to changes that dampen brand image associations.

Hypothesis 1: High degree (vs. low degree) of self-brand connection consumers respond more negatively to changes that dampen associations in brand image.

Changes That Augment Brand Associations

Augmentation of brand associations can produce a change in brand image. A brand's shift from a somewhat rugged image to an exceedingly rugged image, for example, may alter the degree to which consumers feel they can identify with that particular brand. A recent example is Burberry's stated strategy to sharpen the brand positioning, making it even more luxury and upscale than before (Sandle & White, 2017).

We suggest that consumer responses to such changes are not only contingent on the degree of self-brand connection, but also to which part of the consumer's self that brand is connected. We investigate two common conceptualizations of the self-concept, namely, ideal self and actual self. The ideal self is a representation of the kind of person one dreams of being, while the actual self is how one actually sees oneself. Hence, ideal self-brand connection is the perceived fit between the brand's image and the ideal self, whereas actual self-brand connection is the perceived fit between brand image and the actual self (Aaker, 1999; Malär et al., 2011).

Ideal self-brand connection to enhance the self. Consumers use brands to achieve goals motivated by the self, such as self-enhancement (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). Self-enhancement is the desire to maintain or increase the positivity of one's self-concept and thus protect self-esteem (Leary, 2007). Several studies have documented the use of consumption and brands as instruments for self-enhancement. For example, Escalas and Bettman (2003) demonstrated that consumers who are motivated to self-enhance will report stronger connections to brands associated with the groups to which they aspire to belong. Escalas and Bettman (2003) argued that the appropriation of brand associations could be derived from the brand usage of reference groups. Hence, when aspirational groups use a particular brand, consumers can form connections to that brand to link themselves to a particular aspirational group and transfer the associations of the brand (and, hence, those of the aspirational group)

to themselves. For example, if a consumer who aspires to be perceived as sophisticated and glamorous sees that people who embody these associations often use the Marc Jacobs brand, then he or she will want to acquire Marc Jacobs products in order to be perceived as personally more sophisticated and glamorous.

Consumers also self-enhance by directly appropriating desired brand associations through brand usage. Park and John (2010) showed that when consumers use a brand, they feel the brand associations rub off on them. For example, after carrying a Victoria's Secret shopping bag, some female participants felt more feminine, better looking, and more glamorous.

These aforementioned findings reveal that self-enhancement motives encourage consumers to connect with brands that project associations central to their ideal self-representations. The more strongly a brand reflects associations that are congruent with an ideal consumer identity, the more efficiently that brand can fulfill these consumers' self-enhancement goals. Thus, we posit that consumers' connection with brands that reflect their own aspirational and ideal selves (how they ideally would like to be) are based on self-enhancement motives.

Managerial actions that augment existing brand associations imply that the brand even more strongly projects the image consumers with a high degree of ideal self-brand connection aspire to have. Viewed through a goal-pursuit lens, such changes will increase both the salience of the ideal and strengthen the representativeness of the brand as a marker of what one is aspiring to be or become (Markman & Brendl, 2000). This augmentation thus increases the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement (self-enhancement efficacy) and assists the consumer's pursuit of the brand as an expression of him/herself.

Hence, we predict that consumers who feel a high degree of *ideal* self-brand connection (brand connection based on self-enhancement motives) will develop a favorable

perception of changes that augment the existing brand image, because such changes will increase the brand's ability to signal an ideal identity (i.e., the brand becomes even "more of what I want to be like").

Actual self-brand connection to verify the self. Consumers use brands not only as instruments for self-enhancement, but also as instruments to achieve self-verification goals (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Self-verification theory proposes that people have a tendency to prefer and pursue information that is consistent with their existing self-views (Leary, 2007). This theory is based on the assumption that a stable self-view gives people a feeling of coherence and a sense that the world is predictable and controllable, and they are then motivated to maintain and substantiate this feeling.

The use of particular brands can become a part of this self-verification process, as brand choice is an expression of the personality and attributes embodied by a brand (Aaker, 197). Escalas and Bettman (2003) demonstrated that consumers who are motivated to verify their self-concept will show stronger connections to brands associated with those groups to which they already belong. Similarly, consumers can self-verify by connecting with brands that reflect an image congruent with their actual self. The more strongly a brand reflects associations congruent with the consumer's actual self, the more efficiently that brand will fulfill those consumers' self-verification goals. Hence, we posit that brand connections between the actual self and the brand are based on consumers' motives to verify, validate, and sustain an existing self-concept (self-verification motives).

As consumers are motivated to maintain a stable self-view, they tend to interpret information about a brand to which they are strongly connected as being in line with their current brand perceptions. Thus, consumers with a high degree of self-brand connection are inclined toward attribution bias and are motivated to defend the brand against any negative information (Cheng et al. 2012; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Zuckerman,

1979). However, if the brand image indisputably changes, then the brand's ability to serve as an instrument for self-verification decreases. Brand image change moves the brand away from a state that the consumer desires to maintain (the actual self), thereby inducing costly effort to re-achieve that state. Hence, maintaining a close brand connection will conflict with the consumer's self-view. Given the need for self-verification, consumers with a high degree of actual self-brand connection are motivated to reduce the felt brand connection to maintain and restore their own stable self-image.

Some research suggests that people are more reluctant to change existing personal traits they believe are more (versus less) fundamental to their self-concept. Riis, Simmons, and Goodwin (2008) found that people are more willing to take drugs to improve their physical and mental abilities than to take drugs to change certain aspects of their personalities (e.g., help them become more extroverted). Presumably, people do not want to change, even for the better, if doing so involves changing their fundamental selves. Extending this insight, we can predict that consumers who feel high degrees of *actual* self-brand congruence (brand connection based on self-verification motives) will develop a negative perception of changes that augment existing brand associations. Augmenting brand image is likely to reduce the felt congruence between the brand and the actual self. For consumers who feel a brand represents their actual self (i.e., the brand is like them), augmenting moves the brand away from the state in which the consumer wants to remain. As a result, that change will decrease the brand's efficacy to confirm and verify the consumer's actual self (self-verification efficacy).

To sum up the discussion about consumer response to changes that augment brand associations, we posit that the degree of ideal versus actual self-brand connections influences responses to changes that augment brand associations differently due to distinctive psychological mechanisms. Firstly, we predict that high degree of actual self-brand

connection influences consumer response to changes that augment brand associations more negatively than do high degree of ideal self-brand connection. Hence, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: High degree of actual (vs. high degree of ideal) self-brand connection consumers respond more negatively to changes that augment associations in brand image.

Secondly, we argue that there are different motivations underlying brand connections related to the ideal versus the actual self, resulting in different psychological mechanisms in response to changes that augment associations in brand image. Hence, we posit that ideal self-brand connections are based on self-enhancement motives, and that response to changes augmenting brand associations are mediated through the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement:

Hypothesis 3A: The effect of ideal self-brand connection on the response to changes that augment associations in brand image is mediated through the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement.

Furthermore, we posit that actual self-brand connections are based on self-verification motives and that response to changes augmenting brand associations are therefore mediated through the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-verification:

Hypothesis 3B: The effect of actual self-brand connection on the response to changes that augment associations in brand image is mediated through the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-verification.

Overview of the Studies

Here we present three studies that examine and support our predictions. In Study 1, we applied an experimental design manipulating self-brand connection (low vs. high), self-identity (ideal vs. actual), and brand image change (dampened vs. augmented associations). Study 1 allowed participants to self-select idiosyncratic target brands according to the

prescribed condition. Hence, the findings arise from several different brands and categories, rather than being limited to one specific target brand.

Study 2 was a marketplace study. We applied a survey design to measure undergraduate students' ideal and actual self-brand connection with the business school they attended before *actual* changes in that brand's architecture. In the process, we instructed a profiled member of the top management group (the head of the Marketing Department) to inform students that recent actual changes in the brand architecture included a strategic decision to augment the existing brand associations of the business school (i.e., the brand increased the level of existing salient associations, becoming "more of what it already was"). Finally, we measured the participants' reactions to these changes in brand architecture and the augmentation of the existing brand associations.

