Interactive effects of self-congruity and need for uniqueness on brand loyalty via brand experience and brand attachment

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the differences in the process by which three types of self-congruity (actual, ideal and social) interact with the need for uniqueness to influence brand loyalty via brand experience and brand attachment.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey with 428 members of an Australian consumer panel. The data are analyzed using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Findings – The results show that social self-congruity has a direct effect on the brand attachment but actual and ideal self-congruity influence it only indirectly through brand experience. Moreover, the need for uniqueness strengthens the positive effect of ideal self-congruity but weakens the effect of social self-congruity on brand attachment.

Research limitations/implications – This study uses publicly consumed brands and the need for uniqueness as the moderator. Future research may study privately consumer brands and use other moderators, such as regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention).

Originality – This study extends current research on brand attachment by highlighting the positive influence of social self-congruity on brand attachment. It also establishes the mediating role of brand experience and the moderating role of the need for uniqueness. These are new insights about the underlying process and the boundary conditions for the well-established relationship between self-congruity and brand attachment.

Keywords - brand attachment; brand experience; brand loyalty; need for uniqueness; self-congruity

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Consumer-brand relationships are ever-changing, hence marketers need to understand how their brands remain relevant to their consumers and how they can create memorable experiences that meet consumers' needs (Alvarez et al., 2021). Consequently, marketing scholars and practitioners have focused on ways to help understand how to strengthen consumer-brand relationships (Fernandes and Moreira, 2019; Fetscherin *et al*., 2019). At the core of such strong relationships lies brand attachment. This refers to the cognitive and emotional bonds connecting the brand and the consumer's self-concept that in turn help build brand loyalty (Japutra *et al*., 2016; Park *et al*., 2010; Torres *et al*., 2020), improve customer lifetime value (Thomson *et al*., 2005), and, build brand equity (Jun and Yi, 2020).

Building strong brand attachment is an arduous task for firms as consumers have ample options to switch brands and/or adopt new brands (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2019), rather than simply remaining attached to a particular brand. Thus, there is a great deal of interest in the process by which consumers develop an attachment with brands (Vredeveld, 2018) but there are still gaps in existing knowledge that need to be addressed to help fully appreciate this process. Moreover, not fully understanding this important marketing process potentially restricts the capacity of marketers to build customer loyalty. This research therefore aims to address a number of these research gaps and throw new light on how to better leverage brand attachment in the process of building both attitudinal and behavioral forms of brand loyalty.

One way for consumers to develop an attachment with brands is to help them fulfill their need for self-expression as they are more likely to feel attached to brands that represent their self-concepts (Rabbanee *et al*., 2020; Sirgy, 2018). In this context, the self-congruity theory posits that a match between the consumer's self-concept and the brand's personality (i.e., high self-congruity) results in positive brand attitudes and behaviors (Sirgy, 2018). Moreover,

it identifies three types of self-congruity, namely actual, ideal and social self-congruity (Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020; Sirgy, 2018). However, prior work on brand attachment only focuses on the role of actual and ideal self-congruity as important drivers of brand attachment (e.g., Huber *et al.*, 2018; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Tseng, 2020) and ignores the role of social self-congruity. This is despite considerable evidence about the influence of significant others on consumers' purchases and brand relationships (Reed *et al.*, 2012). Specifically, the social self reflects how individuals want others to see them and these self-concepts are invariably swayed by the social forces that surround them (Sirgy, 2018).

Brands serve as an expression of the social aspects of one's identity as well as a symbol of belonging to a particular group (Escalas and Bettman, 2009; Reed *et al.*, 2012). In fact, consumers not only build connections with brands but also with fellow brand enthusiasts (Badrinarayanan and Sierra, 2018; Hughes *et al.*, 2016). They engage with the brand, share information and express their views on the brand (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2021; Wallace *et al*, 2017) and embrace a shared culture, rituals, and traditions with a collective identity (Haverila *et al.*, 2020). These consumers strive to maintain an image others (i.e., brand enthusiasts) have of them (i.e., social self) in order to facilitate social interactions and approval (Swann *et al.*, 1992). Thus, the "social self" and its congruity with brands seems to be growing in importance to consumers (Rabbanee *et al.,* 2020). Loureiro *et al.*, (2012) show that consumers tend to create strong 'love' towards brands that reflect their inner and social self, resulting in calls for more research on the role social self and social self-congruity can potentially play as a key driver of consumer-brand relationships (Japutra *et al.*, 2016; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020). This study addresses these calls by exploring the effects of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand attachment and brand loyalty, potentially highlighting another tool practitioners can use to build and maintain brand loyalty.

Past research has shown that actual and ideal self-congruity are crucial determinants of

brand attachment (e.g., Huang *et al*., 2017; Huber *et al*., 2018; Japutra *et al*., 2018, 2019; Malär *et al*., 2011; Rabbanee *et al*., 2020; Tseng, 2020). However, the link between self-congruity types and brand attachment present mixed findings in the literature (e.g. Gonzalez-Jimenez *et al.,* 2019; Rabbanee *et al.,* 2020). For example, Malär et al. (2011) find a positive significant relationship between actual self-congruity and brand attachment, but the effect of ideal self-congruity was not significant. In contrast, the results of Huang, Zhang, and Hu (2017) suggest a negative effect of ideal self-congruity on brand attachment, indicating there is more work needed to understand the effects self-congruity on brand attachment.

