

Exploring the role of brand identification and brand love in generating higher levels of brand loyalty

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to develop a model that integrates brand identity, brand-life congruence, customer hotel brand identification (CHBI), and brand love into one model and to test its predictive power in explaining brand loyalty. The survey data were gathered from (432) guests who were staying in seven well-known hotels located in Jordan. Data were analyzed using a structural equation modeling SmartPLS2.0. Four key findings emerged from the current research. First, compared to brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruency appears to have a stronger and more significant relationship with CHBI. Second, CHBI contributes only to the development of brand love. Third, CHBI appears to influence brand loyalty only indirectly via brand love. Fourth, the current research provides an empirical support on the applicability of Sternberg's love theory in the hotel industry. This research adds to the body of knowledge on hotel brand loyalty through examining its relationship with four key constructs, whose effect either had been examined in isolation or had never been examined. It tests for the first time how brand identity and brand-lifestyle congruence contribute to the development of CHBI, which in turn, engenders a powerful emotional experience with hotel brands and cultivates affection and passion to that brand. Those heavy emotional feelings in turn provide an important basis upon which hotel brand loyalty is established.

Keywords

Brand identification, brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruency, brand loyalty, Sternberg's (1987) love theory

Introduction

Brand loyalty represents a key indicator of the sustainability of a hotel brand (Kayaman and Arasli, 2007; Nam et al., 2011). Loyal customers are less likely to switch to competing brands (Eakuru and Mat, 2008), spread positive word of mouth (Deng et al., 2010; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Shiravari et al., 2012), generate stable revenues (Kang et al., 2007; Lee, 2010); are not influenced by bad publicity (Deng et al., 2010); are more cost-effective to be maintained than to attract new ones (Reichheld, 1996); are more willing to pay higher prices (Jaiswal and Niraj, 2011; Krishnamurti and Raj, 1991) and make more frequent purchases than

non-loyal customers (Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998; Rowley, 2005). In the hotel industry, Bowen and Shoemaker (2003: 346) point out that 'loyal customers also claim they purchase other hotel services (e.g., laundry and restaurant meals) more frequently at hotels towards which they feel loyal compared to hotels for which there is little loyalty'.

However, although there is a theoretically grounded agreement among researchers that

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perceived quality (Howat and Assaker, 2013), perceived value (Setiowati and Putri, 2012), and satisfaction (Bloemer and de Ruyter, 1998) offer the best assessment of brand loyalty (Dorsch et al., 1998), the limitations of these constructs in explaining and predicting brand loyalty are widely acknowledged in the literature (Bowden, 2009; Deming, 1986; Hollebeek, 2011; Sureshchandar et al., 2002; Oliver, 1999). For example, Oliver (1997: 33) pointed that although satisfaction is an important step in loyalty formation, it becomes 'less significant as loyalty begins to set through other mechanisms'. Accordingly, several calls have been made to identify new mechanisms of brand loyalty, which may offer superior predictors relative to traditionally used marketing constructs (Bowden, 2009; Brakus et al., 2009; Buckingham, 2008; Hollebeek, 2011). Such an issue becomes increasingly important in the hotel industry because of the fierce competition (Mattila, 2006), low switching costs (Skogland and Siguaw, 2004), and the increasing difficulties in finding ways to differentiate hotel products and services from competitors (Choi and Chu, 2001).

However, although researchers have made significant efforts to advance our understanding on the role of branding in the hotel industry through examining issues such as brand personality (Li et al. 2014; Tran et al., 2013), hotel co-branding (Ashton, 2011), online brand communities (Hede and Kellett, 2012), and brand equity extensions (Rompf, 1999), little attention has been paid to explicitly investigate the role of brand-related constructs in determining loyalty in hotels (Nam et al., 2011; So et al. 2013; Wilkins et al., 2009). To fill this gap, the authors reviewed different streams of literature and identified two key constructs, namely customer hotel brand identification (CHBI) and brand love, and two key antecedents (i.e. brand identity and brand-lifestyle similarity) to CHBI. These two contemporary constructs (i.e. CHBI and brand love) have become cornerstone constructs in recent marketing literature (e.g. Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; He et al., 2012; Nam et al., 2011; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013). A major difference between conventional (e.g., perceived value and quality) and contemporary marketing constructs (e.g., brand-lifestyle congruence, CHBI, and brand love) is that the former tends to focus on developing brands that offer tangible benefits through product features and quality (cognitive sphere), while the latter focuses on

both tangible (cognitive sphere) and intangible aspects of branding (i.e. symbolic features of personality and lifestyle), tapping into deep sensory and emotional elements of brands (Moore and Reid, 2008; Schmitt, 1999).