Study 3 manipulated ideal and actual self-brand connections by allowing participants to self-select idiosyncratic target brands, while measuring the levels of self-brand connection. In addition, Study 3 measured two proposed processes (i.e., the target brand's self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy) directly. Study 3 also included measures of psychological reactance and the expectations of marketing management changes (changes in prices, quality, and customer service), as these attributes could serve as alternative explanations for the final results.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that supports the notion that self-identity (ideal vs. actual) and self-brand connection influence consumer response to changes in brand image. Interestingly, we found that consumers who were feeling a high degree of ideal self-brand connection responded positively to changes that augmented the brand image, whereas consumers' feeling of a high degree of actual self-brand connection responded more negatively to such changes.

This set of studies builds confidence in the results by replicating the effects using different target brands (both predefined and idiosyncratic self-selected brands); manipulating changes in different brand image associations; measuring and manipulating general, ideal, and actual self-brand connections; including direct measures of the proposed processes; and controlling for alternative processes. We believe that participants' self-selection of target brands, in both Study 1 and Study 3, is a definitive strength of the designs of these studies and speaks to the robustness of the effects across several different types of brands in several different categories. In these studies, participants selected several hundred unique target brands, ranging from Apple, Nike, and Tide, to relatively smaller brands such as Cover girl, Moleskin, Barilla, and many more.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to investigate consumer responses to changes in brand image that either dampened or augmented existing brand associations, and specifically test hypotheses 1 and 2.

Study 1 applies brand acquisitions as the context for brand image change. Brand acquisitions are commonly used as a form of corporate development. More than 95,000 mergers and acquisitions were reported in 2017 (Zephyr Annual M&A Report 2017, www.zephyrdealdata.com). Even large, world-known companies are sometimes acquired or merge with other large, world-known brands or even venture capital companies. For example, Jaguar and Land Rover was acquired by Tata Motors, Youtube was acquired by Google, Kraft was acquired by Heinz, Time Warner was acquired by AT&T, Jimmy Choo was acquired by Michael Kors, Whole Foods was acquired by Amazon, just to name a few. Consumers are regularly exposed to such acquisitions and mergers through the press and social media, such that reading about an acquisition in a newspaper is not uncommon.

Design and Procedure

US-based members of the MTurk online panel participated in the survey for a nominal fee. The participants were randomly assigned to one condition in a 2 (brand connection: low vs. high) \times 2 (self-identity: ideal vs. actual) \times 2 (brand image change: dampen vs. augment) factorial design, with consumer response as the dependent variable.

All the participants first read a short explanation of two different types of self-brand connections, linked either to the ideal or actual self. Participants were then asked to provide two or three examples of brands toward which they felt an *ideal* self-brand connection, and two or three examples of brands toward which they felt an *actual* self-brand connection. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on the combination of two of the independent variables (brand connection: low vs. high \times self-identity: ideal vs. actual): Low ideal self-brand connection, high ideal self-brand connection, low actual self-brand connection, or high actual self-brand connection.

In the *low* self-brand connection conditions (low self-brand connection \times self-identity: ideal vs. actual), participants were instructed to think of brands they liked and used regularly *without* the brands being highly connected to their own identity – specified as the ideal self or actual self, according the self-identity condition – and then enter the name of the one brand that best matched that description.

In the *high* self-brand connection conditions (high self-brand connection \times self-identity: ideal vs. actual), participants were instructed to think of “those brands that you feel fit an ideal you in the future (your ideal self)” *or* “those brands that you feel fit who you are today (your actual self),” with respect to the self-identity condition, and then enter the name of the one brand that fits that description best.

The brand names the participants offered were automatically merged into the rest of the questionnaire and used as target brands idiosyncratic to each participant. To further

strengthen the manipulation, participants in the high degree of self-brand connection conditions were asked to briefly describe what it was about a brand that made it fit “your ideals and aspirations” (ideal self) or “who you are today” (actual self) depending on the self-identity condition.

Participants answered scales that measured initial brand attitude and self-brand connection to “their” brand. Self-brand connection was measured with three distinct scales; general self-brand connection, ideal self-brand connection, and actual self-brand connection. All participants responded to these three self-brand connection scales. The participants also selected three associations that were most descriptive of “their” brand from the list of 42 brand personality traits developed by Aaker (1997). The three selected associations were automatically merged into the subsequent brand image change scenario.

Since the data were collected from an online panel, we also included the instructional manipulation procedure developed by Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009) to detect careless participants who did not read the instructions.

Next, the participants read a scenario about the acquisition of “their” brand that manipulated the dampening associations vs. the augmenting associations. Both the brand name and descriptive associations were automatically linked to the participants’ answers from prior survey questions. The scenarios were the same for both conditions except for the description of how the acquisition would affect the target brand. Specifically, the scenarios stated that the acquisition would either dampen or augment (according to the condition) the brand image in terms of the three idiosyncratic brand associations the participants had evaluated as most descriptive of “their” brand. In both conditions, the scenarios described the acquisition as positive and welcomed by the brand. The acquirer was a fictitious venture capital company named InvesTech Corp. (no other information about the acquirer was given). The scenarios provided to the participants were as follows:

Dampen Associations' Condition:

Imagine that a news report states that the world's leading venture capital company, InvesTech Corp., has acquired (brand name). Following the acquisition, management has decided to dampen and adjust the (brand name) brand. Management says it will change (brand name) to portray an image as less (Association 1), (Association 2), and (Association 3) than it is today by decreasing these values in all activities. "The goal is to adjust the brand image," says management.

Augment Associations' Condition:

Imagine that a news report states that the world's leading venture capital company, InvesTech Corp., has acquired (brand name). Following the acquisition, management has decided to reinforce and augment the (brand name) brand. Management says it will change (brand name) to portray an image that is even more (Association 1), (Association 2), and (Association 3) than it already is today by boosting the level of these values in all its activities. "The goal is to create a reinforced brand image," says management.

After reading the scenario, the participants answered scales directly measuring attitudes toward the change in brand image, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection. Finally, we collected demographic information and debriefed the participants.

Measures

We measured attitude toward the target brand using three 0-100 sliding scales labeled "bad/good," "negative/positive," and "unfavorable/favorable" ($\alpha = .92$) (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992). We measured the self-brand connection using the 7-item scale developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003). That scale includes items such as "I can identify with (brand name)," "The (brand name) reflects who I am," and "I feel a personal connection with (brand name)," all rated on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" ($\alpha = .94$).

We adapted the measures and the procedure from Malär et al. (2011) for measuring the degrees of actual and ideal self-brand connections, and designed a two-step approach. First, we instructed the participants to think about the personality of the target brand – that is, we asked them to think about the brand as if it were a person and then think of human characteristics they associated with that brand. Then we instructed the participants to think about their own personality and their *actual* self before indicating the extent to which they felt

a sense of congruity between the brand and that *actual* self (“The personality of (brand name) is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self)” and “The personality of (brand name) is a mirror image of me (my actual self)”) on a 0-100 sliding scale (0 = “disagree”; 100 = “agree”) (Spearman-Brown coefficient = .90).

Next, the participants completed the same exercise, but were asked to think about their *ideal* self and their perceived congruence between the brand’s personality and their *ideal* self (“The personality of (brand name) is consistent with how I ideally would like to be (my ideal self)” and “The personality of (brand name) is a mirror image of the person I ideally would like to be (my ideal self)”), measured on a sliding scale of 0-100 (0 = “disagree”; 100 = “agree”) (Spearman-Brown coefficient = .94).

We included three dependent measures to capture both the direct response to the acquisition (attitude toward the acquisition) and potential consequences for consumer-brand bonds (change in brand attitude and change in self-brand connection). Attitude toward brand acquisition was measured by the item, “How is your reaction to the acquisition of (brand name)?” for three 0-100 semantic differential scales, ranging from bad to good, negative to positive, and unfavorable to favorable ($\alpha = .99$). Change in brand attitude was measured by the item, “To what extent does the acquisition change your impression of (brand name) to be...?” for three 0-100 semantic differential scales ranging from worse to better, less positive to more positive, and less favorable to more favorable ($\alpha = .98$). Finally, change in self-brand connection was measured by the item, “To what extent does the acquisition change the level of connection you feel towards (brand name)?” for three 0-100 semantic differential scales ranging from weaker to stronger, decreased to increased, and reduced to added to ($\alpha = .98$).

Results

The study was completed by 652 participants. After we removed those who did not read the instructions and questions properly (126 participants either failed the instructional

manipulation procedure and/or did not correctly type in a target brand), the final sample size was 526 participants ($Age_{mean} = 36.4$, 54.8% females).

