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ANTECEDENTS AND THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF CUSTOMER-RESTAURANT BRAND IDENTIFICATION

Abstract

This study develops a framework of customer-restaurant brand identification and tests a full and partial mediation model of brand identification to understand the way in which customers develop brand identification in the restaurant sector. The models are tested via customer data using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The findings suggest that brand identification by customers is influenced by four antecedents: *brand prestige*, *symbol attractiveness*, *self-congruence* and *brand experience*. The study confirms that brand identification fully mediates the effect of *self-congruence* on brand loyalty. The effects of *brand prestige*, *symbol attractiveness*, and *brand experience* on brand loyalty are partially mediated by brand identification. This study contributes to the branding strategies of global restaurants to secure a competitive edge.

Key words: Brand identification, self-congruence, brand prestige, brand experience, restaurant, tourist.

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Introduction

The power of brand has been well recognized in hospitality industry, particularly in the global brand restaurant industry which is highly competitive sector. In recent years, eating out is a significant leisure activity and branded global restaurants are contributing to customers' spending. Global restaurant brands are recognized through much of the world with their unique identities among tourists as well as local residents. They employ standardized products, services, logos, characteristics and so on and emphasize strong brand images. Thus, symbolic meanings of the global restaurant brands are critical for building relationship with customers ensuring long-term business success.

One of the aims of branding strategy is to improve brand loyalty. Thus, many researchers have studied antecedents of brand loyalty such as brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), service quality (So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2013), brand reputation (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). However, these studies hardly focus on brand loyalty from a social identity perspective which can provide a deeper understanding of customer-brand relationship. More recently, researchers have mentioned the importance of social identity in hospitality sector (de Leaniz and Rodríguez, 2015) because social identity approach to customer-brand relationships helps customers develop a stronger relationship with the restaurant brand through customer brand identification (CBI). Customer brand identification (CBI) originating from a social identity theory is a powerful predictor of various customer behaviors such as customer loyalty, word

of mouth by engendering positive customer evaluation and satisfaction (Kuenzel & Halliday 2008). Brands satisfy customers' symbolic needs in which to communicate their personal and/or social identity (Grots & Widner Johnson, 2013). Nowadays, customers deciding on which restaurant to dine in will base their choice on both the type of food and the identity that a restaurant brand has. This means that restaurants are becoming symbolic locations for users to express their identity (Huang, Mitchell, & Rosenaum-Elliott, 2012). However, despite the increasing importance of brand identification in the restaurant sector, the research brand identification in the restaurant sector remains relatively unexplored.

The marketing literature about a social identity suggests the importance of antecedents of CBI in developing meaningful relationships with brands. Previous studies have investigated the antecedents of brand identification from various perspectives. For example, from a brand identity perspective, brand similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012) and from a company activity perspective, service quality and corporate social responsibility (He & Li, 2011; Martínez & Bosque, 2013; Huang, Cheng & Chen, 2017) are suggested. These factors are related to brand management activities. On the other hand, from a customer-brand interaction perspective, brand experience (Rahman, 2014), corporate communication (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), emotional attachment to the brand (Park et al., 2010), and social benefits (So, King, Hudson & Meng, 2017) are suggested. These factors are related to human interaction. Although these studies have suggested antecedents of brand identification, these antecedents may not be entirely reasonable for the service brand such as a restaurant. Study of the CBI in restaurant sector needs to consider emotional as well as cognitive factors in building customer-brand relationship because restaurants are industry with high levels of consumer commitment and emotional involvement. Our conceptual framework suggests four antecedents of CBI that include two external variables (factors)

(brand prestige and symbol attractiveness) and two internal variables (factors) (self-congruence and brand experience).

This research also examines the mediating role of the CBI between antecedents of CBI and brand loyalty in order to confirm the importance of CBI to brand loyalty development. Previous studies in hospitality sector have found the significant impact of CBI on brand loyalty (Huang et al., 2017; Rather & Sharma, 2016). In particular, several researchers confirm the mediating effect of CBI. The research of He & Li (2011) confirms the mediating role of CBI on the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and service quality on service brand loyalty. Moreover, the research of Martínez & Bosque (2013) shows that CSR has no direct effect on brand loyalty in hotel sector, but the effect of CSR on brand loyalty is mediated by C-C identification. However, these studies did not examine the mediating role of CBI on brand loyalty from the emotional and symbolic perspectives.

The study contributes to the hospitality literature by suggesting a conceptual model of CBI for the social symbolic values in the global brand restaurant sector. For this, firstly, the present research tests the antecedents of CBI from the cognitive and emotional perspectives. Secondly, the study examines whether brand identification fully or partially mediates the relationships between the four antecedents of CBI and brand loyalty.