However, despite the significant importance of the previously mentioned constructs, they remain largely unexplored in the hotel industry. Investigating these constructs in the hotel industry is significantly important for many reasons. First, prior research examined constructs such as brand love, brand identity, and brand identification in products and/or services (e.g. cars, cosmetics, and sport teams), which possess high levels of symbolic meanings (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; He et al., 2012; Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012). However, as hotel services do not possess symbolic meanings to the degree of those products (So et al. 2013), it becomes unclear the extent to which these constructs are applicable to the hotel industry. This, in turn, does not aid hotel managers in making evidence-based decisions regarding their branding strategies. Second, the rapid increase in the number of new hotel brands (Kim et al., 2008) and the growing reliance on branding strategies in the hotel industry (So and King, 2010) necessitate a greater understanding of the role that brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruence, CHBI, and brand love play in loyalty formation and development. Examining the nature of the relationships between these constructs and how they drive brand loyalty in the hotel industry would be very beneficial to hotel managers because it could help them develop more appropriate and competitive marketing strategies to attract new guests while ensuring repeat business from existing ones.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this article is to combine four distinctive and unique constructs (i.e. brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruence, CHBI, and brand love) into one model to delineate the consumer's psychological path to brand loyalty in the hotel industry and to test its predictive power in explaining brand loyalty (see Figure 1). The rest of the article is structured as follows: the second section provides a theoretical background on the key constructs of the current study, while the third section proposes the framework of the current study and develops the research hypotheses. This will be followed by analyzing and testing the research hypotheses. The last section concludes the findings. Managerial implications and direction for future research are also provided.

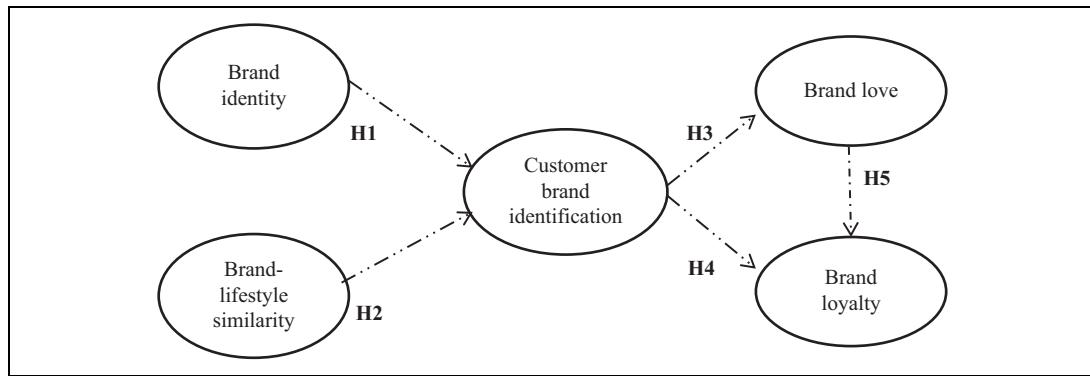


Figure 1. The study' framework.

Literature review: Theoretical background on the study's constructs

Separate and distinct streams of literature have emerged recently, which resulted in introducing different brand-related concepts such as brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruence, customer brand identification (CBI), and brand love. These concepts, which do not overlap with each other and address different issues, have not been integrated into one model in order to see how they affect each other. Therefore, the following subsections discuss each construct separately to show its distinctiveness and uniqueness and to capture its core essence and what it stands for. After that, theoretical links between the constructs are identified in order to integrate them into one model.

Brand love

In the context of psychology, love is an affectionate connection between two parties (Shaver et al., 1987) that provide a deep interpersonal bond (Guerrero and Andersen, 2000) and reflect an intense desire to sustain a relationship (Shaver et al., 1996). The majority of previous studies on brand love indicates that a person's love feelings for a brand are structurally parallel to interpersonal love feelings (Brakus et al., 2009; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Keh et al., 2007; Shimp and Madden, 1988). Consumers usually associate a brand with human personality traits (Aaker, 1997), which act as a basis for building a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Thus, a consumer can form and develop a loving relationship with a brand, as if it was with another person. Through citing the work of Richins (1997) and Fournier (1998), Batra et al. (2012: 2) also made

a distinction between the love emotion and the love relationship; the former involves 'a single, specific feeling, akin to affection' and it 'is short term and episodic', whereas the latter is 'like the friendship relationship, which can last for decades and involves numerous affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences'.

This study views brand love as 'love relationship' since it relies on Sternberg's (1987) love theory as a foundation to define and conceptualize the concept of brand love. Although there are different brand love's conceptualizations (e.g., Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), the robustness and the high generalizability of Sternberg's (1987) triangular theory (Sarkar et al., 2012) made it the most adopted framework to investigate brand love (Batra et al., 2012). Additionally, the three indicators of love—*passion, intimacy, and decision/commitment*, which have been proposed by the theory, are quite popular when conceptualizing consumer's love to brands (Kohli et al., 2014).

