Apple ID: Building a Model of Consumer Brand Identification

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the meanings that Apple consumers attribute to the brand. It also aims to test a brand identification model. To this end, a mixed-method approach has been adopted. Qualitative data were analysed using the Iramuteq computer program while for quantitative data structural equation modelling was used. The results show that when Apple consumers think about the brand, they think about the quality and the distinctive properties of and the different parts that make up the product. The results also indicate that customer satisfaction and social benefits precede brand identification, which leads to greater advocacy of, loyalty to and a greater tendency for an impulse buying of Apple products. These results provide useful insights into consumer-brand relationships from a social identity theory perspective and important implications for brand management strategies.

Introduction

Marketers are becoming more aware of the importance of consumers' identification with a brand or company and seek to build committed and meaningful relationships with their customers. Brands offer consumers the possibility of enhancing their social identity by consuming products of a specific brand or discussing a brand and its products online (McGowan et al., 2017). Therefore, brands have been crucial for building relationships with consumers, guaranteeing long-term business success.

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Over the last few years, consumer scepticism towards brands has been a common experience. This scenario has led to questions concerning consumer brand identification (CBI) that has become even more important for brand management (Tuškej et al., 2013). A brand's identity in this context has profound effects on a business and its consumers. Two obvious examples are Google Android phone and Apple iPhone in the cell phone market (Lam et al., 2013).

Although previous studies on CBI provide important insights, two key limitations can be noticed. Firstly, even though the importance of CBI as an antecedent to consumer behaviour is widely acknowledged, there has been little research about the drivers of CBI (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). Secondly, few researchers have examined the evolution of CBI from the perspective of social identity (Rather et al., 2019). Furthermore, despite the awareness about CBI has increased, research on the relation, effects and causes of this identification with a brand in the consumer's behaviour is limited (Büyükdağ & Kitapci, 2021).

This article begins with the presentation of the conceptual framework, followed by a review of the relevant literature. Then the hypotheses are tested in a structural model that describes the relationships among brand identification, social benefits of a brand, customer satisfaction, brand advocacy, brand loyalty and impulse buying. This model is proposed for CBI for Apple. This is followed by the description of the study's research design and the findings and their implications are discussed. In conclusion, some limitations of this research are presented and directions for further investigation are suggested.

Despite the prior research, we still know little about how brand identification takes place and how consumers incorporate attributes from a brand. It is therefore essential to find out how brand identification evolves and changes over time (Lam et al., 2013). Several authors address the operationalisation of CBI and highlight the importance of further investigation of its antecedents and consequences (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). Besides, it remains unclear what factors are part of CBI, and it is vital to both marketing academics and practitioners to know what produces CBI (Lam et al., 2013).

The conceptual framework used in this paper explains potential antecedents and consequences of CBI. The model postulates that social benefits of a brand and customer satisfaction antecede brand identification, and that brand identification leads to brand advocacy, brand loyalty, and impulse buying of the brand products. This study aims to gain insights into the scope of research on CBI using Apple as a brand and integrate different lines of marketing research. Also, it seeks to provide a better understanding of how a consumer identifies with a brand, which offers the marketing managers insights into where to invest (Augusto & Torres, 2018).

Apple

It is essential to explain why Apple was chosen as a brand to conduct this study. The main reason is the fact that Apple has seen, in the past years, a cult-like following from consumers highly identifying with it. Over the years, Apple grew through the manufacture and distribution of its line of personal computers and became the world leader in the design, distribution and manufacturing of high-tech personal computing devices . Apple continues to be on the list of the 100 most powerful global brands (Badenhausen, 2019).

This distinction of Apple's being a 'cult brand' emerged because some brands claim a particularly high-identified consumer base (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). In this sense, Apple has a strong brand personality based on nonconformity, innovation and creativity. Advertising and marketing strategies, such as 'Think Different', enlighten these characteristics with a relevant symbol of individuality and empowerment (Fitzsimons et al., 2008). In this way, it is easy to understand why Apple consumers are intensely loyal,

integrating the brand 'into their self' and creating 'brand communities' with like-minded, passionate consumers (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). The prior research on Apple has established several factors that contributed to the company's identification, including the story of the company's beginnings in Steve Jobs' garage and Mac computers' outstanding performance (Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). These and other factors contribute to Apple's being recognized and referenced in the academic and business world as a loved brand (Palaio, 2011). Research has shown that a product's design can promote brand identification. For example, the Apple product line utilises a minimalist design that produces perceptions of high quality. This identification by product design is becoming more important in the context of fast market consumer goods (Herm & Möller, 2014).

Moreover, Apple's customers are highly involved with the brand, which gives them means of expressing individual and social status (Forsido, 2012). Lusensky (2014) states that companies usually have consumers, but Apple has fans and a strong brand mythology. This idea comes from neuroscience findings that used MRI scans, showing that Apple's brand stimulates the same part of the brain in its followers as religious images do in people of faith (Lusensky, 2014). The power of the brand on Apple's consumers is undeniable. The associations of 'prestigious, high quality, fashionable, elegant, trustworthy, and number-one among brands' its users have with it reinforce a positive self-image, status, loyalty and positive word of mouth (Forsido, 2012, p. 34).

Consumer Brand Identification

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1985) has emerged as an important theoretical perspective in marketing research that explains group processes and intergroup relations. SIT suggests that individuals simplify the social world by classifying themselves and others into various social groups, which is called *social categorisation*. This classification helps them to segment and order the social environment and provides a means to define themselves and others. Recently, this idea has been extended to the field of consumer relationships (Elbedweihy et al., 2016).

Social identity refers to the 'interaction between two or more individuals (or groups of individuals) that are fully determined by their memberships in various social groups' (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 277). Since social identification affects social behaviour, SIT has been widely used to understand consumers' psychological linkage to brands in building lasting relationships with the consumers (Elbedweihy & Jayawardhena, 2014). SIT is important because it is the foundation of the concept of brand identification and most of the definitions about CBI are drawn on it.

