

An Analysis of Consumers' Brand Trust Building and Behavioral Tendency from the Perspective of Self-Presentation

Ming Li

MA Fashion Management, Winchester School of Art, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Southampton, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 8DL, United Kingdom

Abstract: Study of the application of the theory of self-presentation to explain the construction of consumer brand trust and behavioural changes. Apply Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explore how self-congruity theory by Sirgy and the multi-dimensional trust model proposed by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman influence the construction of brand trust, how different dimensions of trust determine purchase intention, loyalty and word-of-mouth intentions, and what changes in the self-presentation-brand trust relationship are caused by the digital media environment. Therefore, the above studies indicate that the two primary ways consumers connect their self-concept with a brand are impression management and identity signalling; brand trust acts as an intermediary psychological bridge connecting this self-brand alignment to continuous behaviour.

Keywords: Self-presentation theory; Brand trust; Self-congruity; Behavioral intention; Impression management; Consumer identity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The intersection of self-presentation and brand consumption has become a focus of study in consumer behaviour research; that is, people use brand choices to build and express their social identities, not only out of need but also for identity construction and self-expression. Goffman's dramaturgical framework proposes that people strategically create an image through "identity-expressive props and performances" visible to others in the "front stage" and a private space for "back stage" reflection. As culturally rich symbols, consumer brands function as such props; therefore, their selection and display are forms of self-presentation that help consumers situate themselves in social hierarchies, peer groups, and spaces of aspirational identity.

At the same time, there has been an idea of brand trust that connects consumers with brands and determines whether consumers will continue to be influenced by the behaviour of a brand or switch to another. Based on the above research, brand trust in benevolence, competence and integrity positively affects purchase continuity, loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. The convergence of self-presentation dynamics and brand trust formation creates a theoretically promising but empirically under-examined research area: Although research on self-congruity has shown that brand-self alignment can affect brand attitude and loyalty, the precise mechanisms through which self-presentational motivations construct and regulate brand trust have not been fully explored in theory.

Social media platforms have changed brand consumption into a public performance of identity, and consumers use brand-related content sharing, review writing, community participation, etc., as their main tools for self-presentation. These digital self-presentation practices generate and are also constrained by brand trust assessments simultaneously, creating a recursive dynamic that conventional linear models of consumer behaviour cannot fully capture.

1.2. Research Questions

The three research questions addressed in this paper are as follows: (RQ1) Through what channels does self-presentation theory explain the formation of consumer brand trust? (RQ2) How do the different types of brand trust predict purchasing behavior, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendation intentions separately? (RQ3) How does the digital media environment modify the connection among consumers' selves-presentations and brand trust building?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Goffman's Dramaturgical Self-Presentation Framework

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, put forward in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), believes that social interaction is essentially a type of theatrical performance, and people are all the time managing the impressions they want to give others through carefully selected identity-expressive performances, props and settings [1]. The two main distinctions between front-stage performance and back-stage preparation are that they are both self-presentations, but they differ in public focus and objectives; front-stage performance is for public viewing and seeks audience approval, whereas the back-stage area is private and concerned with preparation for or dealing with the pressures of impression management. Later, other scholars have expanded this system to the digital era and shown that online platforms enhance front-stage performance by increasing the persistence, scalability and searchability of digital identity traces [8].

Goffman's system of identity performance has been applied by marketing researchers to brand consumption, and it has been found that selection and expression of brands serve as essential means of self-presentation to communicate social identity and aspirational self-concept to others. Research on personal branding and impression management on social

media shows that people strategically use brand associations to manage perceptions of their professional identity, and dramaturgical self-presentation has begun to spread among commercial brands [5].

2.2. Self-Congruity Theory

Sirgy's self-congruity theory is based on the idea that people compare the image of a brand with their own self-concept; if there is a fit between the two, they are likely to like the brand more, want it more, have a favourable attitude towards it, and be more loyal to it [2]. The four types of congruence in the theory are: actual self-congruity (alignment with the consumer's actual self-image), ideal self-congruity (alignment with the aspirational self), social self-congruity (alignment with desired social perceptions), and ideal social self-congruity (alignment with aspirational social image). The self-congruity function serves as the evaluation mechanism for self-presentation, and thus indicates how closely a brand's identity aligns with a consumer's desired self-image.

According to the above research, low self-congruity reduces people's trust in the long-term health of a retail or service enterprise and consequently lowers their sense of belonging to the company. A study of users of online travel agencies shows that self-congruity is positively related to both trust in and use of such services, and significantly, this effect occurs through a path of attitude rather than via trust [7]. Research on luxury brands has also found that the ideal self-congruity fostered by brands can make people love the brands more and be more loyal customers by enabling them to live out their aspirational identities through brand affiliation [4].