Passion describes the zeal and enthusiasm features of a customer–brand relationship and 'it captures consumers' dithyrambic, and sometimes, blind affect for the brand driven by motivational involvement and other arousals' (Keh et al., 2007: 84). Passion is also the difficulty the consumer senses because of a separation from the brand and its omnipresence in the consumer's mind (Albert et al., 2010). It can be derived from a guest's motivational involvement in the relationship through psychological and physiological arousal because of a longing for union with the hotel (Sternberg, 1987: 121). Intimacy is defined as the closeness and harmonization features of a customer–brand relationship, and it represents consumers' emotional willingness to remain in touch with the brand, share their feelings with it, and support it when it is in difficulty (Keh

et al., 2007: 84). Intimacy, which is derived from a guest's emotional investment in the relationship, including 'mutual understanding with the loved one' (Sternberg, 1987: 121), measures the psychological and affective proximity between the brand and the guest (Albert et al., 2010). Decision/commitment involves the short-term decision to love and the commitment to sustain that love in the long term (i.e. will be part of the guest's life for a long time to come and to feel a sense of long-term relationship). Decision/commitment emanates from a person's cognitive decision concerning, and commitment to, an interpersonal relationship.

CHBI

CHBI has been approached from social identity theory (SIT). The theory explains that a positive self-esteem of a person is enhanced through his/her personal identity and/or social identity (Edwards, 2005), both of which constitute the self-concept (Tajfel, 1981). It also posits that people make sense of the world by categorizing themselves into groups and that the several social categories to which a person affiliates with or member of construct his/her social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). SIT further indicates that self-categorization into a group serves a self-definitional role (Hogg et al., 1995).

Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) made a clear distinction between three aspects of social identity, namely cognitive (i.e. identification), affective (i.e. affective commitment), and evaluative (i.e. group-based self-esteem), and conceptualized identification accordingly as a cognitive state in which a person comes to view himself/herself as a member of a social entity. This conceptualization, which differentiates identification from related emotional and behavioral concepts, reveals that the affective and evaluative components are potential antecedents and consequences of identification (Ahearne et al., 2005). Under this view, CHBI is primarily a cognitive state, 'albeit one that has an abundance of emotional association' (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013). As such, CHBI is defined here as 'the perceived oneness with the brand' and it is distinct from the process of comparison of brand traits and self traits, which may contribute to CHBI (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013: 6). When a consumer strongly identifies with a brand, an overlap exists between one's self-schema and the brand's schema (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2013) point out that although CBI

is related to the construct of self-brand connections, it is narrower in that it excludes the potential motivations guiding such self-brand connections, that is, achieving one's desired self and communicating one's identity to others. Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2013) also explain that brand identification is conceptually different from positive brand evaluations (i.e. brand attitudes) since the former depends on the perceived identity of the brand and the self-identity of the consumer, whereas the latter put the brand as a target for evaluation. Accordingly, brand attitudes are likely to be either inputs or outputs of brand identification rather than an integral part of the construct.

Brand identity

Brand identity communicates to consumers what a brand provides or what the brand stands for (Keller, 2008). It satisfies consumers' symbolic needs more than their functional needs (He et al., 2012). Under this view, brand identity could be defined as a unique set of brand associations, which are manifested in the form of distinctiveness and prestige of the focal brand (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ghodeswar, 2008; He and Mukherjee, 2009). Brand distinctiveness is the perceived uniqueness of a brand identity in relation to its competitors (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013). It differentiates a relevant, suitable, long-term, and credible promise of value associated with a brand and specifies the source of that promise (Ward et al., 1999). On the other hand, brand prestige refers to the status or esteem associated with a brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013). Symbolic meaning embedded in a brand (Steenkamp et al., 2003), higher price and greater scarcity, represents the sources of creating greater prestige appeal of a brand (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). In other words, brand distinctiveness satisfies consumers' needs for uniqueness (Ruvio, 2008), while brand prestige helps consumers protect and develop greater self-esteem (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013).

Brand-lifestyle congruence

Lifestyle, which covers beliefs, aspirations, and attitudes toward life (Brassington and Pettitt, 2003), refers to the particular manner in which consumers live their life (Peter and Olson, 2008: 535), or as Solomon et al. (2006: 558) note, it is 'a statement about who one is in society and who one is not'. Under this view, brand-lifestyle congruence refers to 'the extent to which the brand

supports the consumer's lifestyle' (Nam et al., 2011: 1014) or the brand's capability to support hotels' guests in expressing their values and lifestyle in their social environment (Keller, 2003). The brand can in itself reflect status, enhance image, and project lifestyle so that the ownership or the use of the brand becomes of value in its own right (Tuominen, 1999). Nam et al. (2011) noted that brand-lifestyle congruence differs from brand-self congruence and brand identification because consumers use self-concept and social groups as comparison standards. However, with regard to brand-lifestyle congruence, 'the comparison standards are associated with consumers' consumption opinions, activities, interests and goals, which might be related to different social and personal values that are not captured by self-concept and social identity' (Nam et al., 2011: 1014).

Brand loyalty

A review of the literature reveals that there are various definitions of brand loyalty. Melnyk et al. (2009: 82), for example, define loyalty as:

that there is a relationship of some sort (i.e., ranging from very shallow to very strong) between an actor and another entity and that the actor displays behavioral or psychological allegiance to that entity in the presence of alternative entities.