The manipulations of self-brand connection (low vs. high) and self-identity (ideal vs. actual) produced the intended results. Participants in the low degree condition felt significantly less self-brand connection than those in the high degree condition ($M_{sbc\ low} = 52.41$ vs. $M_{sbc\ high} = 77.16$, $F(1, 524) = 215.20$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, participants in the ideal self condition felt higher levels of ideal self-brand connection toward the target brand ($M_{ideal\ sbc} = 67.06$ vs. $M_{actual\ sbc} = 59.23$, $F(1, 524) = 10.82$, $p < .01$), while participants in the actual self condition felt higher levels of actual self-brand connection ($M_{ideal\ sbc} = 54.91$ vs. $M_{actual\ sbc} = 63.44$, $F(1, 524) = 16.25$, $p < .01$).

Please note that even though we conducted a 2 (brand connection: low vs. high) \times 2 (self-identity: ideal vs. actual) \times 2 (brand image change: dampen vs. augment) factorial design, the specific hypotheses are not related to the full design. Hypothesis 1 is related to degree of self-brand connection and response to changes that dampen brand image. Hypothesis 2 is related to the difference between high degree of ideal and high degree of actual self-brand connection consumers' response to changes that augment brand image. Still, to provide an understanding of the data, we report the results of the full design before we report the specific hypotheses tests.

We ran an ANOVA with self-brand connection (low vs. high), self-identity (ideal vs. actual), brand image change (dampen associations vs. augment associations), and their interactions as independent variables. The analyses produced the same pattern of results across the three dependent variables (attitude toward the acquisition, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection). We realize these are conceptually distinct constructs, but for parsimony we report the results of the composite measure – consumer response ($\alpha = .96$). For all the subsequent analyses of Study 1, please see the Web Appendix for the

individual results for each of the three dependent measures.

The results showed significant main effects of self-brand connection ($M_{\text{low}} = 40.99$ vs. $M_{\text{high}} = 32.57$, $F(1, 518) = 21.80$, $p < .01$); self-identity ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 39.38$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 34.38$, $F(1, 518) = 4.93$, $p < .03$), and brand image change ($M_{\text{dampen assoc.}} = 22.46$ vs. $M_{\text{augment assoc.}} = 52.30$, $F(1, 518) = 266.07$, $p < .01$) on consumer response.

There were significant interactions between self-brand connection and brand image change ($F(1, 518) = 4.23$, $p < .04$) and between self-identity and brand image change ($F(1, 518) = 4.75$, $p < .03$) on consumer response. There was no interaction between self-brand connection and self-identity ($F(1, 518) = .03$, $p = .87$). Analyses of the significant two-way interactions are provided in the relevant hypotheses testing below.

The three-way interaction between self-brand connection, self-identity, and brand image change did not have a significant effect on consumer response ($F(1, 518) = .87$, $p = .35$). Keep in mind, however, that the overall three-way interaction is not relevant to test hypotheses 1 and 2. These hypotheses relate to two specific interaction contrasts (H1: Low vs. high degree of self-brand connection in the dampen associations condition; H2: High ideal SBC vs. high actual self-brand connection in the augment associations condition), on which the three-way interaction does not provide information. In essence, the three-way interaction is a composite of all the interaction comparisons, while only two of them are relevant to our hypotheses testing (Keppel 1991: 253). According to Keppel (1991: 446), the lack of a three-way interaction means the results can be safely interpreted by considering the three independent variables two at a time, rather than all three simultaneously. Hence, we follow this analysis strategy to test hypotheses 1 and 2.

Test of Hypothesis 1. Analysis of the interaction between self-brand connection and brand image change ($F(1, 518) = 4.23$, $p < .04$) confirmed the main effect of brand image change (See Fig. 1). Both low and high degree of self-brand connection participants

responded more negatively to changes that dampened (vs. augmented) brand image (low self-brand connection: $M_{\text{dampen assoc.}} = 28.33$ vs. $M_{\text{augment assoc.}} = 54.62$, $p < .01$; high self-brand connection: $M_{\text{dampen assoc.}} = 16.09$ vs. $M_{\text{augment assoc.}} = 49.85$, $p < .01$). More importantly, and in relevance to Hypothesis 1, participants in the high (vs. low) degree of self-brand connection condition responded more negatively to changes that dampened brand associations ($M_{\text{low}} = 28.33$ vs. $M_{\text{high}} = 16.09$, $p < .01$). As a comparison, this difference did not reach significance for changes that augmented brand associations ($M_{\text{low}} = 54.62$ vs. $M_{\text{high}} = 49.85$, $p = .07$). These results provide support for Hypothesis 1. High degree of self-brand connection consumers respond more negatively than low degree of self-brand connection consumers, to changes that dampen brand image.

-----Insert Figure 1 about here-----

Test of Hypothesis 2. Analysis of the interaction between self-identity and brand image change ($F(1, 518) = 4.75$, $p < .03$) showed that participants in the actual self (vs. ideal self) condition responded more negatively to changes that augmented brand image ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 56.09$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 48.04$, $p < .01$). There was no such differences when brand image was dampened ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 22.43$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 22.49$, $p = .98$). These results are in line with Hypothesis 2, yet they do not speak to the specifics of our prediction. Hypothesis 2 is related to one specific interaction contrast; high degree of actual self-brand connection participants respond more negatively than do high degree of ideal self-brand connection participants to changes that augment brand image.

Since Hypothesis 2 is related to how high degree of self-brand connection consumers respond to changes in brand image, the important analyses are those within the high degree of self-brand connection condition. Hence, we conducted ANOVA with brand image change (dampen associations vs. augment associations) and self-identity (ideal vs. actual), and their interaction, within the high degree of self-brand connection condition (i.e., only including

participants in the high degree of self-brand connection condition). The analyses yielded the expected results. Not surprisingly, among participants in the high degree of self-brand connection condition, there was a significant difference in the responses to brand changes that dampened brand image compared to brand changes that augmented brand image ($M_{\text{dampen assoc.}} = 16.09$ vs. $M_{\text{augment assoc.}} = 49.85$, $F(1, 250) = 177.93$, $p < .01$). There was no significant effect of self-identity ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 34.73$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 30.31$, $F(1, 250) = 2.23$, $p = .14$) but the interaction between brand image change and self-identity was significant ($F(1, 250) = 5.11$, $p < .03$). The interaction is illustrated in Figure 2.

-----Insert Figure 2 about here-----

Of importance to Hypothesis 2, contrast analysis showed that those who felt a high degree of *actual* self-brand connection responded more negatively than those who felt a high degree of *ideal* self-brand connection when the acquisition augmented brand associations ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 54.34$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 44.91$, $F(1, 250) = 6.87$, $p < .01$). There was no such difference in the dampen associations condition ($p = .58$). Also, compared to the mid-point of the scale (50), which indicates a neutral response, participants with a high degree of actual self-brand connection tended to respond negatively ($p = .09$).

As a comparison, we conducted the same ANOVA also within the low degree of self-brand connection condition (i.e., only including participants in the low degree of self-brand connection condition). The results showed that also those in the low degree of self-brand connection responded more negatively to brand changes that dampened brand image compared to brand changes that augmented brand image ($M_{\text{dampen assoc.}} = 28.33$ vs. $M_{\text{augment assoc.}} = 54.62$, $F(1, 268) = 97.58$, $p < .01$). The effect of self-identity did not reach significance ($M_{\text{ideal self}} = 43.76$ vs. $M_{\text{actual self}} = 38.14$, $F(1, 268) = 2.73$, $p = .10$), and there was no interaction between brand image change and self-identity in the low brand connection condition ($F(1, 268) = .75$, $p = .39$).

The results support Hypothesis 2. Consumers who feel a high degree of actual self-brand connection tend to respond more negatively than consumers who feel a high degree of ideal self-brand connection, to changes that augment brand associations.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support our theory of consumer responses to changes in brand image. Generally, participants responded negatively to changes that *dampened* brand image, and this response was more pronounced among those feeling a high degree of self-brand connection. This result concurs with the extant branding literature. Consistency in core associations and brand image over time is important to achieve a strong and unambiguous position (Keller, 1999). Commonly, consumers who have invested in, and identify with, a brand prefer stability, and they do not want the brand to change.