CBI is known as 'the primary psychological substrate for that kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers.' (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 77). CBI has also been defined as 'a consumer's psychological state of perceiving, feeling and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand' (Lam et al., 2013, p. 235).

Consumer identification has multidisciplinary foundations, and scholars recognise that the process of identification has a significant impact on consumer behaviour (Tuškej et al., 2013). Since the sense of oneness with a brand is usually a shared symbol of groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Tuškej & Podnar, 2018), the researchers have emphasised the value of identity-motivated marketing strategies (Lam, 2012). In fact, the concepts of identity and identification have been applied to study a wide variety of situations in the marketing field (Lam, 2012).

According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), CBI depends on the extent to which a company's perceived identity is seen as an attractive means of satisfying one or more individuals' self-definitional needs. Powerful brands embody positive, attractive and meaningful social identities that fulfil these needs

(Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Moreover, consumers are likely to find a brand's identity more attractive when the brand matches their self-sense because such identity enables them to maintain and express their sense of self authentically (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Consumers tend to create strong relations with brands because the latter express and enhance their self-identity, which plays an essential role in their lives (Tuškej et al., 2013).

The identification of a brand has various positive outcomes, so understanding how identification occurs over time has important managerial implications for the customer's loyalty, satisfaction and the predisposition to pay for a specific product (Popp & Woratschek, 2017b). Brand identification may be an important tool for identifying and developing a long-term brand relationship (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018). Additionally, people who identify with a brand are more likely to perform activities that benefit the brand (Homburg et al., 2009). Therefore, identification has positive effects on diverse brand goals, including customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, feedback, and product innovation (Popp & Woratschek, 2017b). Prior research about brand identification has led to various outcomes; however, it is unclear why and how this identification occurs (He et al., 2017). There is also a lack of understanding about the dynamics of the antecedents of and the 'nature of CBI (Elbedweihy & Jayawardhena, 2014).

Brand Social Benefits

Research on social groups suggests that people often identify with a brand withing their groups to gain social status and strengthen their membership (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). In the context of Apple, the existence of brand communities is an essential way to connect people since these users have something in common: admiration towards a brand and a company. Apple as a brand has social and cultural meanings, and sometimes consumers form groups based on a shared commitment to a brand with a set of shared beliefs and values (Torres et al., 2017).

Social benefits of a brand (BSB) are defined as 'social interaction opportunities that are provided by a brand' (Torres et al., 2017, p. 54), suggesting that if consumers perceive that a brand provides social benefits, their identifying with the brand is likely to happen (Torres et al., 2017). This concept is important when studying CBI because brands have both social and cultural meaning. For example, Zhang and Luo (2016) reveal that BSB shows the strongest impact on satisfaction in the online smartphone brand community. Additionally, Kleine et al. (1993) tried to answer the question 'How do products make the person?' The results showed that products stimulate reflexive self-evaluations that lead to self-definitions . Even though brands and products have been perceived as creating and enhancing social identity, only a few studies on the benefits of and social interactions regarding the consumtion of a brand have been produced (Lee et al., 2015). In this sense, the research shows that consumers are more likely to identify with brands that help them connect with important groups, communities or subcultures (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Based on this, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H1:   Social benefits of a brand are positively related to consumer-brand identification.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction (CS) occurs when the performance of a product or a service meets or exceeds the customer's expectations (Oliver, 1980; Popp & Woratschek, 2017b). Thus, satisfaction results

from expectations from a purchase and the experience after obtaining the product or service. Customer expectations influence brand satisfaction or product and are influenced by brand importance and its cost (Forsido, 2012). Consequently, satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of the consumption experience by consumers in terms of their expectations. This expectation is an indicator of the performance anticipated by the consumer, which depends on what they get from the product or service in the present.

Although that evaluation is based on the characteristics they value from that brand, it is increasingly difficult to meet or exceed customer expectations (Forsido, 2012; Homburg et al., 2009). According to Homburg et al. (2009), the effects between customer satisfaction, loyalty and willingness to pay are more substantial for the customer who has had a long-term relationship with the firm. On the other hand, history shows that companies lose customers despite providing high satisfaction (Sondoh et al., 2007). Therefore, in order to maintain the old and gain new loyal customers, marketers must focus on efforts to improve satisfaction among their customers while at the same time strengthen their strategy for the functional appeal of the brand (Sondoh et al., 2007).

Scholars argue that identification is related to the CS levels because satisfied customers have fulfilled their self-definitional needs and are more likely to identify with a specific product, brand or company (Popp & Woratschek, 2017a). Furthermore, research shows that customer identification and satisfaction influence a customer's loyalty and willingness to pay. If loyal to a brand, the customer will keep using that product or brand in the future and will not search for alternatives (Forsido, 2012). Therefore, we propose the hypothesis that

H2:   Customer satisfaction is positively related to consumer-brand identification.

Brand Advocacy

People are social animals and share information and opinions about all kinds of things, such as what they buy, eat, drive, visit, or wear, and which brands are the best ones (Thomson, 2015). In the current global market, where information is massive and easily accessible and competition is strong, companies struggle to differentiate themselves from competitors (Wilder, 2015). What people say about a product or brand is one of the most important information sources for the consumer. For marketers, it is imperative, therefore, to comprehend the dynamics of how brands are discussed by people and use this understanding to find new ways of customer engagement (Keller, 2007).