Literature review and research hypotheses

Customer brand identification

Marketing researchers investigate brand identification through the lens of social identity (e.g. Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). The social identity theory is a social psychological analysis regarding how individuals understand themselves and others in

the social context (Korte, 2007). Thus, social identification is that an individual identifies him/herself as a member of a society (Kim, Han & Park, 2001). Individuals tend to categorize themselves as members of various social classifications such as gender, ethnicity, or organizations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus, according to the self-categorization theory, attitudes and behaviors of individual are based upon the categories to which the individual belongs (Solnet, 2006). CBI is a special type of social identification. Brands can be meaningful social categories that customers identify with (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Thus, consumers define their social identity by purchasing or using particular brands.

Brand identification is defined as “consumers share the same self-definitional attributes with a brand” (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, and Schillewaert, 2010:129). This definition mentions that brands possess a distinct identity and the identity of a brand enables customers to establish relationships with the brand. Thus, customers tend to identify with brands which can build and keep their social identity (Holt, 2005). Scholars argue that the strong relationship between customers and brands is influenced by customer identification with particular brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus, high identification with a brand leads to positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty by increasing the satisfaction of the services and products the brand offers. This study refers brand identification to individual thoughts and feelings related to brands in a social context.

Antecedents of CBI

Identification process with a brand helps satisfy customers’ key self-defining needs. Based on these needs, the present research suggests that identifications with brands are related to self-congruence, distinctiveness, and prestigious which focus on the cognitive aspects. In addition,

this research also considers affective aspects that customers feel when interacting with the brand. Therefore, this research includes brand prestige, symbol attractiveness, self-congruence, brand experience as antecedents of CBI and classifies these antecedents into two groups; external and internal factors. External variables come from the social environment or situational influences and they are generally controlled by brand managers, whilst internal variables arise from within the inner world of the individual (Workman & Lee, 2011).

External factors: brand prestige

Brand prestige is defined as the relatively high status of product positioning associated with a particular brand (Truong, McColl, & Kitchen, 2009). Brand prestige is long-term accumulated assessment based upon past overall performance of a brand (Da Camara, 2007). Thus, customers not only perceive that prestigious brands are superior to other brands, but also that they offer customers a sense of belonging to the upper classes (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003) because buying and possessing prestige brands elevate a person's social status (O'Cass & Frost, 2002).

Social status indicates one's rank in a hierarchy and the extent to which one is respected by others, and it can be predetermined or achieved (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). The idea that status can be achieved is related to conspicuous consumption for status signals such as luxury handbags and expensive cars. Status signals are valued when they are recognized by other members of the social group (Berger, & Ward, 2010). This explains why people want to buy prestigious brands.

Customers tend to incorporate themselves into specific brands that reflect their self-identity. Thus, identifying with a prestigious brand can enhance the customer's pride (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). Many studies have agreed that brand prestige leads to the

identification of the individuals with the brand. The perception by customers that a brand has prestige can allow them to demonstrate a higher identification with that brand (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2012).

Looking at the service sector, nowadays customers patronize prestigious restaurants because they consider restaurants as a sign of social status or wealth (Steenkamp et al., 2003). A prestigious image of the restaurant is reflected positively onto the customers' self and it enhances customers' self-esteem and meets their self-enhancement needs (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes:

H1. Brand prestige has a positive impact on brand identification.

External factors: symbol attractiveness

People have needs to distinguish themselves from others and such needs can be achieved through the acquisition and utilization of the brand with a distinctive identity (Ruvio, 2008). Thus, the distinctiveness of a brand is an important driver to a customer's needs to identify with that brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Thus, certain brands offer meaningful and attractive social identities to customers that help them satisfy differentiation needs.

In this sense, a logo is an important asset that helps consumers to differentiate themselves from others by providing a recognizable visible identity for a brand (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). As a brand logo or symbol is one of the most notable visual factors of a brand, it conveys important meanings brands stand for as well as facilitating the identity of the brand (Henderson and Cote, 1998).

Attractive brand images are formed by a particular brand's associations through brand identities such as brand name, logo, sign, design, symbols and so on, and these strong,

favorable and special brand images create value to customers by making brand identification easier (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001). Brand logos or symbols play important roles for connections with customers by delivering brands' core values because they are symbolic representation of the brands (Park, Eisingerich, Pol, & Park, 2013). That is, brand logos or symbols are important means to enhance brand identification by conveying brand associations and helping customers recognize the brand as part of themselves (Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010).

In the restaurant industry, brand associations using restaurant logos and symbols are vital for customer-brand relationships. Logos or symbols of the restaurants enable customers to recall and recognise impressive elements related to the brand, such as food quality, interior design, service quality and so on. For example, when customers see the logo of McDonald's, they recall the experiences they got from it and have emotional connections with the brand (Pittard, Ewing, & Jevons, 2007). Like this, associations based on logos are effective for customers to identify with brands quickly. In addition, Logos or symbols contribute to the creation of a sense of community which can improve social identity (Balmer and Gray, 2003). Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes:

H2. Symbol attractiveness has a positive impact on brand identification.