However, consumer responses to changes that *augmented* a brand image revealed more intricate results. In the specific situation of a high degree of self-brand connection that was of interest to our theory, the results showed different effects depending on the type of self-brand connection (ideal vs. actual). Compared to those responses in the high degree of ideal self-brand connection condition, participants in the high degree of actual self-brand connection condition responded more negatively to changes that augmented the brand image. This finding was interesting. Intuitively, one would expect that consumers who like and identify with a brand would welcome changes that augment that brand's image. However, the results from Study 1 conversely show that when brand connection is related to the actual self, more is not necessarily better.

Study 1 applied a hypothetical scenario to manipulate brand image change. To increase realism and build further confidence in Hypothesis 2, we conducted Study 2. This venue was a real marketplace study that took advantage of ongoing changes at a university college.

STUDY 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to increase confidence in Hypothesis 2 by investigating the effects of self-brand connection and self-identity (ideal vs. actual) on the responses to changes that augment brand image in a real marketplace setting.

Design and Procedure

In order to ensure realism and elicit authentic consumer responses, we utilized actual changes in brand architecture at a university college. This university college had been operating with three distinct schools with different brand names when the decision was made to integrate the three schools and deploy a single brand strategy.

We conducted Study 2 among students at a business school¹ – one of the three schools being merged into the university college. The data were collected in two rounds. First, before the students learned about the changes in brand architecture, we measured the degree of ideal and actual self-brand connection they felt toward the business school. We used the same measures for ideal and actual self-brand connection as in Study 1, except that we applied 1-7 scales. All participants answered both the ideal and actual self-brand connection measures.

Then, two months later, after the changes were made public, we arranged an information meeting among the same group of students at the business school. At the information meeting, a well-known member of top management (the head of the Marketing Department) informed the students that the changes in brand architecture would lead to an augmentation of the current brand image of the business school and that it would become

¹ The target school is a somewhat untraditional business school. The school has been positioned as a “soft” business school attracting students interested in communication, advertising, and creativity, more than economics and core business. Nevertheless, the school is still a business school.

even more serious, professional, and business oriented². The specific associations were based on the results of a pretest identifying the core associations of the business school³. The manuscript presented at the information meeting read as follows:

As you know, the board of Trustees has decided to organize the business school, the school of arts, and the school of health into one university college deployed with one master brand. Currently, management is crafting the positioning for this college. That is, we are deciding on the identity and values of the college. We have decided that the college will continue to be rooted in its existing 'business school' identity and values, as this is the largest and most dominant entity of the three schools. Moreover, our objective is to reinforce and augment this position in order to signal even higher levels of seriousness, professionalism, and business orientation than we already do today. The reason I am here today is that top management is inviting feedback and advice from you, our students, before finalizing the new strategy. To ensure that all opinions are voiced and that we collect feedback from all of you, please respond to the following short survey.

We then collected students' individual reactions to the change in brand image (attitude toward the change, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection). We used the same measures of the dependent variables as we did in Study 1, except that we adapted the wording of the questions to the merger of the schools and used 1-7 scales. After the participants had completed the survey, they were debriefed.

Results

In part one, the pre-merger data collection, a total of 358 students participated. In part two, after the announcement of the changes, 210 students participated. Several students participated in only one of the rounds of data collection. Based on demographic and other background information (gender, age, zip code, and the last four digits of the respondents' mobile phone numbers), we successfully paired 131 full responses from part one and part two of these data collections.

² The authors thank Lars Erling Olsen for helping us with the information meeting and executing the manipulation.

³ Undergraduate students (N = 50) evaluated the business school using the 42-brand personality traits identified by Aaker (1997) on a 1-5 scale (1 = not at all descriptive; 5 = extremely descriptive). The associations that were most strongly associated with the business school were "serious" (M = 4.34), "business oriented" (M = 4.32), and "professional" (M = 4.26).

As our independent variables were measured, we conducted multiple regression analyses to test Hypothesis 2. The independent variables were the degree of ideal self-brand connection and the degree of actual self-brand connection, both measured before students learned about the changes. We found the same results across the three dependent measures (attitude toward the merger, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection). For parsimony of reporting, we provide here the results for a composite index of the three dependent variables – consumer response ($\alpha = .81$). Detailed results of the three individual dependent measures are reported and noted in the Web Appendix.

Regression analysis revealed a positive effect of ideal self-brand connection ($b = .36$, $t(128) = 3.33$, $p < .01$) and a negative effect of actual self-brand connection ($b = -.24$, $t(128) = -2.49$, $p < .02$) on consumer response to the announced brand image change. The correlation between ideal and actual self-brand connection was only moderate ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), and multicollinearity statistics were acceptable (tolerance = 0.81, VIF = 1.25). Hence, ideal and actual self-brand connection are two separate constructs with considerable unique variation. The results of the regression analysis support Hypothesis 2.

Although not critical to test our theory, we also conducted a post-hoc test of the interaction between the actual and ideal self-brand connection on consumer response (Figure 3). The results indicated an interaction effect at the 10% significance level ($b = .14$, $t(127) = 1.71$, $p = .09$). In accordance with our theory, analysis of the interaction revealed a negative effect of degree of actual self-brand connection on consumer response when ideal self-brand connection was low (Johnson-Neyman point = 4.40 or lower). Hence, when ideal self-brand connection is low, higher degrees of actual self-brand connection will lead to more negative responses. This result provides additional support to Hypothesis 2.

-----Insert Figure 3 about here-----

Discussion

Study 2 provides additional support for Hypothesis 2 in a real marketplace setting. These results support our theory that the type of self-brand connection influences consumers' response to managerial actions that augment existing brand associations. In particular, consumers who are feeling a high degree of ideal self-brand connection responded positively to changes that augmented the existing brand image, as those changes increased the brand's ability to signal an ideal identity. However, consumers feeling a high degree of actual self-brand connection responded negatively.

We argue that these findings are due to two different underlying processes, contingent on whether the motivation for the brand connection is based on self-enhancement or self-verification motives. If the brand connection is based on an ideal self-brand connection (i.e., a self-enhancement motive), changes that augment the existing associations increase the brand's ability to signal an ideal identity, and thus the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement increases. However, we expect the process to be different for those who have a self-brand connection based on actual self-brand congruity (i.e., self-verification motives). In this case, changes that augment the existing associations reduce the perceived similarity between the actual self and the brand, and thus the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-verification will decrease. Study 3 was designed to test these proposed processes precisely.

An alternative speculation is that these results could be driven by psychological reactance. This theory suggests that consumers with a high degree of actual self-brand connection respond more negatively not because the brand's efficacy as an identity marker actually decreases, but because of their lack of control over the changes. If this rationale were indeed the causal mechanism, then chronic psychological reactance would moderate the

effects such that higher chronic psychological reactance would lead to even more negative reactions to any changes in the brand image.

Yet another possible alternative explanation for the results could be that they are not due to the brand becoming a less efficient instrument in the consumers' identity projects but rather to the fact that changes in brand image lead to inferences about other changes in quality, price, and service level. In this case, consumers' feeling a high degree of actual self-brand connection may respond more negatively than others to such marketing management changes.

To build confidence in the results and provide further support for the identity explanation, Study 3 includes measures of expectations of marketing management changes (i.e., changes in quality, price, and service levels) and measurement of chronic psychological reactance.

STUDY 3

The purpose of Study 3 was to investigate the processes that lead to different consumer responses (self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy) while controlling for alternative explanations (expectations of marketing management changes and psychological reactance).

Design and Procedure

US-based members of the MTurk online panel participated in the survey for a nominal fee. The participants were randomly assigned to a single-factor (ideal vs. actual self-brand connection) between-subjects design with consumer response (attitude toward the change in brand image, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection) as the dependent variable.

All participants first read a short explanation of the two different types of brand connections (ideal self vs. actual self). They were then asked to provide two or three examples of brands to which they felt an ideal self-brand connection, and two or three examples of brands to which they felt an actual self-brand connection. The participants were then randomly assigned to either an ideal self-brand connection group or to an actual self-brand connection group and were asked to provide the name of the one brand with which they felt the strongest self-brand congruence (ideal or actual, according to the prescribed condition). The brand names given by the participants were then automatically merged into the rest of the questionnaire and used as target brands idiosyncratic to each individual participant. To further strengthen the manipulation, the participants were asked to briefly describe what it was about the brand that made it fit “your ideals and aspirations (ideal self)” or “who you are today (actual self),” according to the prescribed condition.