2.3. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's Multidimensional Brand Trust Model

Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's integrated trust model is based on the three components of perceived characteristics for trust: ability (the ability to fulfil promises), benevolence (the wish to benefit consumers), and integrity (a person's reliability and honesty). Theoretically, consumer trust can be divided into the three dimensions mentioned earlier, as well as expectations for predictability and openness; together, they provide full support for the prerequisites of building brand trust and have different strengths in predicting subsequent behaviour [3]. The multi-dimensional model offers a good way to connect self-presentation behaviour with all kinds of trust; that is, people who focus more on instrumental motivation for self-presentation will be more interested in the brand's functionality, and those who aim to enhance their social identity through self-presentation will pay more attention to the brand's honesty and morality.

3. Self-Presentation Mechanisms in Brand Trust Formation

3.1. Identity Signalling and Symbolic Brand Trust

The first way that self-presentation connects with brand trust is identity signalling: it refers to how people use their membership in a brand to show their identity to others in society, and whether that identity is confirmed or denied by the response from these groups. When a brand successfully serves as an identity signal, consumers form symbolic brand trust, and believe that the brand will reliably offer identity-expression values to inspire their choice. Research on self-expressive brands in the context of social media shows that

brands offer consumers a way to present themselves, either showing their inner selves or how they want to be perceived by others, and this self-expressive function is now an important factor in driving consumers' continued interest in and loyalty to a brand [8]. The self-brand connection that is created through identity signalling provides a psychological anchor for brand trust; thus, consumers who have publicly committed to a brand in their identity-expressive consumption face a social cost of trust withdrawal and are more likely to maintain a positive assessment of their trust.

Symbolic attributes of brand trust are more suitable in high-visibility, identity-driven situations, such as luxury goods, lifestyle brands and subcultural products. Research on congruency and incongruity in self-brand values shows that brand behaviours symbolically inconsistent with the consumer's existing self-brand connection result in substantially negative trust and loyalty responses; thus, the mechanism of identity-signalling is bidirectional: it fosters trust when aligned and erodes it when inconsistent [10].

3.2. Impression Management and Brand Authenticity Trust

The second is Impression Management and Brand Authenticity. Consumers of impression management seek brand associations that will be perceived as authentic by the target audience, so the brand needs to be perceived as consistent, value-oriented and transparent. Brand authenticity perception thus directly affects trust formation: A brand perceived as authentic offers a socially credible means of impression management, and an inauthentic brand may damage consumers' own sense of credibility in self-presentation. Research has shown that consumer-based brand authenticity can help build trust in a brand for all products and cultures [9].

In the digital age, the mechanism of impression management has been enhanced by the public and archival nature of self-presentation on social media. Consumers who post brand-related content aim to promote that brand and thus want to ensure that their trust in the brand is consistent with their own stated preferences for the brand. According to the study on digital brand trust, the basic reasons for consumers' trust in digital brands include open and responsible marketing; Openness also helps to present the true image of the brand and provides consumers with a means to form a self-identity in line with that of the brand [9].

3.3. Social Comparison and Normative Brand Trust

The third way is social comparison; that is to say, consumers' trust in a brand may be derived from their own evaluation of brands in society. When people in the social circle of a consumer trust a brand, it offers a normative reference point that reduces the evaluation uncertainty and thus helps foster trust. Social comparison is more pronounced in the construction of brand trust among younger generations; according to the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 79 per cent of Generation Z respondents believe that trust in brands is more necessary now than ever before, and that peer brand reviews on social platforms have had a relatively significant impact on the formation of their trust [6]. According to the data released by Edelman, at present, the main way to establish brand trust is through continuous post-purchase engagement; it follows the self-presentation model and is built upon repeated, socially visible occurrences of

brand interaction rather than a single transaction.

4. Brand Trust Dimensions and Behavioral Tendencies

4.1. Ability Trust and Purchase Intention

One component of brand trust that shows whether consumers think a brand can meet their basic needs has been directly linked to both their willingness to purchase and how often they buy again in many studies. Ability trust is the basic form of trust for instrumental decision-making; without established brand competence, other motivations such as benevolence and integrity are unlikely to drive a purchase. Brand trust is stronger for product categories that carry functional risks of selection; consumers are unwilling to be associated with a brand that fails in function and thus risks damaging their self-image publicly. Research by Guo et al. (2023) of the brand attributes, brand trust and loyalty of smartphone users in China has found that functional brand attributes motivate ability trust, and both can drive loyalty and word-of-mouth behaviour [6].