Moreover, studies that examine the role that potential mediators play in explaining the relationship between self-congruity types and brand attachment are to the best of our knowledge non-existent. In this paper, we therefore address this important gap in the literature by putting forward the proposition that brand experience acts as a mediating variable between self-congruity and brand attachment. Brand experience not only reflects the positive impact of brand stimuli when consumers interact with the brand (Brakus *et al*., 2009) but serves to highlight the role engaging with the brand has on building brand loyalty. Typically, as brand attachment is developed through past and present brand experiences (e.g., Park *et al*., 2010; Park *et al*., 2013; Thomson *et al*., 2005), such brand experiences serve to drive consumers' propensity to attach to brands (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020).

Although past studies in marketing incorporate brand experience as a mediator to explain the relationship between self-congruity types and store/destination attachment (e.g., Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Fu *et al*., 2017), to the best of our knowledge no studies examine this particular link in the context of brands. Moreover, previous retail and tourism marketing studies have pointed to the potentially mediating role of brand experience in the relationship between self-congruity types and brand attachment (e.g., Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Fu *et al*., 2017) but this has not been empirically tested. Hence, this paper also addresses this particular

gap in the branding literature by proposing brand experience as a mediator between various self-congruity types and brand attachment. In addition, this study extends this line of research by exploring the moderating effect of the need for uniqueness (NFU) between self-congruity and brand attachment. In this context, NFU reflects consumers' trait of pursuing differences relative to others by using brands to express their self-concepts (Baghi and Gabrielli, 2018; Kautish *et al.*, 2020; Tian *et al.*, 2001), thus helping to provide a more complete picture of the link between the types of self-congruity and brand attachment.

Consumers vary in the extent to which they pursuit uniqueness (Lynn and Harris, 1998; Tian *et al.*, 2001). Given brands help consumers reflect their self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982; 2018) this potentially serves as the mechanism that consumers use to differentiate themselves from each other (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; Ruvio *et al.*, 2008; Tian *et al.*, 2001). Consumers with a high NFU may experience threats to their self-concept (ideal self) when they perceive being highly similar to others (Abosag *et al.*, 2020). Typically though, the pursuit of dissimilarity is restrained by the need for social acceptance (social self) (Ruvio, 2008), meaning that the effect of self-congruity type on brand attachment therefore depends on the consumer's levels of NFU. Accordingly, this study explores the interactive effect of self-congruity types and the role that customer's NFU has on brand attachment, and the role this in turn plays on brand loyalty – given this is the ultimate goal for companies when focusing on developing brand attachment (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005).

This study therefore addresses a number of gaps in the literature that can help to understand how firms can strengthen their customer-brand relationships. First, by including social self into the self-congruity framework this will help to examine the direct effects of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand attachment and subsequently on attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty. Previous literature has not examined these inter-relationships so this will provide clearer insight how to leverage their brands to great effect. Second, by

examining the indirect effects of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand attachment through brand experience will help better understand the interplay between these important constructs in the process of building brand loyalty. Finally, this study will assess the moderating role that the need for uniqueness plays on the relationship between the various forms of self-congruity and brand attachment. By addressing these three distinct gaps in the literature, this research makes distinct conceptual contributions within the important domain of consumer-brand relationships, as well as providing some practical implications for brand managers that aim to improve brand loyalty. We develop a conceptual model that helps us to addresses these gaps in the literature by drawing upon the theories of attachment self-congruity. Next, we discuss the conceptual foundations of our proposed model that depicts a link between the various forms of self-congruity brand attachment, brand experience, the need for uniqueness, and attitudinal and behavioral forms of brand loyalty.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Self-congruity

Self-congruity is best described as the fit between a person's self-concept and a brand's personality (Aaker, 1999; Japutra *et al*., 2019; Sirgy, 2018). Accordingly, self-congruity theory integrates two important concepts, namely self-concept and brand personality concept, which we posit plays a role in helping the firm build brand attachment and loyalty. Self-concept is defined as "the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings about himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7) and includes three dimensions, namely an individual's actual self, ideal self, and social self (e.g., Moons *et al*., 2020). The actual self-concept refers to how individuals perceive themselves, whereas the ideal self-concept denotes how individuals would like to view themselves (Sirgy, 2018). The social self refers to how individuals present themselves to others (Sirgy, 2018); hence, consumers are motivated to maintain a positive

self-concept about themselves that is continually projected towards others. Evidently, consumers tend to act in accordance with the type of person they want significant others to see them as and this, in turn, influences their consumption behaviors (Japutra *et al.*, 2019) with respect to brand choices and usage. Since brand personality refers to a set of perceived human traits associated with the brand (Aaker, 1999), it is not difficult to imagine how consumers attempt to use brands to portray images about themselves to others.

Self-congruity is commonly treated as being multi-dimensional (Moons *et al.*, 2020; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020; Sirgy, 1982; 2018), including actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity and social self-congruity. However, extant research has largely focused on the effect of actual and ideal self-congruity on consumer behavior (e.g., Huber *et al.*, 2018; Japutra *et al.*, 2019; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Tseng, 2020; Wallace *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, research on social self-congruity is very limited and reveals mixed findings. For example, Gonzalez-Jimenez et al. (2019) find support for social self-congruity in an Eastern but not Western culture, unlike Rabbanee et al. (2020).