Brand advocacy (BA) occurs when the consumers proactively recommend a brand and defend it against detractors (Wilder, 2015). This behaviour is challenging to measure because 'nobody knows how to do it on purpose', since it is out of our control (Thomson, 2015). However, with the rise of digitalisation and social media, the focus on the social influence around a brand or product has increased. Nevertheless, online media does not replace peer to peer influence and conversation. Studies have shown that even if the consumers embrace digital tools to discuss their brand experiences, they still need to engage through conversations that take place offline (Thomson, 2015). Research reveals that consumers across many countries consistently report that recommendations from friends, family and colleagues have a significant impact on their brand choices (Thomson, 2015). However, little consensus has been achieved regarding what specific actions and behaviours the term *brand advocacy* covers (Wilder, 2015).

Simon Sinek, in his famous TED talk, says that Apple's success is a result of the company's ability to gain and maintain loyal customers. Sinek (2010) argues that because Apple based all its marketing

messages on a core set of beliefs, consumers who shared that belief system would be loyal to the brand and would seek validation for those beliefs. Research has shown that people who love tech products advocate them more than the usual consumer as they engage in both online or offline reviews and recommendations. Additionally, these tech-savvy consumers have high functional and emotional expectations about the products (Gupta et al., 2017). In sum, when a customer perceives value in their brand relationships, they feel a sense of responsibility to return the favour by investing in products from or by talking about those brands to other consumers (Wilder, 2015).

Although it is not clear in the literature how to classify a behaviour as brand advocacy, all marketers understand the power of recommendation and how it influences the probability of choosing a brand (Thomson, 2015). That is one of the main reasons that lead marketers to implement several strategies to increase interactions around a specific brand. Since the social identity is based on interaction and membership in various social groups and recommendations only happens when social interaction occurs, the present study seeks to gain more insights and analyse the interaction between CBI and Brand Advocacy, believing that brand identification leads to brand loyalty. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated: (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). BA by existing consumers is an attempt to communicate to others their consumer experience and lifestyle (Gupta et al., 2017). Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3:   Consumer-brand identification is positively related to brand advocacy.

Brand Loyalty

As the business environment grows more complex and becomes increasingly globalized, market disruptions become widespread and threaten customer-brand relationships. Events like sales promotion, industry crises, negative publicity and innovations by competitors, for example, can put brands at jeopardy (Lam et al., 2010).

Marketers have devoted much effort in investigating consumers' loyalty (Yeh et al., 2016), since they realise that loyalty is a crucial driver of the growth of their market share, creates resistance to competitors' brands and generates positive word-of-mouth (Forsido, 2012). Additionally, loyalty is positively related to the acceptance of a premium price and resistance to negative information (Yeh et al., 2016).

According to Lam et al. (2010), brand loyalty (BL) is 'a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product consistently in the future' despite marketing efforts to make the consumer switch brands (Forsido, 2012, p. 9). BL occurs when a customer perceives that the brand has a high quality, which creates repurchase intentions and willingness to recommend (Forsido, 2012). Consumers tend to consider peer opinions more reliable than the information a brand provides. These social interactions are based on consumer experience; comparing product experiences and seeking advice creates strong trust and loyalty towards the brand (Coelho et al., 2018). The more the brand is integrated into self and the more benefits the consumer perceives from that brand, the more likely the consumer is willing to invest their social, financial and time resources to maintain and value the brand-relationship, and simultaneously becoming resilient to negative information (Elbedweihy et al., 2016).

SIT suggests that people with high levels of brand identification exhibit supportive behaviours to increase their status. It explains why when a consumer says positive things about a brand: it helps them express their self-identity and strengthen their feelings of fulfilment and self-enhancement (Popp & Woratschek, 2017a).

Although BL is related to CBI, there is a difference between both constructs. While BL represents an attitude or action to the brand, the identity remains separate from the brand. Despite that, both constructs have been widely studied and have received significant attention among marketers (Popp & Woratschek, 2017a).

Nevertheless, the question remains, what makes Apple's consumers loyal to Apple products when there are similar products on the market? Do Apple users generate that loyalty because of a high admiration for the company or just loyalty to one or more Apple products? This kind of loyalty is probably created by the consumer's social identity that sees an Apple product as an extension of who they are. Understanding these questions is important for companies to reproduce this kind of loyalty to their brands (Pinson, 2010). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Consumer-brand identification is positively related to brand loyalty.

Impulsive Buying

Impulse buying (IB) has been defined 'as a sudden hedonically complex purchase behaviour in which the impulse purchase precludes any thoughtful, deliberate consideration of alternative or future implications' (Amos et al., 2014). On the other hand, Rook (1987) defined impulse buying as a powerful urge to buy something immediately. This concept creates effective marketing tactics that can be used to increase a company's market share and revenue (Xiao & Nicholson, 2013).

IB has three aspects: it is unplanned; it is difficult to control; and it is accompanied by an emotional response (Xiao & Nicholson, 2013). These kinds of purchases are driven by strong desires for an immediate satisfaction and are difficult to resist or control. The consumers who have had this experience describe it as a strong temptation for a product for which they have little control over their behaviour in resisting this impulse (Amos et al., 2014).

Many researchers have investigated the antecedents of IB behaviour. For example, Amos et al. (2014) designed a framework that classified IB into three categories: dispositional, situational, and sociodemographic. The dispositional factors that influence IB behaviour include spontaneity, susceptibility to influence, purchase enjoyment, low self-esteem, and ability to regulate emotions. Situational antecedents are external stimuli from which the impulse emerges, such as marketing, current mood, the store or product layout or others' presence during a shopping situation. Lastly, the sociodemographic aspects that influence IB are age, gender, income, and ethnicity (Amos et al., 2014).

Prior research mentions that in an IB behaviour, the decision for purchase is associated more with feelings than with cognitive processing (Sharma et al., 2010). Due to this, identification has a central role in the process of IB. Lins et al. (2016) state that IB in teenagers is related to the brand's importance, which is linked to consumer feelings. Additionally, the results suggest that having a positive attitude towards a brand may lead to the desire to acquire the product, making the consumer more likely to be impulsive in the purchase. In sum, since brands offer the consumer the possibility to express and enhance their self-identity and, simultaneously, when the consumer identifies with a specific brand, the willingness to try and buy new products increases.