4.2. Integrity Trust and Brand Loyalty

Integrity trust is the consumer's sense that a brand meets the normal requirements of truthfulness, consistency and fairness; it is highly correlated with both attitude towards the brand and a person's wish for a long-term relationship with the brand. Integrity trust is more suitable for cases where brands promote social and ethical values; thus, consumers who have aligned their sense of self with the brand's ethics will suffer a higher trust-betrayal cost after an integrity violation by that brand. Studies on the relationship between brand integrity, self-congruity and loyalty have found that self-congruity mediates the path from integrity trust to loyalty; thus, it is supported that integrity trust fosters loyalty by offering a sense of self-expression through the brand [7]. The self-presentation perspective proposes that integrity trust is likely to motivate attitudinal loyalty and brand advocacy more strongly than the need to repurchase.

4.3. Benevolence Trust and Word-of-Mouth Behavior

Benevolence trust, which is a consumer's belief that a brand is genuinely concerned about their well-being rather than just for profit, is the trust type most likely to be linked to positive word-of-mouth and brand advocacy behaviour. Benevolence Trust offers consumers socially responsible story resources to help them create an advocacy movement by showing them how a caring brand can be both moral and fashionable. Research on brand communities in social media has found that brand trust, and especially the benevolent dimension of trust, can effectively motivate value co-creation behaviour, the spread of positive word-of-mouth (eWOM), and community participation; these are precisely the self-presentation activities that digital consumers engage in to build and communicate their brand-aligned identities [12]. Based on the above, studies have shown that social media marketing can simultaneously increase brand loyalty and brand trust through value co-creation; therefore, these platforms serve as integrated self-presentation and trust-building spaces, rather than simply communication tools [11].

5. Digital Reconfiguration of the Self-Presentation–Brand Trust Nexus

5.1. Algorithmic Curation and Trust Signal Amplification

The two main reasons for the alteration in the relationships among self-presentation and brand trust in the digital age are algorithmic content curation and user-generated content ecosystems. Algorithmic curation promotes the social comparison effect to increase brand trust by identifying which brand-related signals will reach particular consumers and thus forming filter dynamics that create reference-group environments for the establishment of norms of brand trust. Research on the impact of self-brand connection on consumer response to brand behaviour has found that, due to the digital intensification of social comparison, identity-locking by brand trust is strengthened; thus, consumers who have publicly aligned their digital identity with a brand are significantly more likely to exhibit resilient trust responses after minor brand transgressions because withdrawing trust would require an expensive public identity revision.

5.2. User-Generated Content and Co-Created Brand Trust

The second way of digital reorganisation is a user-generated content ecosystem, and brand trust is no longer only about the perception of individual consumers but is also a social artifact created by them together. Consumer-generated brand reviews, social media posts and community discussions are distributed trust infrastructures that help build a large amount of trust for all consumers through creation and spread. This co-constructed character enhances the self-presentation stake in brand assessment; that is, by posting good content about the brand online, individuals seek to gain social approval and, in doing so, increase their own confidence in the brand. Studies on social media marketing show that the combination of brand community participation, entertainment, interaction and personalised content together influences trust in brands online, and thus digital brand trust is not passive but participatory in nature.

5.3. Authenticity Imperatives in Digital Brand Trust

The Digital Environment has raised the bar for authenticity, and Brand Trust is now at risk. Digital consumers are more likely to suspect a brand's own promotion, require a high degree of authenticity, openness and consistency in the information provided by the brand; otherwise, they will be uninterested in being engaged by and will not be moved emotionally by this communication. Research on consumer trust in digital brands shows that the main reasons for the construction of trust in a digital environment are openness and ethical marketing practices; transparency is a trust-building mechanism that can satisfy consumers' demand for authenticity in their own self-presentation by providing trustworthy brand associations for digital identity work.

6. Conclusion

This paper will explore what self-presentation theory can do to help us understand why people trust a brand more and what behaviour that trust is about. The three identified self-presentation mechanisms are identity signalling, impression management and authenticity seeking; in addition, social

comparison is also employed, and all three operate through distinct but complementary pathways to generate the ability, integrity and benevolence trust dimensions, which predict purchase intention, loyalty and word-of-mouth advocacy to different extents. Changes in the Digital Media Environment have modified these mechanisms by increasing the social visibility of brand consumption, turning brand trust into a collectively constructed social object, and raising demands for authenticity that require more transparent and value-aligned brands. Researchers' self-presentation perspectives focus on identity-function mechanisms for building brand trust and have been overlooked in traditional transaction-based models. For brand practitioners, stable brand trust should be established by building an authentic identity alignment and consistent integrity performance, rather than solely through one-way brand communication, and digital self-presentation environments should be fostered as participatory trust ecosystems rather than single-direction communication channels.

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