To address these mixed results, this study also includes the impact of social self-congruity in the process of building brand loyalty as the literature indicates this construct tends to be a promising determinant of brand attachment (Huber *et al.*, 2018; Japutra *et al.*, 2016). The concept of brand attachment is drawn from attachment theory in psychology (Park *et al.*, 2010), and through that we assert that brand attachment reflects the bond that connects a consumer to a brand to maintain the security felt through the brand. Such a connection is developed through consumer interactions with the brand, whereby consumers with strong brand attachment are likely to become more committed to that brand and hence view the brand as irreplaceable (Park et al., 2010). This study thus adopts a tripartite view of self-congruity by examining the independent influences of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on the process of building brand loyalty. Actual self-congruity refers to the fit between the

brand's personality concerning how consumers perceive who they actually are; ideal self-congruity reflects the fit between the brand's personality in relation to how they would like to be; whereas, social self- congruity refers to the fit between the brand's personality with how consumers would like to be seen by others (Sirgy, 2018).

Brand attachment

Brand attachment construct captures the idea of customers' affiliation with brands. Current literature identifies two interrelated concepts, namely emotional attachment (Thomson *et al*., 2005) and brand attachment (Park *et al*., 2010). Emotional attachment encapsulates the positive emotional bond between the self and the brand, characterized by feelings of connections, affection, and passion. Park et al. (2010) describe brand attachment as "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (p.2), which encompasses two dimensions: brand-self connection and brand prominence. Prior research on brand attachment mostly focuses on the emotional aspects of attachment with little attention to the process by which brand-self connection and brand prominence emerge (Japutra *et al*., 2018). To address this research gap, this study uses Park et al.'s (2010) conceptualization of brand attachment because focusing on positive feelings alone may not fully capture all the aspects of the brand attachment construct (Japutra *et al*., 2014; Park *et al*., 2010).

Self-congruity and brand attachment

Drawing on self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) is essential to this study as it offers the theoretical foundation on which to examine the relationship between self-congruity types and brand attachment. Self-congruity affects brand attachment based on the notion of self-expansion theory (Malär *et al*., 2011; Tseng, 2020). To that end, self-expansion theory postulates that individuals are inherently motivated to expand their self-concept by including others as part of their self-concept. In the context of brand relationships, the need for self-

expansion drives consumers to incorporate brands into their self-concepts (Reimann and Aron, 2009). As a result, self-congruity, which represents the extent to which a brand is part of a consumer's self-concept, is positively associated with self-brand connection, salient of the attitudes towards the brand, and brand attachment (Park *et al.*, 2010).

For actual self-congruity, the self-consistency motive - which drives individuals to verify, affirm, and sustain their current self-concepts, also acts to guide the consumers' behavior. As a result, a failure to behave consistently results in negative feelings that may threaten beliefs about the self (Sirgy, 1985; 2018). Brands with personalities that serve as a means for self-expansion (Reimann and Aron, 2009) enable consumers' to signal their self-concept (Sirgy, 2018). In this regard, brands that verify one's actual self-view (actual self-congruent) will also result in positive self-evaluations (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Tseng, 2020). Thus, consumers are more likely to connect with a brand with high self-congruity and view such a brand as more salient (Huber *et al.*, 2018; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020), which would help create a stronger attachment to that brand. Accordingly, the authors hypothesize as follows:

H1a. Actual self-congruity is positively associated with brand attachment.

Concerning ideal self-congruity, the self-enhancement motive is proposed herein to be the underlying self-motive that guides a consumers' behavior. Typically, the need for self-enhancement motivates individuals to facilitate their feelings of personal worth, which drives them to approach their ideal self and this fosters their self-esteem (Higgins, 1998). Consumers guided by a self-enhancement motive may form connections with brands that could help them achieve their aspirations about who they would like to be (i.e., ideal self) (Escalas and Bettman, 2009), which in turn may serve to strengthen the emotional connections between them and those brands (Japutra *et al.*, 2019). During the process of using brands to cultivate the concept of one's self, we anticipate that positive personalities portrayed by brands are linked to the consumers' mental representation of self. In other

words, the activation of self-enhancement goals increases the extent to which brand personality influences brand-self connection and brand prominence (Escalas and Bettman, 2009; Huber *et al*., 2018; Rabbanee *et al*., 2020). Therefore, the authors posit:

H1b. Ideal self-congruity is positively associated with brand attachment.

Concerning social self-congruity, individuals' social selves drive their behaviors through the need for social consistency in terms of being motivated to maintain the image of how they are seen by others (Sirgy, 2018). In other words, individuals need to be consistent with social norms (Sirgy, 1982), as it allows them to verify their social self (Swann *et al*., 2003). People tend to manage their presentation of self to be in line with the type of person they wish to be seen as by others (Sirgy, 1982). This link helps to explain why consumers engaged with online social networks have images consistent with their social self-concept (Rabbanee *et al*., 2020). This makes sense given that maintaining images perceived by significant others helps reduce the risk of social conflict (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Hence, consumers are motivated to engage in those behaviors that help them maintain a social image that in turn helps them gain positive reactions from others. For example, consumers are likely to connect themselves with brands that have personalities consistent with their own social selves. From that perspective, rewards such as group conformity and acceptance (Sirgy and Su, 2000) may also lead to brand attachment, implying a link to social self-congruity. Therefore, as follows:

H1c. Social self-congruity is positively associated with brand attachment.