Internal factors: self-congruence

Self-concept is the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is (Baumeister, 1999). Self-concept can influence customer behavior because specific behavior patterns are frequently determined by that

person's self-image (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987) and the majority of people behave in a way that strengthens or retains their self-concepts. Belk (1988) extended the notion of self-concept and supported the idea that possessions reflect the identities of customers. Brands give the customer an opportunity to express their self-concept (Graeff, 1996). A brand has symbolic image and customers evaluate a brand by matching the symbolic image of the brand with their self-concept. This matching process between brand image and customers' self-concept is referred to as self-congruence (Sirgy, 1982). Customers tend to prefer brand that match with their own self-concepts.

Individuals tend to develop a social identity that goes beyond their self-identity. For example, customers who have congruence with a particular restaurant brand can develop emotional bonds with other customers who experience the restaurant brand. Customers can develop brand identification by categorizing themselves in a restaurant context and recognizing themselves as members of the restaurant. In addition, brand identification is related to customers' self-definitional needs in a social context, which are self-continuity, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Self-continuity and self-enhancement are also needs for self-congruence. Self-continuity determines people's actual-self (Kressmann et al., 2006) and self-enhancement is boosted by the ideal self-image (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Thus, brands that can build high self-congruence can enhance consumer-brand identification (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Brands convey a shared social meaning by group and the self-concept of individuals (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). Therefore, Brands that are congruent with customers' self-concepts are likely to lead to stronger identification (Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2003). Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes that;

H3. Self-congruence has a positive impact on brand identification.

Internal factors: brand experience

Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello (2009, p. 53) define brand experience as “subjective, internal customer responses (sensations, feelings and cognition) and behavioral responses are also evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments”. Most brand experiences arise through direct consumption such as shopping, buying and consuming certain brands. However, brand experiences can also occur indirectly through the exposure of brand advertising and marketing communication (Brakus et al., 2009).

Brand experience has been investigated to understand customers’ emotional connections with brands. Emotions play a powerful role in buying decisions by customers toward brands (Morrison & Crane, 2007) because the emotional connection between customer and brand is important in building memorable brand experiences (Joseph, 2010). As brand experience is focused upon the human mind and emotions, it is very important for marketers to understand the customer in a more personal manner through brand experience (Hultén, 2011). The experiential view of brand consumption is considered as a more comprehensive method in understanding the relationship between brands and customers (Carlson, Todd Donovan, & Cumiskey, 2009). Brand experience is the first relationship between brand and customer, which ultimately determines customer-brand interaction. Positive brand experiences form an identification between the customer and brand as well as develop a sense of community (Jones & Runyan, 2013). Customers can have a shared consciousness through brand experience. This shared consciousness can form the foundation of a brand community and brand associations (Cova & Pace, 2006). Customers connect themselves with others through brand affiliation which represents themselves in a social context (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

The positive experiences with a brand that customers identify with have a positive impact on their in-group association and result in brand identification.

Brand experience is more critical within the service context because of its intangible nature (Crane, Kerin, & Hartley, 2007). When customers have experience with the service brand, this experience becomes the powerful determinant for brand evaluations. When the service encounter plays an important role in customers' evaluation of the brand, brand experiences contribute to forming CBI (Grace & O'Cass, 2004). The strength of the customers' experience with the brand develops brand identification (Lin, 2015). Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes:

H4. brand experience has a positive impact on brand identification.

Effects of brand identification on brand loyalty

Some researchers have explored brand loyalty based upon the psychological perspective which emphasizes the mental factors of customers (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002). They argue that a strong 'attitudinal commitment' toward a brand is essential for true loyalty (e.g. Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). When positive feelings and affects are added to a brand, loyalty can be shown as an attitude. Attitudinal loyalty is often viewed as brand preference (Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004), commitment (Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004), intention to repurchase (Harris & Ezeh, 2008), and word-of-mouth (Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006). If customers believe in the desirable attributes of their particular choice of brand, they will have a more favorable attitude toward that brand with intentions to purchase (Kassim & Asiah Abdullah, 2010). The present research adopts attitudinal loyalty as a consequence of brand identification. In the restaurant industry, consumers prefer brands which provide delight as a

positive emotional state. Delight with service is positively associated with brand loyalty and results in repurchase intentions and willingness to recommend a brand (Paswan, Spears and Ganesh, 2007).