This definition focuses on the behavioral aspects of loyalty. Oliver (1999: 392), on the other hand, defines loyalty as 'a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior'. This indicates that loyalty has two aspects: behavioral and attitudinal. Behavioral loyalty refers to consumer's repetitive and systematic purchasing behavior of a brand, which is revealed through patterns of continued patronage and actual spending behaviors (Hammond et al., 1996). Attitudinal loyalty is an attitudinal predisposition consisting of having a preference to a particular brand and intention to repurchase that brand (Mellens et al., 1996). However, in the current research, brand loyalty will be measured from the behavioral perspective only in order to avoid any potential overlap between attitudinal loyalty and the third dimension of brand love (i.e. decision/commitment).

Hypotheses development and suggested model

Brand identity → CBI. Consumers tend to identify with a brand if it has a distinctive and prestigious identity (Fournier, 1998; He et al. 2012). Such a proposition, as He et al. (2012) noted, is in line with the suggestion that consumer company identification comes largely from corporate identity and that employee organizational identification comes from organizational identity. Evidence suggests that distinctive and prestigious brands are more advantageous in making consumers engage in brand-supporting activities (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2013). This is because distinctive brand identity helps consumers to maintain a positive personal/social identity by viewing themselves in the brand's reflected glory (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and categorize themselves in society to ease their self-transitions and attain a sense of continuity (Belk, 1988). Distinctive brand identity can also act as salient social categories, which allow consumers to develop relationships with and to claim affiliation with them (He and Li, 2010). Regarding brand prestige, Kirmani et al. (1999) point out that consumers do not choose a brand only for its quality but also for its status and conspicuous consumption. When consumers believe that a brand is highly reputed and prestigious, self-enhancement will be established (Kressmann et al., 2006). A prestige brand can also fill the gap in consumers' personality, particularly when they perceive themselves as lacking a personal quality (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Thus, it could be argued that consumers will have a greater tendency to identify with a hotel brand if it has a strong identity (i.e. distinctive and prestige) compared to other competing hotel brands. The following hypothesis summarizes that:

H1: Hotel brand identity is positively associated with customer hotel brand identification

Brand-lifestyle congruence → CBI. Solomon (2002) views brands and brand settings as a means of expressing consumers' lifestyles. Nam et al. (2011) point that lifestyle branding refers to a social situation where consumers purchase products/services that are associated with a particular lifestyle. Thus, the higher the degree that a brand image matches a consumer's personal lifestyle, the greater is the consumer identification with the brand. Consumers tend to identify with and form personal attachments to a brand when the

consumption of that brand reflects their desired lifestyles (Solomon, 2002; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). In sport marketing, Crimmins and Horn (1996) note that if the image associated with a specific sporting event does not match the lifestyles and interests of the target audience, the sponsor fails to reach the targeted consumers and to convey the proper association. Accordingly, it is reasonable to hypothesize the following:

H2: Hotel brand-lifestyle congruence is positively associated with customer hotel brand identification

CBI → brand love. It could be argued, by drawing on self-identity theory, that if consumers' identities are constantly confirmed in interaction with a particular hotel brand, they will increasingly come to reveal emotional attachments to that brand (e.g. Stryker, 1982). In other words, they become more oriented to the hotel brand in which their identities are confirmed. As such, the more a hotel brand helps identities to be verified, the greater the passion and affection will be to that brand, that is, guests will experience 'positive emotions from satisfaction at the lower-intensity end to joy and pride at the higher-intensity end of positive emotions' (Turner, 2013: 351). On the other hand, if a hotel brand does not provide a consumer with identity verification, he/she may experience negative emotions such as anger, fear, embarrassment, and other negative feelings. Branding literature also indicates that customers become attached to a brand whose traits overlap with their own personality traits (Aaker, 1997; Escalas and Bettman, 2005) and/or share the same self-definitional characteristics/aspects (Donavan et al. 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Accordingly, it is reasonable to propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Customer hotel brand identification is positively associated with hotel brand love

CHBI → brand loyalty. Identification is found to be associated with organizational members' commitment (i.e. low level of turnover) and financial support in the context of nonprofit organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). It is also associated with long-term preference for the identified-with firm's products (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and actual purchase behavior (Lam et al. 2010). Drawing on that, a guest who identifies with a hotel brand is more likely to support that hotel through recommending it to others, exhibiting long-term

preference for it and showing willingness to pay a price premium. This is because he/she has a vested interest in the success of that hotel for the benefits that accrue to him/her. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: Customer hotel brand identification is positively associated with hotel brand loyalty

Brand love → brand loyalty. Past behaviors and actions are often considered good predictors of future behavior, thus implying greater loyalty to loved brands (Thomson et al., 2005). As such, brand love is an antecedent to brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Kamat and Parulekar, 2007). Park et al. (2010) conclude that brand loyalty is determined by the intensity of the emotional commitment a consumer has to a particular brand. Brand love generates positive word of mouth (Fournier, 1998), influences willingness to pay higher prices (Thomson et al., 2005), and leads to positive evaluation of the brand, even when consumers are exposed to negative information about the brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Brand love does not only influence consumers' behavioral intention and attitudinal preference but also their persistent stickiness toward the brand (Reimann et al., 2012; Tsai, 2011). Drawing on that, the following could be assumed, as far as the hotel industry is concerned:

H5: Hotel brand love is positively associated with hotel brand loyalty

Figure 1 summarizes the hypothesized relationships among variables.