Participants responded to scales that measured the degree of ideal and actual self-brand connection (both scales for both conditions counterbalanced) and selected three associations they believed best described “their” brand from the list of 42 brand personality traits developed by Aaker (1997). These three selected associations were automatically merged into the subsequent brand image change scenario. The participants also completed scales measuring initial brand attitude and general self-brand connection as well as some filler tasks, including a measurement of chronic psychological reactance. We included two attention filters to ensure that participants read all the questions and instructions properly. One filter was the instructional manipulation procedure developed by Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko (2009), and the other was a “blue dot” inspired question, i.e., “On this particular question, do not give any answer; simply continue with the next question.”

Next, participants read a scenario about a repositioning that augmented the existing associations of “their” brand. The scenario was the same for all participants, except for the

brand names and associations, which were automatically linked to the participants' answers from prior survey questions. The scenario was the following:

Imagine a news report stating that the management of (brand name) has decided to reposition and change the (brand name) brand.

The management says it will change the (brand name) brand to portray an image even more (association 1, association 2, and association 3) than it already is. "Our existing customers will experience a considerable difference in the (brand name) brand, ranging from changes in how it is portrayed in advertising and other communications to the visual profile and design, and other marketing activities. The goal is to create a new, reinforced brand image," says management.

After reading the scenario, participants answered scales that directly measured their attitude toward the brand image change, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection, as well as their expectations for the marketing management changes (i.e., changes in quality, price, and service levels). Furthermore, we included two scales that were independent of the condition to investigate the underlying processes, namely, self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy. One scale measured the degree to which the changes in brand image changed the self-enhancement efficacy of the brand – that is, how the augmentation of existing brand associations would influence the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement. The other scale measured the degree to which the changes in brand image changed the brand's self-verification efficacy – that is, how the augmentation of existing brand associations would influence the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-verification. Finally, we collected demographic information and debriefed the participants.

Measures

Chronic psychological reactance was measured using Hong and Faedda's (1996) 14-item scale (e.g., "I resist the attempts of others to influence me," "I become angry when my freedom of choice is restricted"; $\alpha = .89$, on 0-100 sliding scales).

Participants' expectations of the marketing management changes were measured using three items ("To what extent do you think the changes will affect the following at (brand

name): quality, prices, and service levels?” with 0-100 sliding bars anchored by “not at all” and “completely,” $\alpha = .71$).

The degree to which the changes in brand image changed the brand’s efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement (process measure: self-enhancement efficacy) was measured by two items (“The changes will make (brand name) become more the way I like it” and “The changes will make (brand name) fit my ideal even more than it did before,” $\alpha = .94$). The degree to which the changes in brand image changed the brand’s efficacy as an instrument for self-verification (process measure: self-verification efficacy) was measured using two items (“If (brand name) changes, it will no longer fit me as well as it did before” and “Any changes will make (brand name) become less like me,” $\alpha = .89$). We recoded the scale to facilitate the interpretation of these results.

The other variables were measured similarly as in the previous studies, using 0-100 sliding scales. For parsimony, we reported a composite measure (response to brand image change) of the three individual dependent variables’ attitude toward brand image change, change in brand attitude, and change in self-brand connection.

Results

Two hundred-and-fifty participants completed the survey. After we removed those participants who did not read the instructions and questions properly (43 participants, or 17%, failed the instructional manipulation procedure), the final sample size was 207 ($M_{age} = 33.3$; 59% females).

The manipulation check showed that participants in the ideal self-brand connection condition felt higher levels of ideal self-brand connection than did those in the actual self-brand connection condition ($M_{ideal\ sbc} = 78.40$ vs. $M_{actual\ sbc} = 63.94$, $F(1, 205) = 23.68$, $p < .01$) and that participants in the actual self-brand connection condition felt significantly higher

levels of actual self-brand connection than did those in the ideal self-brand connection condition ($M_{\text{ideal sbc}} = 46.79$ vs. $M_{\text{actual sbc}} = 77.20$, $F(1, 205) = 113.26$, $p < .01$).

ANOVA with an initial general self-brand connection as the dependent variable showed significant differences between the two experimental conditions. Participants in the actual self-brand connection condition felt a significantly higher general self-brand connection than did those in the ideal self-brand connection condition ($M_{\text{ideal sbc}} = 67.80$ vs. $M_{\text{actual sbc}} = 73.80$, $F(1, 205) = 5.10$, $p < .03$). Since the purpose of this study was to investigate how actual versus ideal self-brand connection influences responses to augmentation of brand image, we included the general self-brand connection as a covariate in the subsequent analysis.

ANCOVA showed significant differences between the experimental conditions in the composite measure consumer response ($M_{\text{ideal sbc}} = 65.60$ vs. $M_{\text{actual sbc}} = 57.17$, $F(2, 204) = 9.44$, $p < .01$). Detailed results of the three individual dependent measures are reported in the Web Appendix. As expected, those who felt a congruity between their ideal self and the brand responded more positively to the augmentation of brand image than did those who felt congruity between their actual self and the brand. The covariate (self-brand connection) had a marginal positive effect ($F(2, 204) = 3.66$, $p = .057$). The results strengthen confidence in Hypothesis 2 even further.

The difference between conditions was also significant when chronic reactance ($p = .13$) and expectations of marketing management changes ($p < .01$) were included as covariates ($F(4, 202) = 5.34$, $p < .03$). We also conducted an analysis using chronic reactance and expectations of marketing management changes as factors to test whether they interacted with the type of self-brand connection manipulation. These results showed that neither chronic reactance ($p = .49$) nor expectations of marketing management changes ($p = .37$) interacted

with the experimental conditions. Hence, those results do not lend support to these two alternative explanations.

To test the proposed processes, we conducted bootstrapping mediation analyses using Hayes's (2013) indirect script (Model 4) for bootstrapping with 5,000 re-samples. In our predictions, we expected consumers with an ideal self-brand connection to respond positively to changes that augmented existing brand associations, because such changes would increase the brand's self-enhancement efficacy. Furthermore, we predicted that consumers with an actual self-brand connection would respond negatively to such changes because they would decrease the brand's self-verification efficacy. Hence, we included type of brand connection as the independent variable (ideal self = 0 and actual self = 1), the measures of self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy as two different mediators, and consumer responses as the dependent variable. General self-brand connection was included as a covariate. The subsequent results also showed the same pattern without the covariate.

Bootstrapping analysis showed that both self-enhancement efficacy ($b = -7.68$, CI 95%: - 11.81 to - 4.26) and self-verification efficacy ($b = -3.01$, CI 95%: - 5.69 to - 1.05) negatively mediated the effect of type of brand connection (ideal self vs. actual self) on the response to brand image change. The total effect was $b = -9.33$ (CI 95%: - 15.32 to - 3.34). The direct effect of the type of self-brand connection was not significant ($b = 1.35$, CI 95%: - 2.29 to 5.00) when controlling for the indirect effects, indicating full mediation. These results suggest that participants in the actual self-brand connection condition (vs. ideal self-brand connection condition) perceived that the augmentation of brand image reduced both the brand's self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy, and thus, they responded more negatively to the changes.

Our specific interest lay in investigating the variance in response to the augmentation of brand image between both different degrees of ideal self-brand connection and different

degrees of actual self-brand connection, as well as the processes (self-enhancement efficacy and self-verification efficacy) underlying those responses. Therefore, we conducted two additional bootstrapping analyses, one with the degree of ideal self-brand connection (measured) as the independent variable and one with the degree of actual self-brand connection (measured) as the independent variable. In both cases, the analysis included self-enhancement efficacy and brand self-verification efficacy as two separate mediators, and consumer response as the dependent variable.