Brand identification research suggests that when customers identify with a brand, they tend to recommend that brand and have intention to purchase (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Previous brand identification studies in hospitality sector have provided evidences that brand identification has an influence on brand loyalty (e.g., So et al., 2013; Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). In addition, Kim and Jang (2014) and Cha, Yi & Bagozzi (2016) found that symbolic consumption related to customers' social identity have a positive effect on brand loyalty of the brand coffee shop. This is because brand identification indicates a strong psychological attachment which can potentially form stronger loyalty to the brand. Customers are more attached to those restaurant brands that enable them to express their social identity and are therefore likely to have intention to re-visit or recommend them. Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes that:

H5. Brand identification has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

Mediation effect of brand identification

This research proposes that brand identification mediates the relationships between brand loyalty and the four antecedents. Previous research has tested the mediating role of brand identification using different variables within various research settings. For example, Kuenzel & Halliday (2010) demonstrate that brand reputation on brand loyalty is mediated by brand identification. Stokburger-Sauer (2011) suggests that nation brand identification mediates the relationship between personality congruence and visit intentions. As noted earlier, four

antecedents (brand prestige, symbol attractiveness, self-congruence and brand experience) positively influence brand identification, which in turn has impact on brand loyalty. Hence, this study implies that brand identification mediates the influence of antecedents on brand loyalty. Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes:

H6a to H6d. Brand identification mediates the relationship between brand prestige (H6a), symbol attractiveness (H6b), self-congruence (H6c), brand experience (H6d), and brand loyalty.

Research Model

Based on previous studies, the present research has presented our hypotheses in two models, depicted in Figure 1 and 2.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As can be seen in Figure 1, Model 1 proposes that the effects of external and internal antecedents on brand loyalty are fully mediated by brand identification.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 shows model 2 with dotted lines proposing a partial mediation model. This is in order to examine the direct effects of external and internal antecedents on brand loyalty.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

The value of the South Korean restaurant market is estimated to be \$80 billion in 2015, an increase of 6 % on average per year for seven years, which is a much higher growth than the Gross Domestic Product (Kim, 2015). In addition, South Koreans tend to visit restaurants not only for eating but to also reinforce emotional connections with others through the brand and to express their social status as part of symbolic consumption. Thus, South Korea is suitable as a survey place for this research.

The main survey focused on South Korean customers who had experienced global chain restaurant brands (e.g., T.G.I. Friday's, Starbucks, Burger King, Pizza Hut, KFC etc.).

Respondents were asked to select one of the global restaurant brands and answer questions about the brand they selected. Data were collected at different restaurants, coffee shops, parks and shopping malls in the city of South Korea by using person-to-person surveys for one month. Other places besides restaurants were selected because they are popular places for young people who are the important customers for global restaurant brands. Using a convenience sampling method, a total of 297 fully completed surveys were collected.

The respondents were male (41.4%) and female (58.6%). In terms of the highest level of education, of the respondents, 0.7% and 1.4% were under the category of 'no formal educational qualification' and at a middle school level, respectively. 8.5% were at the 'high school level'. The 'Undergraduate level' was the highest at 45.4%, followed by the 'College level' at 29.2%. 'Postgraduate level' was at 14.6% and the 'other' category was the lowest level at 0.3%.

Measurements

Three items developed by Veloutsou & Moutinho (2009) were employed to measure Brand prestige. The symbol attractiveness scale consisted of three items and were adopted from Gladden & Funk (2002); Alexandris et al. (2008). This study uses five items developed by Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001); Delgado-Ballester (2004) to measure brand experience. To measure self-congruence, three items were adopted from Sirgy & Su (2000). Brand identification is measured through three items adopted from Kuenzel & Halliday's (2008) item and Mael & Ashforth's (1992) items. Finally, brand loyalty is measured through three items recommended by Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), Horppu, Kuivalainen, Tarkiainen, & Ellonen (2008), & Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman. (1996). A 7-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1) is used to rate each statement (see Appendix A).

FINDINGS

Reliability and validity of measures

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the measures are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Before testing the research model and research hypotheses, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with the AMOS 7.0 is applied to examine validity of the measures. The outcomes of the CFA test indicate a good fit ($\chi^2 = 261.172$, $df = 128$, $p = 0.00$, $GFI = 0.91$, $CFI = 0.96$, $NFI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.05$). Convergent validity is determined by the significance of factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). All factor loadings are greater than 0.6 and statistically significant. Also, AVE and CR are greater than

0.50 and 0.70 respectively (except for the CR of self-congruence). Although self-congruence falls below 0.7 (0.66), Reliability between 0.6 and 0.7 can be acceptable when other indicators provide good scores (Hair et al., 2006). Thus, these results confirm the convergent validity of the model (Fornell & Larcker 1981). The AVEs of this study show that every construct is higher than the squared correlations between constructs, apart from brand experience and brand loyalty. However, the confidence interval around the correlation estimate between the brand experience and brand loyalty ($\phi \pm 2 \times \text{standard error}$) does not include 1.0 (Table 1). Thus, this supports discriminant validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Additionally, the reliability of scale is tested through Cronbach's alphas, which are above the acceptable levels of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2006). Table 2 presents results of the measurement model.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Model testing

The testing of two research models was performed to examine the mediating effect of brand identification using structural equation modeling (SEM). As the results of the structure analysis, the goodness of fit and hypothesized paths of this study show as appropriate. Table 3 provides the results of the analysis for the two models (full and partial mediation models).