Apple understands the power of constant innovation and the outcomes of having the best product layout, leading to a higher probability of purchasing. By integrating the brand into consumer self-identity, the company has created the urge to acquire Apple products for immediate satisfaction and gratification, which leads to an impulsive purchase of its products.

Marketers and retailers continuously try to increase the possibility of IB behaviour through product design, promotion or marketing channel innovation (Lam et al., 2010). What is important is that these three criteria typically categorise IB. Firstly, the act is spontaneous and incites a positive emotion. Secondly, when making a purchase, the consumer does not think about the consequences or tries to reduce the bad outcomes/consequences or bad results from their purchase decisions. Thirdly, the act generally involves a temptation for self-fulfilment through the purchase (Amos et al., 2014). Therefore, we posit that

H5:   Consumer-brand identification is positively related to impulsive buying.

Method

Participants

In this research the participants were 776 Portuguese Apple users, of which 48.3% were male ($n = 375$), 51.5% were female ($n = 400$) and 0.2% were other gender ($n = 1$). Aged between 18 and 76 years, the respondents' mean age was 28.29 years ($SD = 9.56$). In terms of professional background, 46.9% were employed and 33.8% were college students.

Questionnaire

The study was conducted through a questionnaire, which was divided into two parts. The first part used a qualitative approach, the Free Word Association Technique, where participants were asked which five words come to their mind when they think about Apple and rate those words from 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive. This question was aimed to prime the respondents about Apple. The second part used a quantitative approach. The variables under study were: consumer-brand identification, social benefits of a brand, customer satisfaction, brand advocacy, brand loyalty and impulse buying (Table 1). The questionnaire included multiple-item scales for each variable that have already been validated in previous studies (see Table 1). The items were adapted in the context of Apple in such a way that the respondents had the brand in their mind when they filled the survey. The respondents were asked if they owned any Apple products. For an affirmative answer, they had to mention which products and indicate them on the list provided with the options. Only those who claimed to own an Apple product were selected as participants in this study. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree.

Procedures

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample of 10 respondents and based on the feedback provided, modifications were made to ensure that the wording and meaning of the items were comprehensible. Survey data were gathered in March 2019 using the social media platform Facebook through brand communities of Apple's users and 1628 answers were collected using the *SurveyMonkey* platform. In all, 776 completed surveys were used for this study. The cases with incomplete responses were removed via

Table 1. Construct Measures

Item	Adapted Source
Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI)	
I feel proud of Apple's brand.	Rubio et al. (2015)
I identify strongly with brand Apple.	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
I have a lot in common with other people who use the Apple brand.	Tuškej et al. (2013)
Apple is like a part of me.	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
Brand Social Benefits (BSB)	
Being a customer of Apple brand makes me feel like I belong to a special group.	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
Apple offers me the opportunity to socialise.	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
Apple brand allows me to achieve a certain social status.	Carroll & Ahuvia (2006)
Having Apple products has a positive impact on what others think of me.	Carroll & Ahuvia (2006)
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	
All in all, I am very satisfied with Apple	Homburg et al. (2009)
My experience with Apple meets my expectations of an ideal brand.	Homburg et al. (2009)
Apple products have a good performance.	Sondoh et al. (2007)
This brand does not disappoint me ever.	Kang (2015)
Brand Advocacy (BA)	
I give advice about the Apple brand to people I know.	Tuškej et al. (2013)
I´ve already recommended the Apple brand to other consumers.	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
I have managed to convince other people to buy Apple brand	Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)
I talk about the Apple brand because it is offers really good products.	Tuškej et al. (2013)
Brand Loyalty (BL)	
It makes sense to buy Apple products instead of any other brand, even if they are the same segment.	Yoo & Donthu (2001)
I intend to buy Apple products in the near future.	Algesheimer et al. (2005)
I would be willing to pay a higher price for Apple over other brands.	Elbedweihy et al. (2016)
If I buy technology products, I will continue to choose the Apple brand.	Netemeyer et al. (2004)
Impulse Buying (IB)	
'Just do it' describes the way I buy Apple products	Rook & Fisher (1995)
'I see it, I buy it' describes the way I buy Apple products.	Rook & Fisher (1995)
'Buy now, think about it later' describes the way I buy Apple products.	Rook & Fisher (1995)
I often buy Apple products without thinking.	Rook & Fisher (1995)

Source: Authors' calculation.

listwise deletion. The sampling procedure used was non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Convenience sampling via Facebook is not a substitute for probability-based techniques; however, the fact that Facebook is the most popular social network in Portugal – 95% of the internet users accessed Facebook at least once a month in 2018 – supports the decision to use Facebook as the main sampling tool (Grupo Marktest, 2018).

The textual analysis regarding the qualitative data was done using the Iramuteq software (Ratinaud, 2009). A downward hierarchical classification (DHC) was performed after organizing similar and different textual segments into various classes. This analysis resulted in a dendrogram that organised the words, indicating the quantity and lexical composition of each class. Each word had a chi-square value (χ^2) and the larger χ^2, the more significant was considered the association with the class.

The quantitative data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM). SEM analysis allows to build, test and confirm models of complex relationships with various types of variables (Marôco, 2014). As a result, SEM test hypothesises relationships among concepts, with basic principles that are easy to comprehend with a framework not different from other statistical techniques such as ANOVA or multiple regressions (Gallagher et al., 2008).

This research follows the two-steps approach suggested by Gallagher et al. (2008), which separates the measurement and relationship estimations. The analysis begins with the first step of examining the measurement model by a confirmatory factor analysis of all variables. Then, once a satisfactory measurement model is obtained, the theoretical relationship structure is tested (Gallagher et al., 2008). By applying this two-stage method, it is ensured that the measures of the constructs are reliable and valid before trying to conclude relations between constructs (Møller Jensen & Hansen, 2006). SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 25.0 were used in performing confirmatory, causal, and structural equation analyses.