Research methodology

Similar to previous branding research in the hotel industry (e.g. Ekinci et al., 2008; Kayaman and Arasli, 2007; Nam et al., 2011; So et al., 2013), the current study adopted a quantitative method to examine the research hypotheses. Among the different quantitative data collection techniques, a cross-sectional survey was employed to measure customers' perceptions of brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruence, brand love, CHBI, and brand loyalty in the hotel industry. The adoption of this data collection method was deemed appropriate to collect the required data for a number of reasons. First, previous researchers extensively used the survey methodology to explore branding in different contexts (e.g. Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; He et al., 2012;

Tsai, 2014; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Second, this method has the ability to measure latent constructs, that is, variables that cannot be directly observed or quantified (e.g. CHBI, brand love, and brand-lifestyle congruence) (Burton and Mazerolle, 2011). Finally, the survey method provides participants with the freedom to fill the questionnaire when it is convenient, investigates problems in realistic settings, and allows access to a wide range of participants, thus increasing the likelihood of generalizing the results (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Turcic, 2003).

Data collection

The current study took place in Jordan during summer of 2014. There are 87 luxury or upper upscale hotels in Jordan (www.hotelscombined.com). Due to budget and time constraints, 18 luxury or upper upscale hotels were chosen conveniently and contacted to participate in the study. Out of those (18) hotels, only five 4-star hotels (i.e. first class) and two 5-star hotels (luxury) agreed to take part in the data collection process. Lower category hotels (e.g. economy hotels) were not contacted due to the nature of the investigated constructs, which require studying hotels that may potentially possess high levels of symbolic meanings.

The seven participating hotels asked to distribute the questionnaire to the respondents via their own employees to ensure convenient and non-disturbing access to the hotel's guests. This approach is common in the hotel industry (see e.g. Wilkins et al., 2009). Accordingly, the researchers spent nearly an hour and a half with the employees responsible for distributing the questionnaire in each hotel to explain to them the purpose and the content of the questionnaire and how it needs to be filled. A total of (423) completed usable questionnaires were received. The sample consisted of 57% male and 43% female; 7% within the age range of 21–29 years, 24.5% within the range of 30–39 years, 40.2% within the range of 40–49 years, and 28.3% above 50 years of age. Nine percent of the participants stayed in the hotel only once in the last 2 years and 91% stayed in the hotel two to four times in the past 2 years. Forty-five percent of the participants stayed in the hotel for leisure, 36% for business, 13% for business and leisure, and 6% for other purposes. Sixty-five percent of participants were from European countries, 23% were from Asian countries, 8% from North America and Canada, and 4% from other countries.

Item generation and purification of scale items

The current research used measurement items that had been validated in prior research and proved to have high Cronbach's α . Using previously validated scales will ensure the reliability and validity of the measurements. Accordingly, 4 items were selected from Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) to measure brand identity. These items were validated by He et al. (2012), who examined the effect of brand identity on different brand-related constructs. With regard to brand-lifestyle congruence, Nam et al. (2011) adopted 3 items from Vazquez et al. (2002), Johnson et al. (2006), and Del Rio et al. (2001) to measure the construct in the hotel industry. The 3 items, shown to have high Cronbach's α , were adopted in the current research to measure brand-lifestyle congruence. Five items were selected from the scale of Mael and Ashford (1992) to measure CHBI. These 5 items were further validated by So et al. (2013) in the hotel industry. The components of brand love were measured through selecting items from Sternberg (1997). These items were as follows: intimacy (5 items), passion (6 items), and decision/commitment (6 items). The used items were validated by Chen and Quester (2015) in personal care service setting. Three items were adapted from Harris and Goode (2004) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) to measure brand loyalty.

Some items were reworded to measure the constructs adequately. After that, a questionnaire containing the 32 items was then subjected to a pilot study, and exploratory factor analysis was performed on the data to ensure item purity. Items that were complex were modified to reduce ambiguity. In the final questionnaire, respondents were asked to express their level of agreement regarding the statements of the other five constructs based on a five-point Likert-type scale running from strongly disagree up to strongly agree.

Scale assessment

Table 1 shows that the reliabilities of the study's constructs, which were assessed using Cronbach's α (Churchill, 1979), were much higher than the threshold (0.70) and revealed satisfactory levels, ranging from 0.825 to 0.939. After that, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to unearth and determine the questions or statements that appear to best measure each

Table I. Reliability analysis, EFA, AVE, and multicollinearity.