The results of model fit indices (full mediation model) confirm validity of Model 1 ($\chi^2 = 324.212$, $df = 133$, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07). The validity of Model 2 (partial mediation model) is also confirmed by the model fit indices ($\chi^2 = 351.240$, $df = 136$, $p = 0.00$, GFI = 0.88, CFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07).

Hypothesis Testing

As presented in Table 3, this research posits that brand prestige has a positive influence on brand identification. Hence, the results of the Model 1 testing support H1 ($\beta = 0.22$, $t = 3.68$, $p < 0.001$). The results of the study also support H2 ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 4.29$, $p < 0.001$). These findings confirm that brand prestige and symbol attractiveness have positive influences on brand identification. Furthermore, H3 is supported ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that self- congruence has a positive influence on brand identification. H4 predicts that brand experience has a positive influence on brand identification. Hence the study findings confirm positive relationships ($\beta = 0.36$, $t = 6.01$, $p < 0.001$). The results of Model 1 reveal that the four antecedents- brand prestige, symbol attractiveness, self- congruence and brand experience, are important drivers of restaurant brand identification. H5 suggests that brand identification has a positive effect on brand loyalty. The result of the model testing supports this proposition ($\beta = 1.10$, $t = 10.16$, $p < 0.001$).

[Insert Table 3 here]

Mediating Effect of Brand Identification

Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested that for ‘full mediation’, the independent variables should influence the dependent variables indirectly, but the independent variables have no direct effect on the dependent variables, while for ‘partial mediation’, the independent variables have an influence on the dependent variables both indirectly and directly.

H6a-H6d predicts that brand identification mediates the effects of the four antecedents on brand loyalty. As depicted in Table3, the results of the partial model testing show that brand prestige ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.67$, $p < 0.001$), symbol attractiveness ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 2.27$, $p < 0.05$) and

brand experience ($\beta = 0.35$, $t = 4.54$, $p < 0.001$) have a direct influence on brand loyalty, and as shown in model 1, they also have an indirect effect on brand loyalty through brand identification. Therefore, brand identification partially mediates the impact of brand prestige, symbol attractiveness and brand experience on brand loyalty. However, the relationship between self-congruence and brand loyalty is insignificant ($\beta = -0.01$, $t = -0.25$, *n.s.*). Thus, as Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested, the effects of self-congruence on brand loyalty is fully mediated by brand identification.

DISCUSSION

The present research focuses on the symbolic aspects of a global restaurant brand to create a customer's social identity, because restaurants that were mainly regarded as eating places have now been evolved into places of symbolic consumption where people express their own social identity, and global restaurant brands have social values which can be recognized as a member of a specific group (Kim & Jang, 2014). Our research suggests and empirically tests a conceptual model of CBI in the global brand restaurant sector. Accordingly, this research confirms the theories and offers theoretical implications for the existing body of knowledge in regard to brand identification within the restaurant sector.

Theoretical Implications

First of all, the study suggests that antecedents for restaurant brand identification split into two broad categories: brand prestige and symbol attractiveness being externally related antecedents; brand experience and self-congruence being internally related antecedents.

The results indicate that the two externally related antecedents have influence on brand identification. Hence, brand prestige and symbol attractiveness are integral in the formation of brand identification and social consumption within the restaurant industry. One of the important motivations of customer behavior is the desire to gain social benefits and build social relationships through symbolic consumption. Most previous research investigated the impact of brand prestige and brand logo on symbolic consumptions for luxury goods such as bags, cars, clothes (Esmailpour, 2015). However, our study shows that brand prestige and symbol attractiveness also play an important role for social identity in the restaurant sector beyond luxury goods. Interestingly, the study finding contrasts with Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) who indicate that brand prestige has no effect on brand identification. One of the reasons for this contrasting result may be the product categories involved in testing the research hypothesis. They used goods dominant brands such as supermarkets, soft drinks, and athletic shoes that may be less sensitive to brand identification than restaurant brands that are more service dominant. Furthermore, study results prove that the two internal antecedents of brand identification, self-congruence, and brand experience, are in line with Lam et al., (2013) and Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) who suggest that self-congruence and brand experience are key antecedents of brand identification. Interestingly, the present study findings suggest that brand experience appears as the most important factor for the formation of brand identification amongst the other antecedents in the restaurant sector. This is based on the fact that emotional bond between a person and a specific brand which can occur in a brand attachment is important for brand identification (Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012).

Second, this study confirms the positive effect of brand identification in developing brand loyalty by examining the mediating role of brand identification. This means that the role of social psychology is an important factor of brand loyalty. Basically, individual behavior is

portrayed in order to acquire social approval by consuming particular brands and having symbolic interaction in the context of brand consumption (Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009). The study finds that brand identification partially mediates the effects of brand prestige, symbol attractiveness, and brand experience on brand loyalty, while the effect of self-congruence on brand loyalty is fully mediated by brand identification. Hence the relationship between self-congruence and brand loyalty is not statistically significant without brand identification as a mediator. This finding supports Bhattacharya & Sen's (2003) study in that the relationship between self-congruence and customer behavior is mediated by customer brand identification. The present research shows the importance of brand identification in the social consumption of restaurant brands by confirming the mediating role of brand identification.