Results

The 10 most frequent words were: *expensive* (*n* = 165), *quality* (*n* = 133), *design* (*n* = 127), *price* (*n* = 106), *reliability* (*n* = 77), *durability* (*n* = 66), *beauty* (*n* = 65), *simplicity* (*n* = 56), *innovation* (*n* = 53) and *safety* (*n* = 49), Moreover, the words that were evoked were very positive (*M* = 4.10, *DP* = 0.68). In this way, it was possible to observe that the most cited words were related with the monetary value of the brand product as well as their qualities.

Analysing the general corpus consisted of 776 text segments (TS), with use of 633 (81.57%). 3885 occurrences emerged (words or forms), with 3918 distinct words and 1853 with a single occurrence. The analysed content was categorized into three classes (see Figure 1):

Class 1 – Perceived Quality

Firstly, the second-biggest class was composed of 254 TS (40.1%) of the text segments which included words like 'reliability' (χ^2 = 107.09), 'price' (χ^2 = 100.96), 'durability' (χ^2 = 48.15), 'design' (χ^2 = 32.56) and 'quality' (χ^2 = 19.81). These words are related to the good quality and characteristics perceived by the users of the brand.
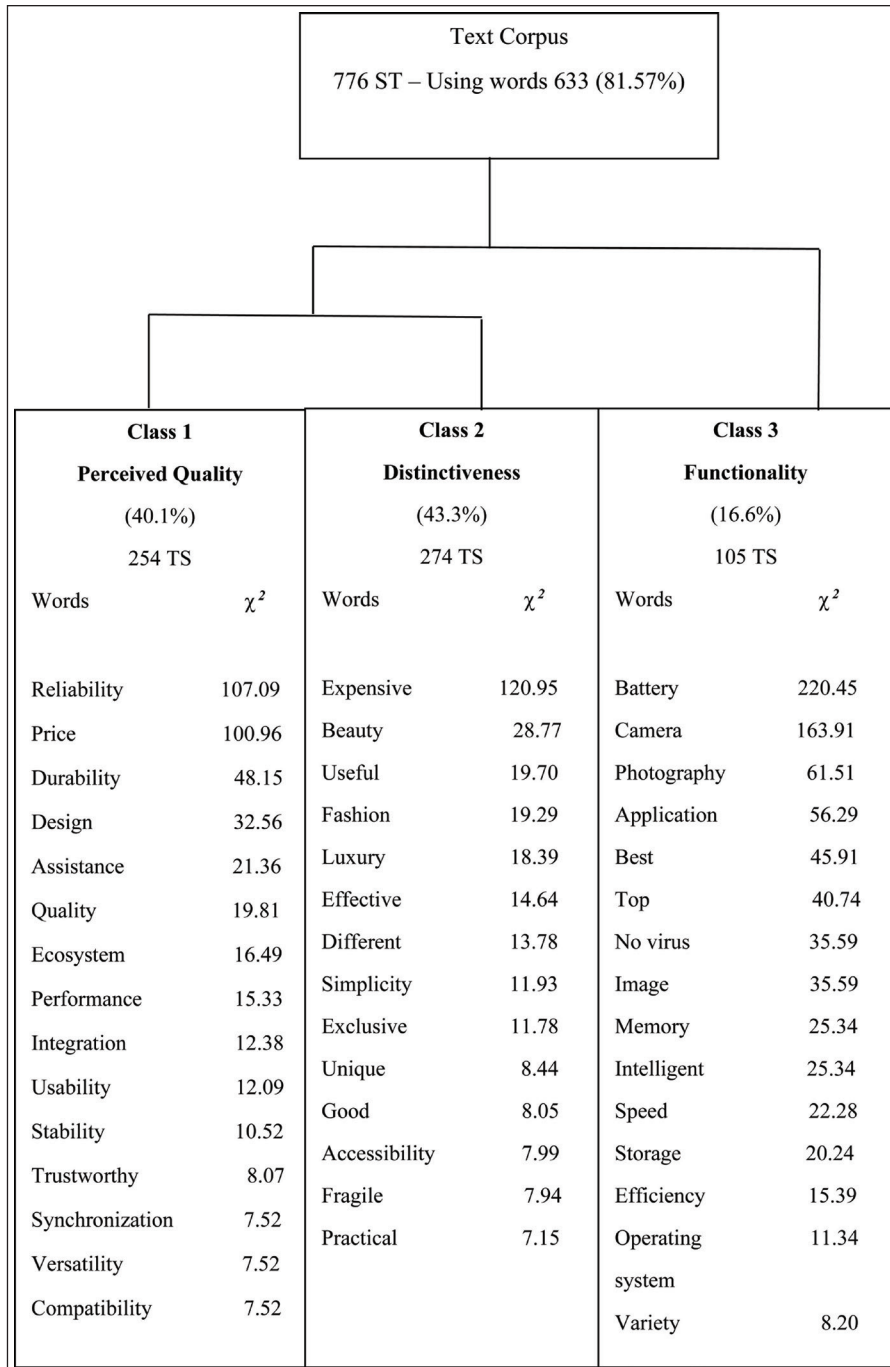
Class 2 – Distinctiveness

Secondly, the biggest class was composed of 274 TS (43.3%) of the text segments which included words like 'expensive' (χ^2 = 120.95), 'beauty' (χ^2 = 28.77), 'useful' (χ^2 = 19.70), 'fashion' (χ^2 = 19.29) and 'luxury' (χ^2 = 18.39). These words are related to the distinctive features perceived by the users of the company.

Class 3 – Functionality

Finally, the smallest class was composed of 105 TS (16.6%) of the text segments which included words like 'battery' (χ^2 = 220.45), 'camera' (χ^2 = 163.91), 'photography' (χ^2 = 61.51), 'application' (χ^2 = 56.29) and 'no virus' (χ^2 = 35.59). These words are related to the functionality proprieties and parts that make up the product.