Variable	Source	Statements	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE	Multicollinearity
Brand identity	Bhattacharya and Sen (2003)	1. This hotel brand has a distinctive identity. 2. This hotel brand stands out from its competitors. 3. This hotel brand is a first-class, high-quality brand. 4. This hotel brand has a high reputation. 1. When someone criticizes this hotel brand, it feels like a personal insult. 2. I am very interested in what others think about this hotel brand.	0.759–0.878	0.837	0.884	0.725	1.455
CHBI	Mael and Ashforth (1992)	3. When I talk about this hotel brand, I usually say we rather than they 4. This hotel brand's successes are my successes. 5. When someone praises this hotel brand, it feels like a personal compliment.	0.805–0.918	0.904	0.931	0.778	1.899
Brand-lifestyle congruence	Nam, Ekinci and Whyatt (2011)	1. This hotel brand reflects my personal lifestyle. 2. This hotel brand is totally in line with my lifestyle. 3. Staying in this hotel brand supports my lifestyle.	0.730–0.828	0.825	0.869	0.612	
Loyalty	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)	1. Next time I am looking for somewhere to stay, I will stay with this hotel brand. 2. I would rather stay with this hotel than try a different hotel I am unsure of. 3. I will continue to choose this hotel brand before other brands.	0.866–0.939	0.939	0.955	0.836	1.208
Intimacy	Sternberg (1997)	1. I give considerable emotional support to this hotel brand. 2. I have a relationship of mutual understanding with this hotel brand. 3. There is a certain intimacy between me and this hotel brand. 4. I feel emotionally close to this hotel brand. 5. I experience intimate communication with this hotel brand.	0.711–0.888	0.889	0.92	0.669	1.042

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Variable	Source	Statements	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE	Multicollinearity
Passion	Sternberg (1997)	1. I am passionate about this hotel brand. 2. I adore this hotel brand. 3. This hotel brand makes me feel great delight. 4. I cannot imagine another hotel making me as happy as this hotel brand does. 5. I enjoy the aesthetic attraction of this hotel brand. 6. Just seeing this hotel brand is exciting for me.	0.775–0.820	0.830	0.878	0.630	1.353
Decision/ commitment	Sternberg (1997)	1. I am committed to maintaining my affection with this hotel brand. 2. I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with this hotel brand. 3. I view my relationship with this hotel brand as a good decision. 4. I view my commitment to this hotel brand as a solid one. 5. I could not let anything get in the way of my commitment to this hotel brand.	0.742–0.810	0.810	0.862	0.570	1.119

Note: AVE = average variance extracted; EFA = exploratory factor analysis.

Table 2. The square root of AVE values of the study's variables.

	Loyalty	CHBI	Brand identity	Intimacy	Brand-lifestyle similarity	Passion	Decision/commitment
Loyalty	0.9022						
CHBI	0.2056	0.8820					
Brand identity	0.1249	0.4374	0.8514				
Intimacy	0.2245	0.2521	0.1857	0.8179			
Brand-lifestyle similarity	0.4155	0.1881	0.2188	0.3095	0.7823		
Passion	0.2433	0.3804	0.4205	0.3528	0.4200	0.7937	
Decision/commitment	0.2076	0.2844	0.3169	0.2953	0.3184	0.3627	0.7549

Note: CHBI = customer hotel brand identification; AVE = average variance extracted.

of the scales. The results reported in Table 1 indicate that the items of each factor loaded significantly ≥ 0.50 (ranging from 0.711 to 0.930) on their respective factor, suggesting satisfactory factorability for all the items. With regard to multicollinearity, it was assessed using SPSS.20 through evaluating the multicollinearity among all the variables. Multicollinearity can be detected by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF) (Henseler et al., 2009). Table 1 shows that the highest value of VIF was 1.889 for CHBI, which is below the common cutoff point threshold of 5. Regarding convergent validity, which measures the extent to which items on a scale are in theory linked (Hair et al., 2006), it was assessed by observing the average variance extracted (AVE) index using SmartPLS2.0 (Wetzel et al., 2009). The results reported in Table 1 show that the average for all the seven scales exceeded the minimum threshold value of 0.50 and the AVE for the seven scales ranged from 0.531 to 0.836.

With regard to discriminant validity, which refers to the extent to which a latent variable (A) is different and unique from other latent variables (e.g. B , C , and D) (Bagozzi et al., 1991), it was assessed by the Fornell–Larcker criterion using SmartPLS (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results reported in Table 2 show that the squared root average values of all the seven scales were greater than the corresponding off-diagonal correlations.

Hypotheses testing. The proposed framework of the current study was tested using a structural equation modeling—partial least squares (PLS). The primary advantage of using PLS is that it simultaneously estimates all path coefficients and individual item loadings in a specified model, which allows researchers to avoid biased and inconsistent parameter estimates (Chin, 1998). PLS also estimates partial model relationships

in an iterative sequence of ordinary least squares regressions, which leads to maximize the explained variance of the endogenous latent variables (Hair et al., 2011). Additionally, PLS is considered more appropriate when the research objective is prediction (i.e. predicting key target constructs or identifying key ‘driver’ constructs) and theory development (i.e. emphasis is more on exploration than confirmation) (Hair et al., 2011), which is the case of this research.

Thus to test the research hypotheses, SmartPLS 2.0 was employed. SmartPLS estimates the structural paths coefficients (β), explains the variance of the constructs in the model (R^2), and determines the significance of the path coefficients using the Bootstrap technique (p value). To start with testing the hypotheses, the current study predicts in H1 that brand identity is positively associated with CHBI. The findings of the study support this proposition ($\beta = 0.240$, $R^2 = 0.340$, $p < 0.05$). The results of the model testing also provide support for H2 ($\beta = 0.455$, $R^2 = 0.340$, $p < 0.001$) and, therefore, confirm that brand-lifestyle congruence is positively associated with CHBI.