Managerial Implications

The study findings provide marketers with practical value in the development of global restaurant brands. First, symbol or logo is used to identify the specific brand and also evokes associations about the brand. Thus, restaurants need to develop a symbol which can evoke positive feelings. The investments of symbols can add value to the restaurant brands by helping to develop brand equity through brand recognition.

Second, restaurant managers should create a brand image to match the self-concept of customers. In order to do so, restaurant managers can utilize tangible and intangible aspects of services (e.g. interior, exterior, menus, staff uniform, staff attitude). Moreover, restaurant managers need to identify the preferences, purchase patterns, etc. of their target customers for emotional bonding with customers through self-congruence. When customers leave reviews on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, marketers can analyse customers'

opinion by using a variety of analytical methods such as text mining, content analysis, multivariate regression and so on.

Third, the findings reveal that brand experience is a more essential factor for restaurant brand identification. Thus, many restaurant brands such as Starbucks Coffee and TGI Friday's have tried to offer excellent brand experience. In addition, they have developed an excellent social media strategy and created an online community, where customers can share their brand experience. Customers increase their social identity through brand communities which can build the relationship with other customers. Nowadays, social media which is a specific form of brand community is an important communication tool. Social media can help to strengthen brand identification by allowing customers to share their comments, reactions and pictures about the brands. The important thing is that the type of identity which is shared and experienced between members creates a feeling of belongingness and unites them (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). That is, customers feel brand identification with favourable brands through experiences of the online communities such as Facebook fan pages (Kang, Tang, and Fiore, 2014).

As communications strategies, restaurants need to focus on telling the story of the brand in order to deliver brand identity to customers because customers can access to brand stories through various digital channels, platforms, and devices. In addition, testimonial marketing which is a written recommendation from a celebrity or satisfied customer through experience of a product or service can be used to generate images and enhance brand identification.

Limitations

This study has some limitations, which can lead to further research opportunities. The study sample was applied to Korean customers. Hence, the results cannot be generalized to other

cultures and populations. In order to establish external validity of the study, further studies should be carried out across different cultures using different samples. In addition, as the research focuses on the global restaurant sector, it is not clear whether the same results will be obtained if this model is applied to the local restaurant sector. Thus, it would be worth investigating the local restaurants for future research.

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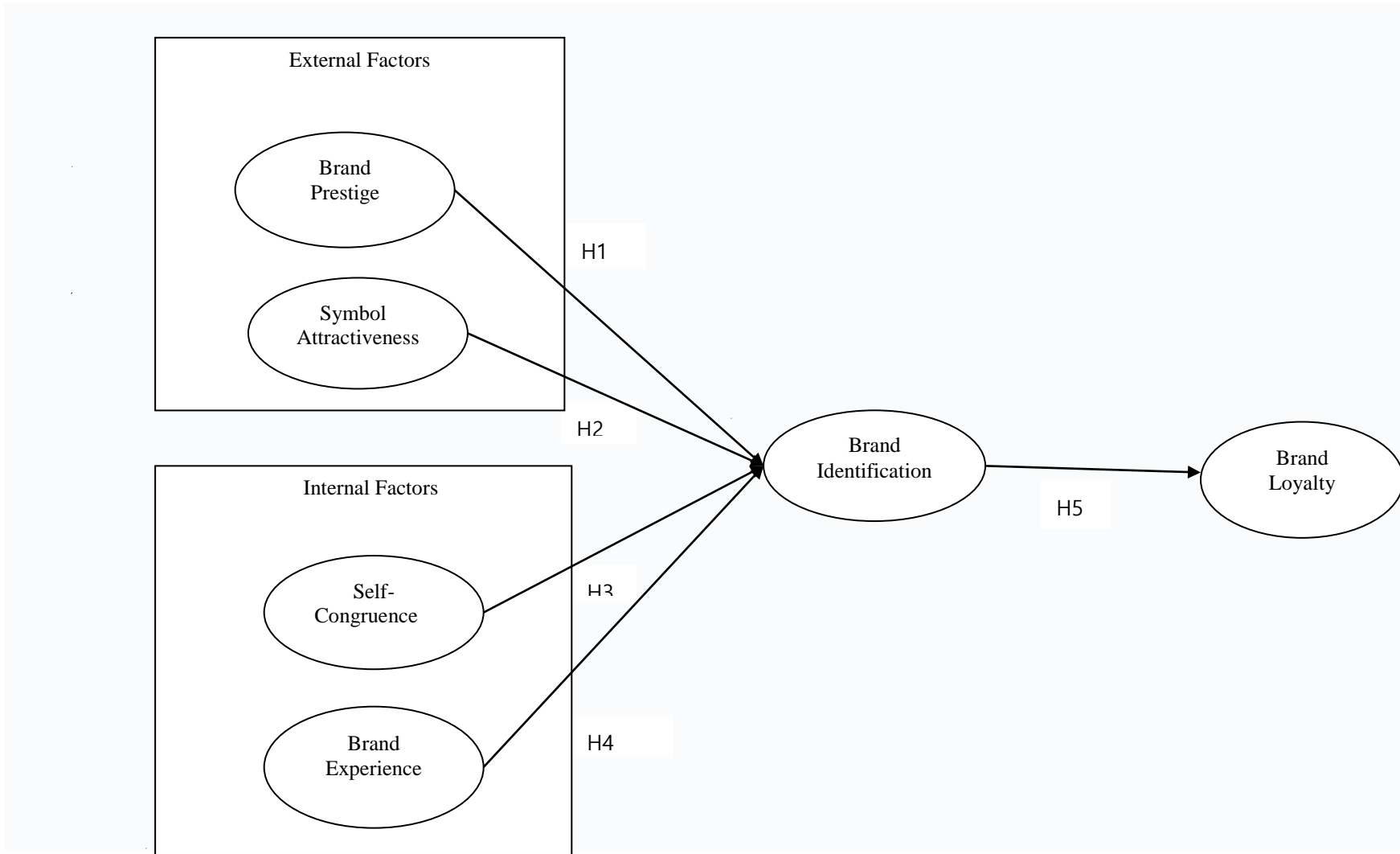