A separate analysis of the degree of ideal self-brand connection (Figure 4) showed a positive effect on self-enhancement efficacy (a_1 path: $b = .25$, $t(205) = 3.12$, $p < .01$), while the effect on self-verification efficacy was insignificant (a_2 path: $b = -.09$, $t(205) = -1.12$, $p = .26$). The effects of self-enhancement efficacy (b_1 path: $b = .53$, $t(205) = 14.11$, $p < .01$) and self-verification efficacy (b_2 path: $b = .30$, $t(205) = 7.45$, $p < .01$) on consumer response were both positive. The bootstrapping analysis showed that the effect of ideal self-brand connection was mediated by self-enhancement efficacy (a_1b_1 path: $b = .13$, CI 95%: .05 to .23), while the mediation of self-verification efficacy was not significant (a_2b_2 path: $b = -.03$, CI 95%: -.07 to .02). The direct effect of ideal self-brand connection on consumer response was not significant when the mediators were included in the model (c' path: $b = -.02$, $t(205) = -.56$, $p = .58$), thus indicating full mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen 2010). These results indicate that when consumers learn about changes that augment an existing brand image, higher degrees of ideal self-brand connection will be associated with an increase in that brand's self-enhancement efficacy, and thus a positive response to brand image change. These results are in support of Hypothesis 3A.

-----Insert Figure 4 about here-----

As expected, the bootstrapping analysis with degree of actual self-brand connection (Figure 5) showed a negative effect on self-verification efficacy (a_2 path: $b = -.24$, $t(205) = -$

3.61, $p < .01$), while the effect on self-enhancement efficacy was not significant (a_1 path: $b = -.04$, $t(205) = -.52$, $p = .60$). The effects of self-verification efficacy (b_2 path: $b = .32$, $t(205) = 7.85$, $p < .01$) and self-enhancement efficacy (b_1 path: $b = .52$, $t(205) = 14.41$, $p < .01$) on consumer response were both positive. Moreover, and critical to our predictions, the effect of actual self-brand connection on consumer response was negatively mediated through self-verification efficacy (a_2b_2 path: $b = -.07$, CI 95%: $-.13$ to $-.03$), while the mediation of self-enhancement efficacy was not significant (a_1b_1 path: $b = -.02$, CI 95%: $-.10$ to $.06$). The direct effect of actual self-brand congruence on consumer response was not significant when the mediators were included in the model (c' path: $b = .05$, $t(205) = 1.48$, $p = .14$), indicating full mediation. These results are in support of Hypothesis 3B.

-----Insert Figure 5 about here-----

These results indicate that the higher the participants' degree of actual self-brand connection, the more the participants perceived the brand's self-verification efficacy to be decreasing and thus, the more negative their response would be to changes that augment existing brand associations. The results of the bootstrapping analyses showed the same pattern of results when psychological reactance and expectations of marketing management changes were included as covariates.

Discussion

Study 3 extends the findings of previous studies in several ways. Study 3 demonstrated that *ideal* self-brand connection increases positive reactions to changes that augment the existing brand image, because these changes increase the brand's ability to signal an ideal identity (i.e., the brand's efficacy as an instrument for self-enhancement increases). However, *actual* self-brand connection leads to more negative reactions because change through the augmentation of existing brand associations reduces the brand's self-verification efficacy. Study 3 also demonstrated that neither the expectations of marketing management

changes nor chronic psychological reactance had any effect on consumer response to changes that augment brand image, either directly or as moderators, thus lending little support to these alternative accounts.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers value brands for more than just their intrinsic attributes. Brands also serve as vessels of symbolic meaning that help consumers achieve goals motivated by the self. Consumers use brands conspicuously to express, validate, and enhance their identity (Reed II, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012; Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2009). During this process, consumers categorize the brand as part of the self, such that the brand associations are linked to mental representations of the self and serve to create a sense of oneness with that brand (i.e., self-brand connection). While the vast majority of studies on self-brand connection have focused on its development, characteristics, and benefits for companies (Chaplin & John, 2005; Cheng et al. 2012; Lam et al., 2010; Park et al., 2010; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007) , our research contributes to the literature by investigating a particular disadvantage of self-brand connection. Specifically, the current research suggests that with increasing degrees of self-brand connection, consumers may object to change, which might then constrain companies' ability to pursue strategic opportunities.

Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal (2011) argued that building self-expressive brands expands competition only from those brands with similar attributes to all brands (and behaviors) that can signal consumer identity. They proposed that consumers' need for self-expression is finite and can be satiated when consumers are exposed to self-expressive brands and self-expressive behaviors. Another peril of building self-expressive brands to compete for

consumer identity is the captive nature of a strong brand image. In general, as the degree of self-brand connection increases, consumers become more motivated to maintain these existing brand perceptions, thus making it difficult for managers to manage their brand associations and adapt to new market trends and possibilities.

While Avery (2012) demonstrated how consumers engage in stereotyping to prevent changes in brand meaning, the current research investigated how consumers cope with changes in an important identity marker. We demonstrated that if managers make strategic marketing decisions that do not correspond with how the brand is deployed in consumers' identity projects, then the most highly involved (and often the most valuable and important) customers respond negatively and reduce their connection to the brand to maintain their own self-identity. Thus, this research contributes to the literature by demonstrating that stronger brand connections are indeed positively associated with conservative and negative attitudes toward brand development.

The current research also increases the insight into the consequences of brand congruence to different parts of self-concept. Self-brand congruence is defined as the perceived fit between the consumer's self and a brand's image (Sirgy, 1982). This congruence can differ for different parts of the consumer's self, such that a consumer might perceive a high degree of congruence between the brand and the actual self while still perceiving the congruence between the ideal self and the brand to be low, or vice versa (Malär et al., 2011).

We argue that brand connections based on the perceived match between the ideal self and the brand are sensitive to self-enhancement motives. In contrast, brand connections based on the perceived fit between the actual self and the brand are sensitive to self-verification motives. Hence, consumers who feel an ideal self-brand connection are likely to respond positively to changes that augment the existing brand image. When such consumers want to be like a brand, augmentations to that brand's positioning make this goal even more salient.

Such changes increase the brand's ability to signal a desired identity, as the brand even more strongly reflects the associations that are already linked to the consumer's ideal self.

However, for consumers who feel an actual self-brand connection, changes in brand image reduce the perceived match between the brand's image and the self. For them, changes in the present brand image decrease the brand's ability to construct and signal the actual self. That is, when consumers are already like a brand, any augmentations move the brand away from the state in which the consumer is already where he or she wants to be, even suggesting there is more work to do to get there. Hence, these consumers respond less positively to changes in brand image, even when the changes actually augment existing brand associations such that the brand becomes "more of what it already is."

Marketing Implications

Are our results relevant only for owners of "symbolic," "prestige," or "badge" brands? Keeping in mind that the participants themselves in this research selected brands with which they felt a self-brand connection in two of our three studies, i.e., 187 different brands in Study 1 and 171 different brands in Study 3, our answer to this question would be "no" (a list of all the brands can be found in the Web Appendix). The brands the participants selected ranged from Tiffany's to Walmart, from Prada to Zara, from Gevalia coffee to Starbucks. Several participants also mentioned relatively smaller and less dominant brands such as Amy's Kitchen, BIC, Trader Joe's, Wired, Burton, Fitbit, New balance, Nickelodeon, Sketchers, Under Armour, Forever 21, to mention just a few categories and illustrate the wide range of brand prestige represented in the research.

Across these diverse brands and categories, the current research shows that customers who have incorporated a brand into their self-concept will respond negatively to brand image changes that do not correspond with their identity projects. Even if these consumers constitute a relatively small part of that brand's customer portfolio, they may have a strong influence on

other customers (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), suggesting that the former group does warrant special attention from managers.

To avoid the risk of negative consumer responses, managers could be misled to assume that brands should focus on consistency and avoid any changes in brand image. However, while this decision might be a low-risk, short-term strategy, it can also result in stagnation and reduce competitiveness in the end. It is not necessarily wise to allow a few fans to dictate overall brand strategy. Companies can experience “relationship myopia,” such that their focus on existing customers reduces their strategic scope and condenses both development and growth. Thus, managers face the difficult task of balancing the trade-off between a dynamic brand strategy that enables them to adapt and utilize growth opportunities and a strategy that builds a strong, consistent position among its existing core consumers.

This balancing act requires managers to be able to answer three interrelated questions before adjusting their brands’ positions. First, they need to know precisely *which* associations serve as the foundation of their consumer-brand relationship. We have shown that even alterations to three associations can cause negative responses, suggesting that inaccurate formulations such as “image,” “reputation,” and “personality” lack the diagnosticity to guide managerial decisions fully in this domain.