To test H3, which posits that CHBI is positively associated with brand love, we followed the recent recommendations of Becker et al. (2012) on constructing and validating formative index. Thus, we first constructed brand love as a formative construct that is measured formatively by the items of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment and then tested the effect of CHBI on brand love index. The analysis supports this hypothesis ($CHBI \rightarrow$ brand love; $\beta = 0.423$, $R^2 = 0.328$, $p < 0.001$). The analysis also confirms H5, which indicates that there is a positive association between brand love and brand loyalty (brand love \rightarrow brand loyalty; $\beta = 0.560$, $R^2 = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$). However, H4, which states that there is a positive association between CHBI and brand loyalty, does not find support ($\beta = 0.180$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 3. Hypotheses testing of the study's model.

Hypotheses	Path coefficients	Significance level	R ²
H1: Brand identity → CBI	0.240	0.05	0.340
H2: Brand-lifestyle congruence → CHBI	0.455	0.001	0.340
H3: CHBI → brand love	0.423	0.001	0.328
H4: CHBI → brand loyalty	0.180	p > 0.05	
H5: Brand love → brand loyalty	0.560	0.001	0.375

Note: CHBI = customer hotel brand identification; CBI = customer brand identification.

Further analysis was carried out to examine the effect of CHBI on the individual components of brand love. The results indicate that CHBI is strongly associated with passion ($\beta = 0.510$, $R^2 = 0.43$), followed by intimacy ($\beta = 0.390 = 0$, $R^2 = 0.355$), and decision/commitment ($\beta = 0.330$, $R^2 = 0.290$). Additional analysis also revealed that among the components of brand love, intimacy has the strongest association with loyalty ($\beta = 0.605$), followed by decision/commitment ($\beta = 0.474$), and passion ($\beta = 0.382$). Overall, the results reveal that the variances in the dependent variables that were explained by their predictors were either relatively moderate or high, thus supporting the integrated framework that the current study proposes, and the applicability of these constructs in the hotel industry. Table 3 summarizes the findings of the current research.

Discussion and conclusions

Prior research tends to focus extensively on social exchange variables such as service quality, perceived value, and satisfaction in explaining hotel brand loyalty. This study, however, extends previous research from the field of sociology and psychology to address the symbolic consumption and the emotional aspects of a guest's hotel experience as paths to loyalty formation. It integrates brand identity, brand-lifestyle congruence, CHBI, and brand love into one model to predict brand loyalty in the hotel industry. As such, the current research extends our understanding on how deep and meaningful relationships can be developed between hotels and guests through

symbolic consumption that goes beyond satisfying guests' immediate needs. More specifically, it shows how brand identity and brand-lifestyle congruence contribute to the development of CHBI, which in turn, engenders a powerful emotional experience with hotel brands and cultivates affection and passion to that brand. Those heavy emotional feelings in turn provide an important basis upon which hotel brand loyalty is established. Thus, the key insight that the current study offers is that guests do not recommend or visit hotels only for their functional values but also for their symbolic values stemmed from brand identity, CHBI, and brand-lifestyle congruence.

Therefore, this research makes a number of theoretical contributions to branding literature in general and hotel brand loyalty in particular. First, the current research uses the concept of love beyond the conventional context of personal relationships and offers an empirical support for the applicability of Sternberg's (1987) conceptualization of love in the hotel industry. The three elements of Sternberg's love conceptualization are unique and distinct. Each element makes a significant and different contribution toward customer experience of love in the hotel industry.

Second, the results of the current research indicate that CHBI influences brand loyalty only via brand love. This is because the fourth hypothesis, which states that 'customer hotel brand identification is positively associated with brand loyalty' was rejected. This suggests that brand love is not a sufficient condition, but a necessary one, for CHBI to influence brand loyalty. This result should not be surprising since prior research was inconclusive regarding that. For example, Carlson et al. (2009) found a direct link between brand identification and brand loyalty in the car industry, and Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) reached to the same conclusion in sport teams. However, Kim et al. (2001) found the relationship insignificant in cellular phone brands. In the hotel industry, however, So et al. (2013) found that when service quality, trust, and perceived value were introduced to the relationship between CHBI and brand loyalty, the relationship became insignificant. The authors concluded that although 'strong CBI is insufficient to establish hotel brand loyalty in isolation, CBI does represent a significant factor that exerts an indirect influence on brand loyalty through customers' brand evaluation' (p. 39). It could be the case that those who found a direct link between identification and loyalty examined products and services that possess high levels of symbolic meanings, unlike

hotel brands, which may not possess symbolic meanings to the degree of those products and services. In sum, this research adds to the findings of So et al. (2013) in that it identifies a new variable (i.e. brand love) that strengthens the identification–loyalty relationship.