Figure 1. Research Model 1 - Full Mediation

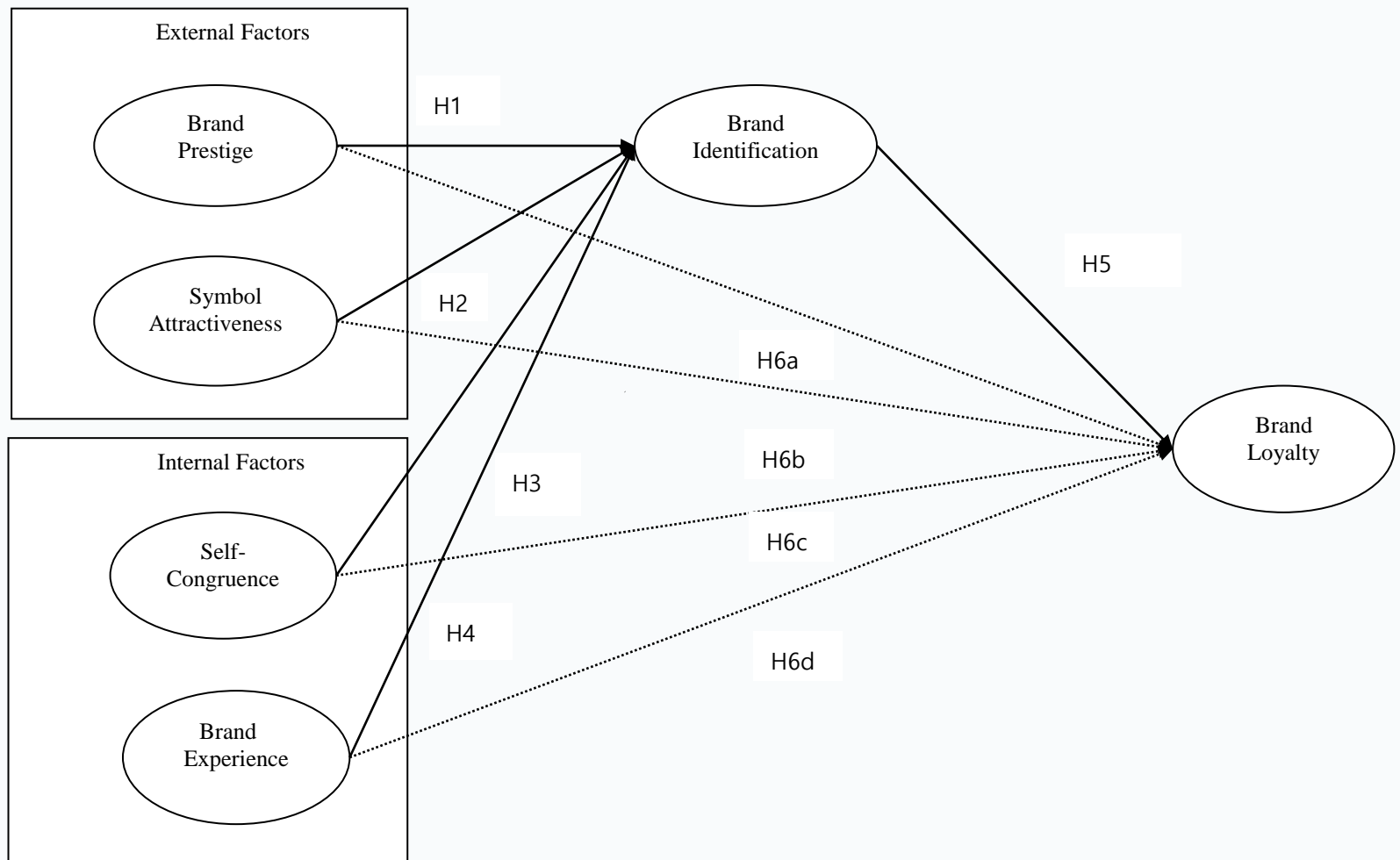


Figure 2. Research Model 2 - Partial Mediation

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Brand Prestige	4.73	1.04	0.66	0.23	0.27	0.56	0.36	0.64
2. Symbol attractiveness	4.60	1.18	0.48	0.65	0.16	0.05	0.24	0.28
3. Self-Congruence	3.37	1.27	0.52	0.41	0.65	0.19	0.43	0.25
4. Brand Experience	4.75	1.00	0.75	0.43	0.44	0.59	0.32	0.62
5. Brand Identification	3.65	1.24	0.60	0.49	0.66	0.57	0.63	0.38
6. Brand Loyalty	4.78	1.08	0.80	0.53	0.50	0.79	0.62	0.68

Note: The diagonal values in bold indicate the Average Variances Extracted (AVE). The scores in the lower diagonal indicate inter-construct correlation and the scores in the upper diagonal indicate squared inter-construct correlation.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity of Measures

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	<i>t</i> -value	AVE	C.R.	Cronbach's alpha
Brand Prestige	Item1	0.75	Fixed	0.66	0.80	0.85
	Item2	0.83	14.36***			
	Item3	0.85	14.66***			
Symbol Attractiveness	Item1	0.77	11.69***	0.65	0.77	0.84
	Item2	0.97	12.22***			
	Item3	0.64	Fixed			
Self-Congruence	Item1	0.77	Fixed	0.65	0.66	0.79
	Item2	0.84	10.69***			
Brand Experience	Item1	0.66	13.42***	0.59	0.83	0.89
	Item2	0.77	Fixed			
	Item3	0.87	15.38***			
	Item4	0.79	13.89***			
	Item5	0.73	12.74***			
Brand Identification	Item1	0.73	Fixed	0.63	0.73	0.84
	Item2	0.83	13.60***			
	Item3	0.79	13.12***			
Brand Loyalty	Item1	0.87	13.90***	0.68	0.80	0.85
	Item2	0.89	14.16***			
	Item3	0.70	Fixed			

$\chi^2 = 261.172$, $df = 128$, $p = .000$, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05.

***Significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 3: Comparison of the Structural Models

Hypothesized paths	Model 1: Full mediation model		Model 2: Partial mediation model	
	Standardized path coefficient	t-value	Standardized path coefficient	t-value
H1 Brand Prestige → Brand Identification	0.22	3.68***	0.03	0.39