It seems that consumers thinking differently about the brand. They think about the quality of the brand (Class 1), what distinguishes it and makes it unique (Class 2), and the functionality of the devices (Class 3).

Text Corpus		
776 ST – Using words 633 (81.57%)		

Class 1	**Class 2**	**Class 3**
Perceived Quality	**Distinctiveness**	**Functionality**
(40.1%)	(43.3%)	(16.6%)
254 TS	274 TS	105 TS

Words	χ^2	Words	χ^2	Words	χ^2
Reliability	107.09	Expensive	120.95	Battery	220.45
Price	100.96	Beauty	28.77	Camera	163.91
Durability	48.15	Useful	19.70	Photography	61.51
Design	32.56	Fashion	19.29	Application	56.29
Assistance	21.36	Luxury	18.39	Best	45.91
Quality	19.81	Effective	14.64	Top	40.74
Ecosystem	16.49	Different	13.78	No virus	35.59
Performance	15.33	Simplicity	11.93	Image	35.59
Integration	12.38	Exclusive	11.78	Memory	25.34
Usability	12.09	Unique	8.44	Intelligent	25.34
Stability	10.52	Good	8.05	Speed	22.28
Trustworthy	8.07	Accessibility	7.99	Storage	20.24
Synchronization	7.52	Fragile	7.94	Efficiency	15.39
Versatility	7.52	Practical	7.15	Operating system	11.34
Compatibility	7.52			Variety	8.20

Figure 1. Downward hierarchical classification of the meanings of the Apple brand consumers have

Source: Authors' calculation.
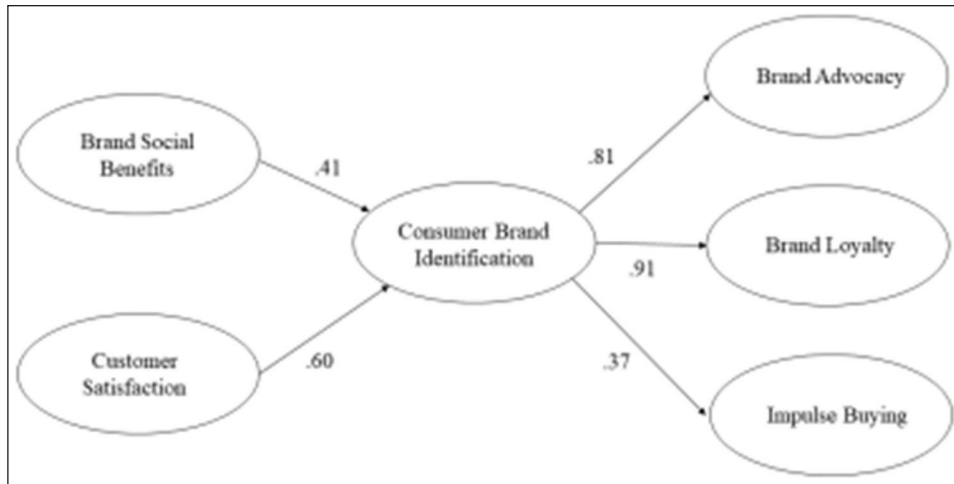
Figure 2. Consumer-Brand-Identification of Apple's brand Structural Model

Source: Authors' calculation.

Structural Equation Model

The model in Figure 2 shows that BSB and CS are antecedents of brand identification, which means that if a customer is satisfied and if the brand offers the consumer social benefits or status, the consumer will be more predisposed to identify with that brand. Consequently, this identification with a brand results in the consumer being an advocator and a loyal consumer of the brand, who is more likely to buy products from that brand on impulse. Before proceeding to the main analysis, the assumptions for structural equation modelling (SEM) were checked and verified. These assumptions were: an adequate variable-to-sample ratio, normality, linearity, no extreme multicollinearity and sampling adequacy.

Reliability, Discriminant Validity and Convergent Validity

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients r of Pearson, Cronbach's α, composite reliabilities (CR) and average variances extracted (AVE). Cronbach's α ranged from .74 for brand identification to .90 for social benefits, which is acceptable (Kim et al., 2008). The CR of each scale exceeded the .70 standard, suggesting adequate construct reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). The results indicate that the scales are internally consistent (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE for each construct presented in the model exceeded the .50 level in all constructs except in brand identification (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Despite that, as shown in Table 1 the variables dash back to different theoretical foundations and are conceptually distinct. Moreover, each of the scale items has relatively high standardised estimates on each factor, demonstrating high convergent validity, which means that each factor's chosen items reflect the construct examined here. Besides, correlations among the constructs are not excessively high, indicating high discriminant validity (see Table 2). In summary, the constructs are unidimensional and

Table 2. Correlation Matrix, Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability and Validity Measures

	CBI	SB	CS	BA	BL	IB
Consumer brand identification	1					
Brand social benefits	0.44**	1				
Customer satisfaction	0.42**	0.09*	1			
Brand advocacy	0.62**	0.26**	0.51**	1		
Brand loyalty	0.64**	0.34**	0.53**	0.65**	1	
Impulsive buying	0.34**	0.37**	0.10**	0.30**	0.21**	1
Cronbach's α	0.74	0.90	0.83	0.86	0.77	0.88
CR	0.71	0.90	0.88	0.87	0.78	0.89
AVE	0.38	0.69	0.66	0.69	0.98	0.66
Mean	3.45	1.94	4.44	4.03	3.56	1.45
SD	0.90	1.10	0.72	0.99	1.01	0.85

Source: Authors' calculation.

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$. CBI = consumer brand identification, BSB = brand social benefits, CS = customer satisfaction, BA = brand advocacy, BL = brand loyalty IB = impulse buying, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, SD = standard deviation.

show acceptable levels of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity to proceed with structural measurement.