Third, the association between CHBI and brand love is consistent with the view of Shaver et al. (1987: 1078) who pointed that an antecedent to the love emotion is ‘the judgment that the loved one provides something the person wants, needs or likes’. Analogously, in the hotel industry, the symbolic resources of hotel brands, which allow guests to express their values and lifestyle in their social environment, will lead to develop a strong attachment and positive evaluation of hotel brands and their offerings. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) also concluded that a consumer’s love toward a brand is greater for brands that play a significant role in shaping a consumer’s identity, enhancing a consumer’s social self, and reflecting a consumer’s inner self.

Finally, the findings reveal that a distinctive and unique identity that clearly distinguishes the hotel brand from its competitors and appeals to target segments’ needs and desires will allow for a sustainable differentiation of the hotel’s products and services, which in turn help in enhancing guests’ identification with the hotel. In addition, a hotel brand that supports guests’ lifestyle, beliefs, aspirations, and attitudes toward life also enhances guests’ identification with the brand. Such results are consistent with the view of Tuominen (1999) who notes that the ownership or the use of the brand, which reflects status, enhances image, and projects lifestyle, which becomes of value in its own right.

Managerial implications

The insights that the findings of the current research offer to brand managers are threefold. First, when a hotel wants to explore its brand identity, it needs to examine both internal and external factors (Urde, 1999). Internally, the hotel considers who it thinks the brand is, whereas, externally, the hotel considers the guest’s view of who the brand is. Once the firm explores ‘Who is the brand?’ a logical next consideration relates to ‘Who does the brand want to be?’ Exploring the current brand identity leads to the formulation of brand-related objectives. This in turn leads to the formulation of strategies of achieving those objectives. As the hotel becomes

deeply analytical about the brand’s identity, it increases guest identification with the hotel brand.

The results of brand lifestyle congruence, brand identification, and brand love also indicate that guests are motivated to differentiate themselves through brand experiences, which need to be tailored and personalized to support the individuality, uniqueness, and distinctiveness of guests. For example, to enhance brand identification and love, Wyndham Hotels encourage guests to display their personal items and belongings in their rooms to express the uniqueness of their personalities (Nam et al., 2011). Other hotels such as Hemingway Hotels and Resorts work on identifying an iconic figure as inspiration, in each segment, whose life has developed around a particular lifestyle. This issue has allowed Hemingway’s Hotels to make an immediate picture from which customers of that particular market segment can easily identify (Devlin, 2015). Hotel brands could also create engaging-based symbolic consumption through changing the layout, furnishings, style, and interior decoration of hotel rooms to create certain types of personalities that match those of the target audience. Additionally, hotel brands could develop new products and services to reflect the different lifestyles of their guests and could also combine living elements/activities and modern themes into functional design to provide guests with opportunities to explore the experience they want. In this vein, hotel brands are strongly encouraged to employ psychographic research in order to deeply understand the hearts and thoughts of their guests, that is, what inspires them, what are their values, what encourages them, why they do what they do, and what kind of emotions are involved during their buying decisions.

It is worth noting that service sectors in general (e.g. banking, airlines, etc.) could also benefit from the findings of our study. Managers operating in different service sectors need to realize that perceived brands are appreciated not only for their distinctiveness and superior prestige but also for their ability to convey brand values congruent with the lifestyle of the target customers and their ability to facilitate consumers’ expression of desired lifestyle. They also need to realize that both brand identity and brand-lifestyle congruence represent important routes for brand identification since they both have their own individual direct impacts on brand identification. As such, service sectors

must endow their brands with a sense of authenticity from its origin and history and must also reflect status, enhance image, and project lifestyle common to the brand and the target audience.

Limitations and directions for future research

First, the design of the current research did not allow the researchers to truly understand why CHBI has a direct association with loyalty in other industries (e.g. cars) but indirect association in the hotel industry. Future research could further explore this area to advance our understanding on that. Second, the data were collected from hotels located in one country (i.e. Jordan), which may have affected the results. Investigating the same hypothesized relationships across different countries would provide more concrete evidence on the role of CHBI and brand love in loyalty development. Third, the hypothesized relationships among the constructs included in the model were investigated in the hotel industry only. Therefore, future research could examine these relationships in other industries to enhance the external validity of the model and to see if the same relationships hold true in other industries. Fourth, the sample of the current research had 91% of repeat visitors and 9% of first time visitors. This leads to pose the following questions: Would the results be the same if the sample was the opposite (i.e. 91% first time visitors and 9% repeat visitors)? Would it be necessary for visitors to stay more than once in a hotel to identify and love that hotel? Would the level of brand identification and brand love for repeat visitors be significantly different from that of first time visitors? Future research could investigate such issues through comparing and contrasting first time visitors and repeat visitors to see if that would yield different findings and insights. Finally, it is worth noting that there are different conceptualizations of brand love that have been suggested in the branding literature. However, as far as the current researcher's knowledge is concerned, none of these conceptualizations has been offered to reflect the characteristics of the hotel industry. Therefore, future research could identify the key dimensions of brand love in the hotel industry using a qualitative study and then compare that with existing models to identify areas of similarities and dissimilarities in the application of the construct in the hotel industry and other industries.

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