Brand experience

Brand experience refers to the internal and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (Brakus *et al*., 2009). Consumers are inclined to develop perceptions of a brand when they directly experience the brand through various brand stimuli such as packaging, brand name and logo and other marketing communication. Brakus et al. (2009) identify four

experiential dimensions that play a role in how customers potentially affiliate with the brand, namely sensory, affective, cognitive and behavioral experiences. The sensory experience reflects the consumer's perceptions of the brand through aesthetic and sensory qualities; affective experience refers to consumers' moods, feelings, and emotions; intellectual experience captures both analytical and imaginative thinking about a brand and behavioral experience involves consumers' physical behaviors and lifestyle with a brand (Nysveen *et al*., 2013). Indeed, brands enrich consumers' physical experiences, demonstrating alternative ways of doing things and thus, influence their behavior and lifestyle.

As enduring brand experiences are personal and unique and stored in consumers' memory (Brakus *et al*., 2009), these are key aspects that potentially underpin brand loyalty. Typically, such experiences lead to the creation of consumer-brand relationships, including brand attachment (Ramaseshan and Stein, 2014) and engagement (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). More recently, Kumar and Kaushik (2020) highlight the importance of brand experience in explaining consumer-brand relationships as brand experience represents consumer behavior more holistically than other marketing concepts. However, whilst the role of brand experience remains relatively under-explored in the extant literature on consumer-brand relationships, the authors posit herein that it potentially plays a central role in the link between the various forms of self-congruity and brand attachment.

Brand experience and brand attachment

As denoted by Park et al. (2010), brand attachment is developed through consumers' experiences with the brand. As discussed earlier, during the process of self-expansion, individuals tend to include others in their self-concept (Malär *et al*., 2011), occurring when individuals seek experiences that increase their efficacy (Leary, 2007). Hence, thinking about experiences with the brand forges connections between the brand and the self, and as a consequence it is proposed herein to strengthen a consumers' attachment to the brand.

Furthermore, brands trigger meaningful memories through sensory, aesthetic, emotional, cognitive and behavioral benefits (Krishna, 2012). Access to such positive brand-related memories, in turn, enhances brand prominence (Japutra *et al*., 2016; Park *et al*., 2010; Park *et al*., 2013; Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2019). Brand experience also leads to cognitive and affective self-evaluation that is similar to the mechanism of developing interpersonal relationships (Park *et al*., 2013; Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013; Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2019). Drawing from this notion, consumer research implied the influences of experiential dimensions on consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Kumar and Kaushik, 2020; Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer *et al*., 2012). Typically, Trudeau and Shobeiri (2019) show that brand attachment is positively influenced by brand experience because memorable brand experiences reduce the psychological distance between the self and the brand. Thus,

H2.   Brand experience is positively associated with brand attachment.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty reflects a consumer's commitment to rebuy a preferred brand consistently over time and it is a source of competitive superiority that helps firms develop long-term relationships with consumers (Fernandes and Moreira, 2019; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Brand loyalty can be fostered through brand attachment that emphasizes self-relevance connections between the brand and the self (Huber *et al*., 2018; Thomson *et al*., 2005). Conceptually, it encompasses two different aspects of brand loyalty, which are attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Attitudinal loyalty refers to customers' degree of dispositional commitment and their attitude toward the brand whereas behavioral loyalty refers to repeat purchases of the brand as well as the customer's repeated intention to purchase the brand into the future (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). However, much of the studies in the extant literature do not investigate the effect of brand attachment on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. This study uses these two aspects of brand loyalty as the

outcome variables in the proposed model therefore offering a wider perspective of the effects of brand attachment on brand loyalty.

Brand attachment and brand loyalty

According to self-expansion theory, a strong brand attachment may help improve brand loyalty because consumers would be more willing to allocate resources to sustain relationships with brands connected to their self-concepts (Malär *et al*., 2011; Park *et al*., 2010; Tseng, 2020). To maintain a brand-self relationship, consumers attached with a brand would persist in their efforts to possess the brands, which in turn may elevate their brand loyalty towards that particular brand. In a similar vein, Tsai (2011) asserts that brand loyalty can be fostered through committed and attached relationships. Several empirical studies support the notion that brand attachment contributes to favorable attitudinal outcomes such as the intention to pay a high price for the brand (Jiménez and Voss, 2014; Thomson *et al*., 2005) as well as display willingness to recommend and resist negative information about the brand (Japutra *et al*., 2014). Prior studies reveal that brand attachment also predicts behavioral outcomes such as repurchase intention and actual purchase (Japutra *et al*., 2014; 2016; Park *et al*., 2010; Kumar and Nayak, 2019), implying attachment and loyalty are intrinsically linked. Hence, the authors hypothesize:

H3.   Brand attachment is positively associated with (a) attitudinal, and (b) behavioral brand loyalty.

Brand experience as a mediator

This study proposed that self-congruity not only has a direct effect on brand attachment, but it may foster brand attachment gained through brand experience. To date, prior empirical studies have implied that brand experience may help to bridge the gap between brand self-congruity and brand attachment (e.g., Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Ramaseshan and Stein,

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2014). In that regard, we postulate that whilst there is a relationship between the various forms of consumer self-congruity and brand attachment (i.e. H1a, H1b, H1c), there is also a direct link between self-congruity and brand experience. Previous studies that show self-congruity represents the fit between a person's self-concept and a brand's personality (Aaker, 1999; Japutra *et al*., 2019; Sirgy, 2018) thus consumers will appreciate this link when they directly experience the brand for themselves. Brand experience involves vivid linkages with the brand in the mind of the consumers, which motivate consumers to engage with brand-related stimuli in sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral ways. Such brand experience has also been known to involve brand personality (Ramaseshan and Stein, 2014), and found to mediate the relationship between an image construct (e.g. store image) and brand attachment (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013). Hence, the authors hypothesize that the more a brand reflects the self (i.e., self-congruity), the more positive the personal experiences with the brand, and the stronger brand attachment is likely to become, as follows:

H4.   Brand experience mediates the relationship between (a) actual self-congruity, (b) ideal self-congruity, and (c) social self-congruity on brand attachment.