Findings and Testing of the Structural Model

The measurement model was assessed by covarying all latent constructs in the model and examining the model fit. Regarding the sample size ($n = 776$), multiple fit indices were used to assess the model's overall fit. As implemented in AMOS, the measurement model yields adequate fit properties suggested by Hair (2009) – *CFI* .94, *GFI* = .90, *TLI* = .93, χ2/df = 3.57, *RMSEA* = .06. However, the *χ2/df* test shows minor differences. There is no universally agreed-upon standard as to what is a good and a bad fitting model. As a result, alternative measures of fit have been developed and analysed in this study (Marôco, 2014). Overall, these results show that the fit indices are acceptable, which indicates that the hypothesised model is a good fit to the observed data and the proposed hypotheses are confirmed at *p* <.001 (see Table 3).

BSB and CS are antecedents and measure CBI. On the other hand, identification has a significant influence on BA and BL, and less influence on IB. As Figure 2 shows, we found support for all of the proposed hypotheses. This is not surprising given that many of our hypotheses have been established in previous research (Table 1). In sum, our structural model substantially contributes to existing knowledge by providing a detailed picture of the underlying relationships and their strength.

CFI [Comparative Fit Index] = .94, GFI [Goodness of Fit Index] = .90, TLI [Tucker-Lewis Index] = .93, χ2/df [Degrees of Freedom] = 3.57, RMSEA [Root Mean Square Error of Approximation] = .06

Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to create and test a model that integrated the antecedents and consequences of CBI. It demonstrates the role and impact of identifying long-term brand relationships

Table 3. Structural Model (SEM) Results

Research Hypotheses	Relationship	Standardized Estimates	Z-Statistic*	Result
H1: Brand Social Benefits of a brand are positively related to consumer-brand identification.	CBI ← SB	0.41	11.17	Supported
H2: Customer satisfaction is positively related to consumer-brand identification.	CBI ← CS	0.60	12.67	Supported
H3: Consumer-brand identification is positively related to brand advocacy.	CBI → BA	0.81	15.66	Supported
H4: Consumer-brand identification is positively related to brand loyalty.	CBI → BL	0.91	15.18	Supported
H5: Consumer-brand identification is positively related to impulsive buying.	CBI → IB	0.37	8.46	Supported

Source: Authors' calculation.
Notes: * $p < .001$. CBI = consumer brand identification, SB = social benefits, CS = customer satisfaction, BA = brand advocacy, BL = brand loyalty IB = impulse buying.

and brand-related behaviours applied to the Apple brand. In line with previous research about the emergence of customer's extra-role behaviour from identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), this study extends these findings due to the strong effects observed in identifying BA and BL. However, on IB, the effect observed was smaller. Similar effects were found in previous studies, which are discussed below.

Regarding the sample used in this paper, only the consumers of Apple products are represented, which provides high reliability to the model. The results indicate that brand managers must invest in consumers' satisfaction and social experiences to increase their identification with a brand. This will lead to a loyal customer who recommends the brand to others and is more impulsive in the buying process. Choosing a brand that is an expression of individuality and empowerment, such as Apple, contributes to enlightening the significant interrelationships. In this way, brands should strive to increase CBI by drawing on social influence and symbolic antecedents of identification. Social interactions increase the involvement with the brand, which affects the success of a brand's profitability. Although all hypotheses were supported, researchers should not construe the study as a call for aiming for only high levels of identification; it should be understood that other complementary variables like product durability or design, for example, are essential to satisfaction and loyalty of the consumer.

Belk (1988) states, 'we are what we have', and so what we buy, own and consume define us to others. It is commonly recognised that brands can embody, inform and communicate desirable consumer identities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). New marketing research tools are developed on this recognition so that marketers can get information about who their consumers are and have an understanding on various aspects of their lives, including lifestyles, needs, desires and expectations (Coelho et al., 2018). This is extremely important since customers' expectations continue to rise, challenging companies to fulfil these expectations to succeed (Popp & Woratschek, 2017b).

This research contributes to the research on CBI through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The result of the association between customers' identification with the Apple brand and IB was found to be weak. Since we did not evaluate customer identification with other brands, this might have been a study limitation, considering that people can similarly identify with other brands too. Thus, it was not illustrated if the identification with the Apple brand is equal to or different from the identification this

sample would have with other brands. It is not possible to understand in depth if an identification generates sufficient emotional stimuli, which is an essential component of IB. This would explain the weakness of the results of this association. Despite this, the results confirm previous studies about the importance of CBI.

The present study offers several new insights for researchers and important managerial implications due to the integrative perspective on the drivers of marketing success. It corroborates, for example, the proposed framework by Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday (2008), whose theoretical model was developed from a British sample of car owners. The authors' model focused on business relationships as well as examined brand identification and its influence on repurchase intention. We add to these findings by evaluating a model in a different cultural context and for a different industry as suggested by Kuenzel and Halliday (2008). It was interesting to observe how the perspectives that integrate these variables confirm the importance of further investigations for theory and practice in this area by linking brand identity to other relevant issues.

This study offers some critical insights into high consumer involvement processes. The results indicate that brands play an important role in everyday life and can influence individual identity construction. Thus, consumer relationships with brands tend to be strong and enduring. Therefore, managers need to ensure that their brands have a high social value and do serve consumers' interpersonal goals. This can lead to consumer's identification with that brand and, as a result, to advocacy and loyalty for the brand and a propensity to buy that brand on impulse.

In conclusion, these findings offer a better understanding about consumer-brand relationships from the perspective of SIT with important implications for strategic brand management. Regarding the band image of Apple, 'perceived quality' was the biggest class, evoked by terms such as 'reliability', 'durability' and 'design'. This suggests that the perception of quality is very strong among consumers of this brand and that technology companies should focus on these attributes. In addition, it was seen that an Apple product is distinguished from others by its price and aesthetic appeal. Users identify themselves with this brand, which distinguishes them from others.