Second, managers need to know the degrees of freedom they have in terms of their magnitude to adjust these central associations – e.g., how much more “rugged” could the brand become – is there a tipping point? Brand managers can implement many strategic and tactical decisions, such as introducing new products and new advertising campaigns, making changes in distribution, forming alliances, and more, while keeping the perceived brand image unchanged, as long as these actions can be perceived as still within the scope of the current brand position (Keller, 1999). Thus, managers can benefit from understanding the range and flexibility of their brands’ positions, as well as the degree to which different

strategic marketing decisions and tactical actions may influence their consumers' overall brand perceptions. For brands in need of adjustment, managers could consider step-by-step adjustments while continuously monitoring responses to those adjustments by their high self-brand connection customers.

Third, managers need to understand their consumers' motives for the self-brand connection; is the brand used as an identity marker for the actual self or the ideal self? A critical insight from the current research is that the motivation behind a brand connection can influence a consumer's response to changes in brand image. If this connection is based on motives intended to verify the self and be seen as coherent and consistent (self-verification motive), all changes in brand image are likely to be perceived negatively. However, if self-enhancement motivates that connection, then changes that augment the existing brand image are likely to be perceived positively.

Having answers to these three questions allows managers to address brand positioning in the next step. Previous research has demonstrated that brands congruent with consumers' actual selves (i.e., authentic branding) generally lead to stronger brand connections than those brands congruent with consumers' ideal selves do (i.e., aspirational branding), as the actual self is psychologically closer to the individual than the ideal self is (Malär et al., 2011). However, our results suggest there are two ways in which authentic branding narrows the strategic scope and potentially limits competitiveness. First, authentic branding requires a narrower positioning than aspirational branding. Most people are likely to see their actual self as more personal and unique than their ideal self. People tend to think they have an actual self, a core that is unique to them, while they might also realize their ideals and aspirations are more similar to those of others. Hence, it is difficult for large, mass-market brands to represent the actual self for "everybody." For dominant brands such as Apple, it is almost necessary to be positioned based on common aspirational values. Secondly, authentic

branding requires more static and less flexible positioning than aspirational branding does. Our results suggest that a brand positioned on values related to authenticity, such as “genuine” and “real,” benefit from being managed with the goal of image consistency, whereas a brand positioned on aspirational values is more flexible and can benefit from implementing changes that augment that existing image.

Looking at the result from another angle, the insights from the current research could also be applied to see how stretching a brand can gain new customers and facilitate growth. In some cases, managers might strategize market movement in order to grow in new markets. Old Spice is one example of a brand that was getting old and unable to maintain its identity with a new generation of consumers. In response, Old Spice repositioned the brand such that it applied less to its existing grey market segment and gained more appeal among young people (Rucker & Dubois 2017).

Further Research

All studies reported in the current paper employed changes in brand image caused by either a brand acquisition, changes in brand architecture, or repositioning. The basic mechanisms and consequences identified in these studies are likely to apply to consumer responses to all actions that alter brand image (e.g., strategic alliance, brand extension, and product deletion). However, the contexts and specific scenarios used in the current research have specific characteristics that may not apply to different contexts or types of changes in brand image. Further research should investigate these different scenarios and changes that are based on different types of brand actions (e.g., brand alliances and brand extensions) to identify possible boundary effects. Additionally, rather than investigating only the effects of consumers’ evaluations of the focal brand, future research could study the effect of the changes on the evaluation of competitors and other alternatives, as well as the brand’s overall role, intentions, and control of its own changes in brand image.

Further research should also investigate the boundaries of our findings. In particular, one could speculate that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between brand image change and consumer acceptance in terms of brand connections based on both self-verification and self-enhancement motives. It might be that consumers with a high degree of actual self-brand connection will respond negatively to changes more quickly or easily than those consumers with a high degree of ideal self-brand connection, who would only be harmed if the brand image were to move beyond where that consumer ideally seeks to be.

The findings in the current research suggest that the ideal self is more resilient to change than the actual self. Mining into the characteristic of different aspects of the self (actual self, ideal self, and perhaps other facets of the self) and their malleability is an intriguing avenue for future research. Could it be that the ideal self generally is broader and more malleable than the actual self? In a way, the ideal self is already a stretch, so maybe stretching it more does not pull it uncomfortably out of shape. With respect to their actual selves, are consumers accurate? Is there some emotional danger (guilt) in straying too far from the actual self-image?

The initial image of a focal brand and its salient image associations could also influence the precise response to changes in that brand image. Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) studied brand image (sincere vs. exciting) and the response to brand transgressions. They found that sincere brands were most likely to suffer from weak transgressions, whereas exciting brands actually showed signs of reinvigoration. The current research investigated consumer responses to the dampening and augmentation of brand image across several brands with different associations and personalities. In most of our studies, participants selected the target brand, which ensured a wide range of differently positioned brands. Still, it could be that some image associations have an optimum level (i.e., more is not necessarily better), while others will increase orthogonally (i.e., more is always better). Further research should

investigate the different types of brand image associations (optimum level vs. orthogonally increasing) and their interactions with motivations for brand connections (self-enhancement and self-verification) in response to changes in brand image. Additionally, looking into different degrees of changes and comparing the dampening versus augmentation of brand associations would be a valuable contribution to our understanding of consumer response to changes in brand image.

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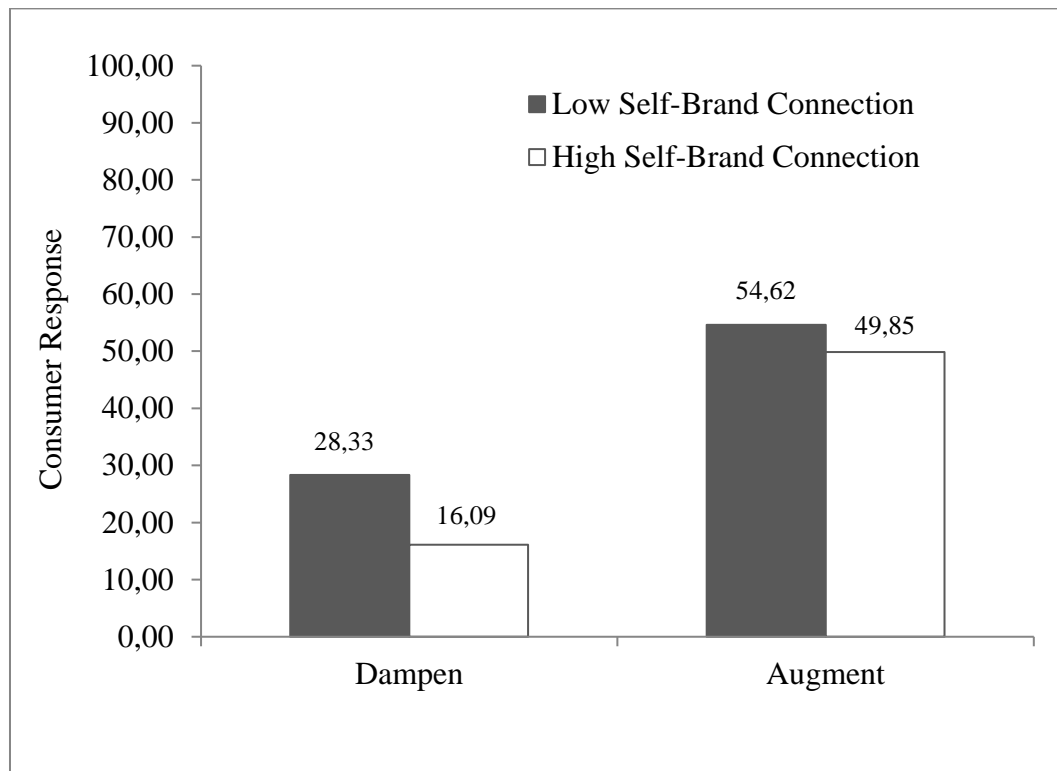
Figure 1: Self-Brand Connection × Brand Image Change (Study 1)

Figure 2: High Degree of Self-Brand Connection: Self-Identity × Brand Image Change (Study 1)