Need for uniqueness

Need for uniqueness is depicted as the need for people to be different from others and this need may make consumers acquire, utilize, and dispose of products and brands to develop and enhance both their self and social image (Tian *et al*., 2001). In fact, consumers with a high need for uniqueness (NFU) may experience threats to their self-concept when they perceive being highly similar to others (Abosag *et al*., 2020). This threat may drive them to seek ways to reclaim their own identity through self-distinguishing behaviors (Lynn and Harris, 1998; Tian *et al*., 2001). However, the pursuit of dissimilarity is restrained by the need for social acceptance (Ruvio, 2008). A consumer's NFU has three basic underlying dimensions, namely creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-

conformity, and avoidance of similarity (Ruvio *et al*., 2008; Tian *et al*., 2001). Creative choice counter-conformity refers to consumers' choice of products that help to create their unique personality (Tian *et al*., 2001). Unpopular choice counter-conformity reflects the motive of consumers using products differing from social norms (Baghi and Gabrielli, 2018; Kautish *et al.*, 2020). Avoidance of similarity indicates the avoidance of consuming widely adopted products and/or the discontinued use of products that are perceived to be commonplace (Tian *et al*., 2001).

As brands are an extension of the self, and consumers use brands to express their uniqueness as a means to maintain or enhance their self-concept (Tian *et al*., 2001), this paper introduces NFU as a moderator of the relationship between self-congruity and brand attachment. A core reason we postulate that a consumer's NFU will act as a moderator is because when brands act as an extension of self this reflects their identities and helps them to express their social differences (e.g., Belk, 1988, Sirgy, 1982; Tian *et al*., 2001). Typically, this means that those consumers who tend to select and use brands to express their NFU (Tian *et al*., 2001) will do so as it is related to their perception of the similarity between brand personality and self-concept (e.g., Abosag *et al*., 2020; Tian *et al*., 2001).

Previous research has linked the NFU to the concept of self, arguing that the expression of the need for uniqueness depends on the self-perceived degree of uniqueness associated with the self-concept (Abosag et al., 2019; Burns and Brady, 1992; Tian *et al*., 2001). Since consumers' self-concept must be involved in the formation of brand attachment (Park *et al*., 2010; Malär *et al*., 2011), the interaction between the need for self-verification, self-enhancement, or social consistency and the need for uniqueness is likely to play a particularly important role in the formation of brand attachment. In light of this, we propose in this research that the consumer's NFU has an important motivational influence on the link between self-congruity types and brand attachment.

Need for uniqueness as a moderator

The effect of self-congruity on brand attachment may not be equally pronounced for all individuals (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Tseng, 2020). Specifically, we propose differential effects of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand attachment when consumers are driven by high versus the low need for uniqueness. Actual self-congruity strengthens brand attachment because it facilitates consumers in their aims for self-verification (Sirgy, 1982; 2018). Self-verifiers prefer consistency, predictability, and risk reduction (Swann *et al.*, 1992). Pursuing differentness requires a willingness to change past behaviors and dispose of preferences to avoid similarity (Baghi and Gabrielli, 2018; Tian *et al.*, 2001; Kautish *et al.*, 2020). The pursuit of uniqueness counters the consumers' motivation to be consistent and predictable. Therefore, self-verification resulting from using actual congruent brands results in the underlying motivation to be different from others. Consumers with a high need for uniqueness are less likely to make the connection between the brand and their actual self and are less likely to form a brand attachment. Therefore, the authors hypothesize as follows:

H5a.   Need for uniqueness negatively moderates (weakens) the relationship between actual self-congruity and brand attachment.

    As hypothesized earlier (H1b), the process of self-enhancement due to the consumption of ideal self-congruent brands strengthens consumers' attachment to brands. It is worth noting that the pursuit of a unique identity is part of the self-expansion process that improves one's self-view and results in self-worth and for such individuals, the feeling of differentness to 'the crowd' serves as an intrinsic satisfaction (Snyder, 1992) that in turn enhances their self-concept. Based on the self-enhancement processes, consumers with a high need for uniqueness are likely to make the connection with brands that are similar to their ideal self and thereby increase their brand attachment. Therefore, the authors posit:

H5b.   Need for uniqueness positively moderates (strengthens) the relationship between ideal

self-congruity and brand attachment.

Social consistency motive suggests that consumers are motivated to maintain an image others have of them (the social self) as to facilitate social approval (Sirgy, 1982; 2018; Swann *et al*., 1992). This motive leads to attachment to social self-congruent brands. These consumers tend to rely on the norms of the reference group in forming brand purchase decisions (Hung and Petrick, 2011). Past research shows that being too unique and different within the group may decrease consumers' sense of belongings and other negative feelings about the self (e.g., Baghi and Gabrielli, 2018; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). Hence, consumers are more likely to engage with products and brands that conform to the group (Sirgy, 2018; Swann *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, social consistency processes result from the consumption of social congruent brands that counter the underlying motivation to be unique and different from others. As a result, we anticipate these consumers are less likely to make the connection between the brand and their social self and thus less likely to form a brand attachment. Therefore, the authors hypothesize:

H5c.   Need for uniqueness negatively moderates (weakens) the relationship between social

self-congruity and brand attachment.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model with all the above hypotheses.