H2 Symbol attractiveness → Brand Identification	0.17	4.29***	0.17	3.00**
H3 Self -Congruence → Brand Identification	0.17	3.75***	0.51	6.98***
H4 Brand Experience → Brand Identification	0.36	6.01***	0.24	2.68**
H5 Brand Identification → Brand Loyalty	1.10	10.16***	0.15	2.02*
H6a Brand Prestige → Brand Loyalty			0.38	4.67***
H6b Symbol attractiveness → Brand Loyalty			0.11	2.27*
H6c Self-Congruence → Brand Loyalty			-0.01	-0.25
H6d Brand Experience → Brand Loyalty			0.35	4.54***
Variance Explained (R ²)				
Brand Identification		48%		48%
Brand Loyalty		28%		61%
Model Fit Indices				
χ^2		324.212		351.240
<i>Df</i>		133		136
GFI		0.90		0.88
CFI		0.94		0.94
NFI		0.91		0.91
RMSEA		0.07		0.07

*p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Appendix: Measures

Construct		Items
Brand Prestige	Item1	This brand makes honest claims.
	Item2	This brand is trustworthy.
	Item3	This brand is reputable.
Symbol Attractiveness	Item1	This brand has an attractive and distinctive symbol (logo).
	Item2	I like the symbol (logo) of the brand.
	Item3	I like the colours of the building and interior of this brand.
Self- congruence	Item1	The customers who dine in this restaurant reflect the type of person I would like to be.
	Item2	The customers who dine in this restaurant are very much like the person I admire.
Brand Experience	Item1	This brand guarantees satisfaction.
	Item2	I have confidence in this brand.
	Item3	I feel good when I dine in this restaurant.
	Item4	This brand makes me happy.
	Item5	This brand gives me pleasure.
Brand Identification	Item1	I feel good when I see a positive report in the media about this brand.
	Item2	I am interested in what others think about this brand.
	Item3	When someone praises this brand, it feels like a personal compliment.
Brand Loyalty	Item1	I say positive things about this restaurant brand to other people.
	Item2	I will recommend this restaurant brand to anyone who seeks my advice.
	Item3	I will revisit this restaurant brand next time.