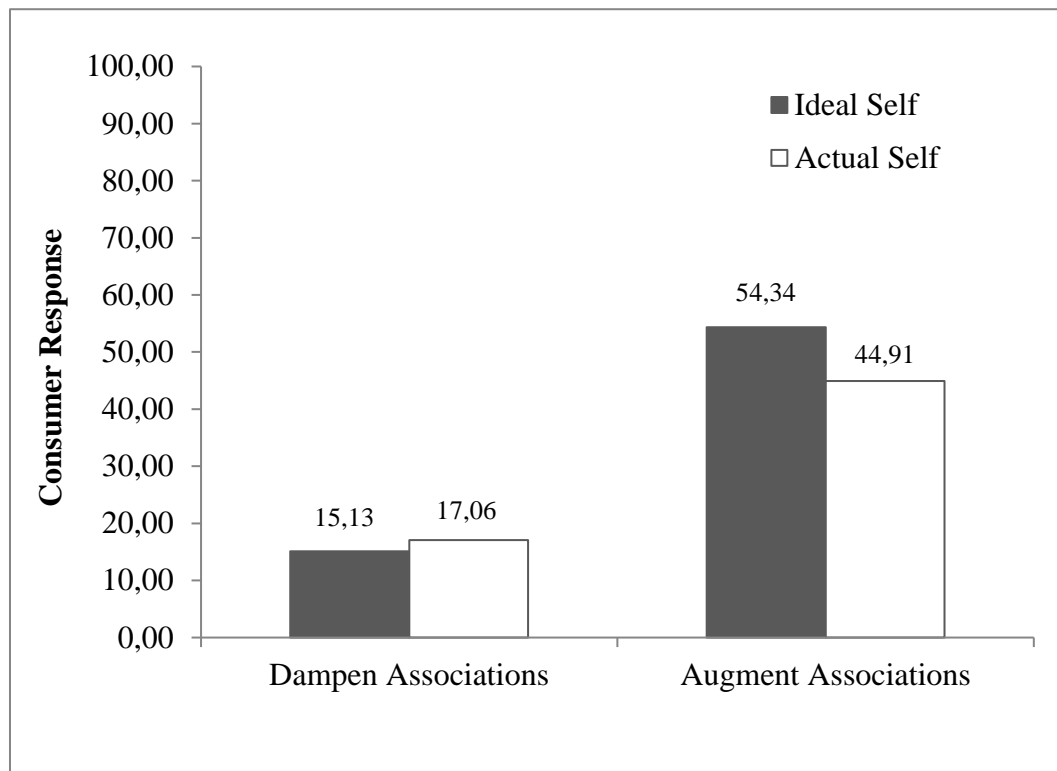


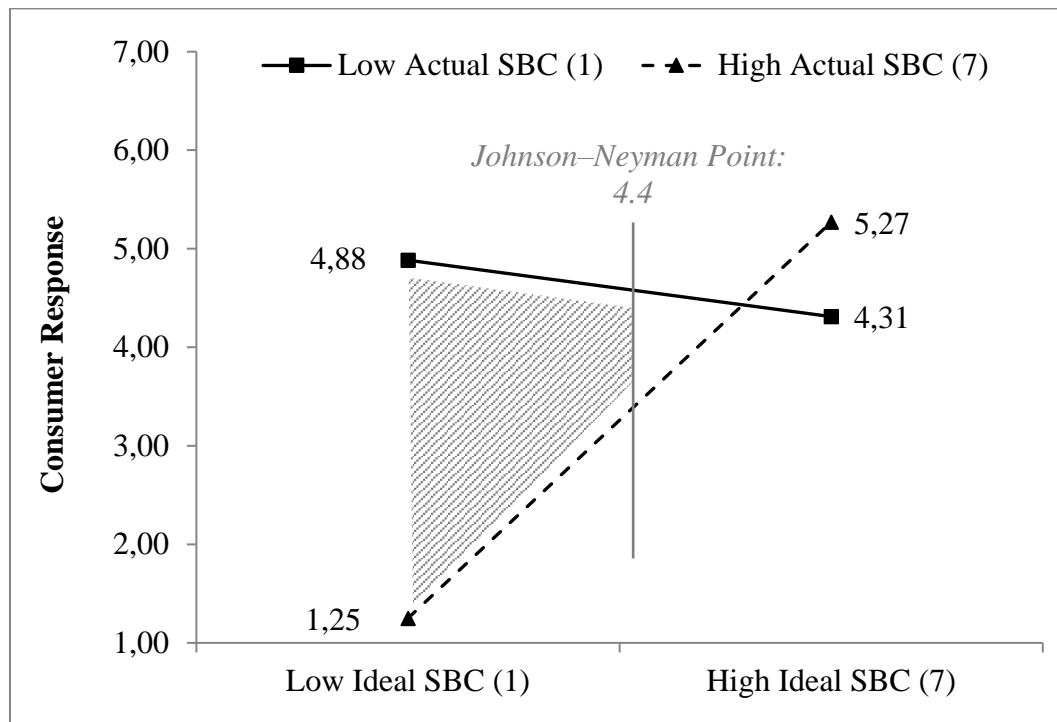
Figure 3: Ideal Self-Brand Connection × Actual Self-Brand Connection (Study 2)

Figure 4: Ideal Self-Brand Connection - Mediation analysis (Study 3)

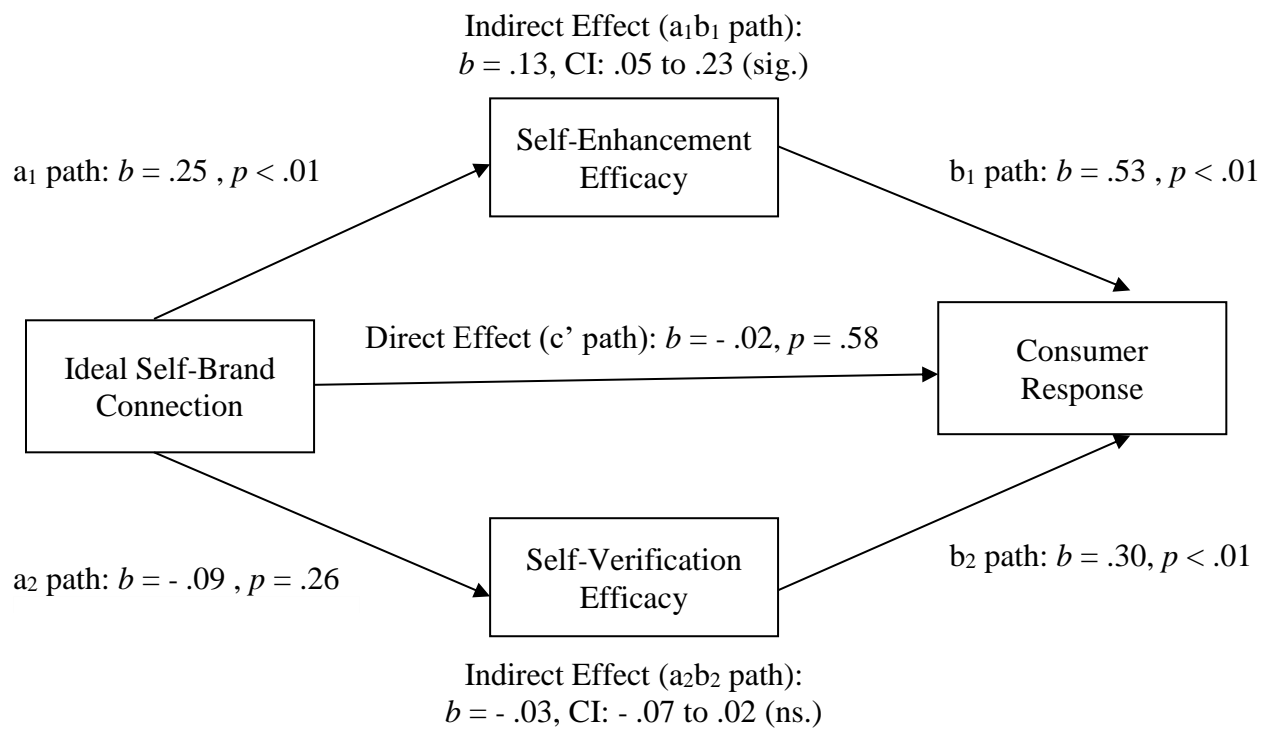


Figure 5: Actual Self-Brand Connection - Mediation analysis (Study 3)