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Methodology

Sampling and data collection

This study uses an online survey with a sample of Australian consumers recruited by a

consumer panel company that specializes in identifying and targeting household consumers within Australia and the Asian region. All the participants received an email invitation with a once only usage link to the online questionnaire to help eliminate duplicate responses from the same IP address. Potential respondents were chosen to participate in this study based on two criteria, a) they should be in the 25-65 age group as it represents the largest segment of the Australian consumer population, and (b) they must have purchased or used at least one of the three brands selected for the survey. A total of 428 usable responses were collected by the panel company with more than half females (61%) and 40 years old and above (75%). About two-thirds of the sample has a personal income between AUD 20,000 and AUD 80,000 per annum (62%) and more than half do not possess a college degree (58%). Overall, this sample fairly represents the adult Australian consumer population as reflected in the latest census data (ABS, 2017). Table 1 shows the sample profile.

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Focal brand selection

In line with the approach adopted in the literature (e.g., Malär *et al*., 2011; Park *et al*., 2010) we asked respondents to select the most familiar brand from a list of brands and then asked them to complete the questionnaire with the selected brand in mind. This helped to ensure all participants were very familiar with the brands chosen by them, which helped any possible confounding effect of differences in the participants' familiarity with the focal brand (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2019). To reduce the possible effects of brand-related differences we included only publicly consumed product categories (Malär *et al*., 2011), as well as not including FMCG brands (Ramaseshan and Stein, 2014). The authors chose three product categories: smartphones, sports shoes and airlines because consumers are more likely to be attached to brands that can induce self-expressive benefits (Tsai, 2011) relevant to socially visible products (Keller, 1993) because they are consumed in highly visible social situations.

To test the potential of any systematic differences among these product categories, we also used a multi-group analysis and found no significant differences in the effects of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand experience and brand attachment across the three product categories at an overall level ($\Delta\chi^2 = 53.46$, df=42). Similarly, the individual effect of self-congruity types on brand experience ($\Delta\chi^2$ASC = 5.42; $\Delta\chi^2$ISC = 3.29; $\Delta\chi^2$SSC = 2.09), and self-congruity types on brand attachment ($\Delta\chi^2$ASC = 3.97; $\Delta\chi^2$ISC = 1.76; $\Delta\chi^2$SSC = 2.83) showed no significant differences at df = 2, across the product categories. Finally, in line with Malär et al. (2011), two criteria were included in the selection of the focal brands: a) the focal brand must have high brand awareness (Leuthesser *et al*., 1995), and (b) must be experiential brands as the formation of attachment involves interactions with the brands (Ramaseshan and Stein, 2014). Accordingly, only experiential brands identified by Brakus et al. (2009) were chosen for the study from INTERBRAND rankings (Malär *et al*., 2011).

Subsequently, the authors chose two brands for each product category, including (a) Apple and Samsung (smartphones), Nike and Adidas (sports shoes), and Virgin Australia and Qantas (airlines). To identify the most appropriate focal brands, an initial pilot study was undertaken, involved 50 respondents that shared similar demographic characteristics with those in the main study (i.e., Australian consumers aged 25-65 years). The pilot sample has more females (64%) than males and participants comprised 40-54 year olds (34%), with an undergraduate degree (40%) and an annual personal income below $20,000 (30.5%). The respondents chose one brand from a list of six brands based on their familiarity, using a 7-point scale (1-not at all familiar, 7-very familiar) to calculate their mean familiarity scores. The brands with high mean scores - Samsung (4.8%), Nike (4.6%) and Qantas (5.2%) - were used in the main study. In the final sample (main study), 43.9% of participants chose Qantas, 41.6% chose Samsung smartphones and the remaining 14.5% chose Nike sports shoes.

Before the main survey, the reliability and validity of the instrument were subjected to a

number of pre-fieldwork tests. First, a panel of two highly experienced marketing academics with expert knowledge in the domain of this research were asked to independently assess the representativeness of the questions for the desired constructs. Second, the questionnaire was then administered to five Australian consumers to help establish the efficacy of the instrument. These respondents were thus asked to complete the questionnaire and report on the clarity of the questions, instructions, wording, layout and time taken to complete the questionnaire. The wording of the main survey was thereafter revised based on respondents' comments and feedback. Finally, the revised questionnaire was then administered to 100 respondents who had similar demographic characteristics to the main survey participants. The sample profile of this pilot study consisted of 55% female respondents, of whom 55% were aged between 35 and 54 years. The data was also used to test the reliability of each of the scales using Cronbach's alpha. For all constructs, the values of Cronbach's alpha were found to be above the recommended 0.7 threshold (e.g. Hair et al., 2010).

Measures

This study used measures adopted from well-established scales from prior studies with seven-point Likert type scales, anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7). Actual, ideal and social self-congruity was assessed with items adapted from Malär et al. (2011) and Sirgy et al. (1997). Brand loyalty was measured as a two-dimensional construct with behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. Four items borrowed from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) were used to measure brand loyalty. The scale for NFU was adopted from Ruvio et al. (2008) with 12 items that captured three conceptually related dimensions: creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity and avoidance of similarity. Brand experience was measured as a second-order reflective construct with four sub-dimensions; sensory experience, emotional experience, cognitive and behavioral experience with three items for each experience (Brakus *et al*., 2009), which is in line with past studies (e.g., Das *et*

al., 2019; Ding and Tseng, 2015). Brand attachment was measured as a second-order reflective construct with brand-self connection and brand prominence as two subscales (Park *et al*., 2010). Table 2 shows all the measures and their properties.