In the class of functionality, it is not known whether the remembered words were negatively or positively charged. However, words like 'battery life' and 'camera quality' are features and hardware that make up an Apple product and are evoked when one thinks of the brand. Regardless of whether we know if the connotations are positive or negative, this class was the smallest in terms of TS. However, thoroughly investigating each of these word's meaning in the minds of the consumers can open new paths of understanding about any brand.

Theoretical Implications

The model presented in this study involves emotional variables such as consumer satisfaction, and social benefits. The joint analysis of these factors allows assessing how social identity is reflected in the relationship with others and the defence of product choice (advocacy) by consumers. These analyses were conducted in two dimensions: attitudinal dimension (brand loyalty) and behavioural dimension (tendency to buy on impulse).

The attitudinal dimension can show what does make sense to buy Apple products instead of any other brand, even if they are in the same segment. While assessing the intention to buy Apple products in the future and how much the customer would be willing to pay a higher price for Apple over other brands reveals that this sample will continue to choose Apple when buying technology products. Therefore, a

positive or negative attitude to any brand will probably lead to a planned behaviour that invokes the level of brand loyalty.

The behavioural dimension also involves emotional aspects, such as lack of cognition for the way in which they buy Apple products. When the consumers display a stronger behaviour in buying an Apple product without thinking, it describes their impulsive buying tendency about the brand. So, the consequence of people's loyalty, pride and advocacy play a role in the emotions that lead customers to impulsive buying behaviour. customers higher in this tendency think about the purchases later, which reflects the emotional involvement with their favourite brands. That is why it is relevant to understand the emotions regarding customers' attitudes and behaviours, which are influential processes for consumer involvement.

Managerial Implications

This paper aimed to offer a more inclusive perspective on marketing activities by integrating customer satisfaction into the areas of brand identification and impulsive buying. The results show a clear direction to managers, in which they can take an accurate view of relationships and identify all targets of identification that are relevant from a consumer's point of view; direct strategies to build high-quality perceived products; and make their consumers feel distinct from others because they own a product from certain brand.

Brands must strengthen their identity by investing in marketing strategies and communicating brand attributes that are perceived and remembered by consumers. Probably what makes Apple consumers loyal to Apple products when there are similar products on the market is perceived quality. Seeing the aesthetic appeal Apple's products have for its consumers, initiatives should be taken to make the brand more attractive in order to satisfy self-verification needs of the consumers and increase their identification with the brand (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). Considering the results of this study, maintaining high reliability about the durability of the product or the design also can be a suitable strategy. Similarly, the pricing strategy should be aligned with the target audience, as being a brand remembered as 'luxury', 'fashion' or 'expensive' can have great significance for more hedonistic consumers (which. however, also limits access to the product to a portion of the population that does have the purchasing power for this product).

Successful marketing strategies differentiate between the individual and social dimensions of the consumers. If the goal is to increase brand loyalty, the strategy should build consumer-brand relationships based on individuality. Consumer identification impacts brand loyalty levels, and it is also a consequence of consumer satisfaction and perceived brand benefits.

On the other hand, if consumers see brands as social currency, then the brand strategy should generate brand advocacy. Maybe loyalty is created by the consumers' own social identity that sees an Apple product as an extension of who they are. That is why social media is a great facilitator because it offers platforms to interact, collaborate and inform other consumers in a congruent way with their values, attitudes and lifestyles (Tuškej et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In sum, this paper advances our understanding of the relationship between brands and consumer identity across technological products. Moreover, by providing an integrative understanding of the CBI

antecedents, the tested model simultaneously have consequences that have been examined only in isolation (e.g., social benefits of a brand and impulsive buying). This model is original since the relationships among these key constructs from different research streams have never been evaluated before and are analysed for the first time in this study. The relevance of multiple targets of identification highlighted in this research may lead to new perspectives to increase brand loyalty and advocacy, the key relationship outcomes, and should encourage future studies with similar goals.

The conceptualisation between brand identity-based constructs and existing marketing constructs remains unclear. Scholars seem concerned about the discriminant validity between the constructs, the validity of structural model estimation and the interpretation of models that involve identity constructs (Lam, 2012). Moreover, the idea that brands play a crucial role in constructing and maintaining consumers' identities is old and related to the consumer culture theory. This theory says that 'consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals' (Lam et al., 2013, p. 871).

Limitations and Further Research

Firstly, this study only focusses on a single brand that has high levels of symbolic meaning and has a strong commitment and emotional involvement, which can be a shortcoming to measure the conceptualisation of identification in marketing. In the future, it would be advisable to include multiples brands (Popp & Woratschek, 2017b). This study analyses consumers behaviour processes only with a brand the participants owned, which can generate higher means for the items and the correlation between them. It is not known what results would be achieved with users of other brands. For example, would Samsung users show similar tendency?

The present study contributes to understanding the role of identification for brand relationships and brand-related behaviours, although the results should be interpreted with some caution and limitations in mind. While the study points to the high fidelity generated by Apple users, it cannot be inferred whether it is because of the great admiration for the company or just loyalty to one or more products. Alternatively, for example, whether the loyalty is due to the identity of the consumer who sees an Apple product as an extension of who they are.

Future research on CBI may also explore the role of CEOs. For example, consumers' identification with Steve Jobs can induce them to identify with any new brands that Apple has. On the other hand, it will be interesting to analyse if the consumers maintain their strong CBI towards Apple and its new products with the death of Steve Jobs (Lam et al., 2013). Additionally, future research can measure differences between Apple and other brands using the same framework presented in this study.

Finally, replicating the model in the context of different types of brands, such as product, service and retail brands could serve to generalise the results further. Future studies could also apply this framework to other cultural contexts and consumer characteristics, such as personality and shopping motivations.

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