< Insert table 2 about here >

Data analysis and findings

Normality test and common method bias

A normality test on the data shows the absolute value of skewness and kurtosis for each item around the absolute value of ±1, confirming normal distribution. As this study uses a cross-sectional design with data collected in a single survey from a single participant in a single setting, the data may suffer from common method bias (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003). The authors tested a model with a common latent factor (CLF) connected to all the items in the measurement model to capture the common variance shared by all the constructs (Fuller *et al*., 2016; MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). The model with the CLF shows a poorer fit and smaller standardized regression weights than the model without the CLF, which rules out common method bias (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003).

Measurement model

Next, the authors assessed internal reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 26. As shown in Table 2, all the factor loadings are significant ($p < .05$) and higher than .70 (Hair et al., 2017). All the composite reliability (CR) values are also higher than .70 (Hair *et al*., 2017) and average variance extracted (AVE) values are higher than .50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), confirming convergent validity. The square roots of the AVE for each construct are greater than its correlation with other constructs and the MSV (maximum shared variance) values are lower than the AVE values, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 3

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shows all these results. VIF (variance inflation factor) for all the constructs are much lower than the acceptable threshold of five. Therefore, multi-collinearity does not appear to be a major concern in this study.

< Insert table 3 about here >

The authors tested four competing measurement models using confirmatory factor analysis to test the appropriate factor structure of the two multidimensional constructs: brand attachment and brand experience (Table 4). Model 1 with all the dimensions of brand experience and brand attachment modeled as correlated first-order factors shows a good fit: $\chi^2 = 2032$, df = 854, $\chi^2/df = 2.37$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, NFI = .92, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05. Next, the authors tested three alternate models. Model 2 has brand attachment as a second-order reflective construct and its two dimensions as first-order reflective constructs; Model 3 has brand experience as a second-order reflective construct with its four dimensions as the first-order construct, and Model 4 has both brand experience and brand attachments as second-order reflective constructs. Among all these models, Model 4 provides the best fit: $\chi^2 = 1936.88$, df = 851, $\chi^2/df = 2.26$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, NFI = .92, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04. Hence, this paper considers both brand experience and brand attachment as second-order reflective constructs, similar to past studies (e.g., Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Das *et al.*, 2019; Fu *et al.*, 2020; Ding and Tseng, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2010).

< Insert table 4 about here >

Structural model and hypotheses tests

Next, the authors tested the structural model using maximum likelihood estimation with path analysis. Actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity and social self-congruity were allowed to correlate in the structural equation model. The model shows a close fit with all the fit indices better than their recommended cut-off values ($\chi^2 = 384.40$, df = 139, $\chi^2/df = 2.76$, GFI = .91,

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CFI = .98, TLI = .97, NFI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .03). Table 5 provides the standardized estimates, critical ratios and significance levels (p-values).

< Insert table 5 about here >

First, the actual self-congruity (H1a: β = .06, p > .05) and ideal self-congruity (H1b: β = -.07, p > .05) do not have significant effects on brand attachment. Thus, H1a and H1b are not supported. Social self-congruity, on the other hand, has a positive relationship with brand attachment (H1c: β =.24, p < .001), supporting H1c. Next, brand experience has a significant positive effect on brand attachment (H2: β =.73, p < .001), supporting H2. Similarly, brand attachment has a significant positive impact on both, attitudinal brand loyalty (β=.72, p < .001) and behavioral brand loyalty (β=.76, p < .001), supporting H3a and H3b.

Brand experience as a mediator

Next, the mediating effects of brand experience in the impact of actual, ideal and social self-congruity on brand attachment (Hypothesis 4a-c) were examined by using bootstrapping method (Shrout and Bolger, 2002) with 5000 bootstrapped samples with bias-corrected at 95% confidence interval (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). As shown in Table 6, actual self-congruity (H4a: β = .29, $CI_{95\%}$ = .16 to .46; p < .001) and ideal self-congruity (H4b: β = .29, $CI_{95\%}$ = .17 to .43; p < .001) have significant indirect effects on brand attachment through brand experience. Direct effects of actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity are also not significant; thus, brand experience fully mediates the positive relationship between actual and ideal self-congruity on brand attachment, supporting H4a and H4b. However, social self-congruity has no significant indirect effect on brand attachment (H4c: β = .04, $CI_{95\%}$ = -.06 to .14; p > .05). Thus, brand experience does not mediate the relationship between social self-congruity and brand attachment.

< Insert table 6 about here >

Need for uniqueness as moderator

Finally, the moderating effects of NFU (H5a-c) were tested using moderated multiple regression analysis (Cohen et al., 2013) with three interaction terms, namely actual self-congruity and NFU (ASC x NFU), ideal self-congruity and NFU (ISC x NFU), social self-congruity and NFU (SSC x NFU). All the predictors (actual, ideal and social self-congruity) and the moderating variable (NFU) were mean-centered to avoid multi-collinearity. The model shows a close fit (χ^2 = 280.24, df = 91, χ^2/df = 3.0, GFI = .93, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .06, NFI = .97, CFI = .97, and TLI = .96). Table 7 shows all the results from this analysis.

< Insert table 7 about here >

As shown in Table 7, the moderating effect of NFU on the relationship between actual self-congruity and brand attachment is not significant, thus H5a is not supported. The interaction between ideal self-congruity and NFU is positive and significant (H5b: β = .08, t = 2.02, p ≤ .05), thus the positive relationship between ideal self-congruity and brand attachment is stronger for consumers with a higher NFU. In addition, simple slope analyses are conducted at one standard deviation above and below the mean. As Figure 2A shows, a simple slope analysis implies that when NFU is high (β = .1, $CI_{95\%}$ = .01 to .18, p ≤ .05), ideal self-congruity has a higher effect on brand attachment than the effect when NFU is low (β = -.07, $CI_{95\%}$ = - .17 to .01, p ≤ .05).

Typically, individuals with high NFU are associated with low social interest, so they are unlikely to think and act in normative ways. Thus consumers with a high NFU are more likely to choose products that are relatively rare and innovative, as these products seem to be a way to maintain their uniqueness. Hence, they are willing to choose products and brands that deviate from group norms, risking social disapproval. In comparison, consumers with a low NFU are more likely to seek conformity with others in their choices and follow social

norm behavior (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010).

In contrast, the interaction between social self-congruity and NFU is negatively significant (H5c: β= -.09, t = -2.98, p ≤ .05), indicating that the relationship between social self-congruity and brand attachment is weaker for consumers with a high NFU. As shown in Figure 2B, the rate of change was greater when the NFU was low (β= .24, $CI_{95\%}$ = - .17 to .32, p ≤ 0.001) than when the NFU was high (β= .09, $CI_{95\%}$ = - .02 to .17, p ≤ 0.05). Figure 2A and 2B revealed two nonparallel lines, which implies that NFU moderated the relationship between ideal self-congruity and social self-congruity and brand attachment. Therefore, H5b and H5c are supported.

< Insert figures 2A and 2B about here >

Discussion and implications

The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between self-congruity types, brand experience, brand attachment and brand loyalty (i.e., attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty). The findings support the view that actual, ideal and social self-congruity affect brand attachment differently. The study also considers brand experience as a mediator of the relationship between self-congruity and brand attachment. Further to this, the moderating effect of NFU on the link between self-congruity and brand attachment was also examined. The findings indicates that social self-congruity has a direct impact on brand attachment. However, this impact is weakened when consumers have a high need for uniqueness. In contrast, actual and ideal self-congruity did not exert direct effects on the brand attachment but rather indirect effects through brand experience. However, the findings indicate that ideal self-congruity may still be relevant when consumers need for uniqueness is high. Brand attachment is a strong determinant of both attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty.

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Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the domain of consumer-brand relationships by providing insights into ways to build strong brand attachment, fostering brand-self cognitions and brand prominence. Specifically, the findings support the view that self- congruity types have independent effects on brand attachment (Huber *et al.*, 2018; Japutra *et al.*, 2019; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020; Tseng, 2020). It also adds to existing knowledge on self-congruity by including the effects of social self-congruity on the level of brand attachment, as depicted by the proposed model. This study provides empirical evidence about the effect of social self-congruity on brand attachment and subsequently brand loyalty (i.e., attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty). Consumers tend to form an attachment with brands that demonstrate the types of persons they wish to be seen by significant others (social self). Specifically, a social self-congruent brand makes consumers feel secure about themselves as it helps them to meet the need for social consistency (Sirgy, 1982; 2018). Therefore, the felt security results in brand attachment. However, this study shows that neither actual nor ideal self-congruity exerts a direct impact on brand attachment, unlike prior research (e.g., Huang *et al.*, 2017; Huber *et al.*, 2018; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Tseng, 2020).

These divergent results may be due to the use of publicly consumed products/brands. The evaluation of publicly consumed products/brands are likely to be less influenced by the actual self and thus, self-congruity may not be relevant in such cases. For example, publicly consumed brands selected in this study (e.g., iPhone, Adidas and Qantas) may be endorsed by well-known celebrities that may be too idealistic or too incongruent with one's ideal self (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020; Tseng, 2020). Another plausible reason may be the differences in conceptualizing brand attachment in the studies. Dunn and Hoegg (2014) differentiate emotional attachment that focuses on emotional responses (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) and cognitive attachment that captures the strength and salience of brand-self

connections (Park *et al*., 2010; Tseng, 2020). The authors argue that emotional attachment occurs instantaneously as emotional evaluation can occur without thought (Dunn and Hoegg, 2014). It is assumed that consumers' perception of the fit between the actual or ideal self and brand personality may lead to positive feelings about the brand but not necessarily create strong and salient self-brand connections (Rabbanee *et al*., 2020).

Although actual and ideal self-congruity do not have direct impacts on brand attachment, they indirectly influence brand attachment through brand experience. This leads to another pivotal contribution of this study not previously examined in brand attachment studies which concern the mediating role of brand experience. The significance of brand experience in mediating the relationship between self-congruity types and brand attachment reveals the importance of experiencing the brand in order to transfer the brand personality to symbolic meanings related to the actual and ideal self-concept, which may lead to brand attachment. This provides a possible explanation on why actual and ideal self-congruity do not directly influence brand attachment. Consistent with the view of Reimann and Aron (2009), the self-expansion process through the inclusion of the brand into the self induces positive responses (i.e., brand experience), which in turn leads to brand attachment. This is an important finding because without cultivating positive brand experiences, consumers may not build a strong attachment with brands congruent with their actual and/or ideal self-concept.

The third contribution concerns the moderating effect of NFU. The findings support the notion that the effect of self-congruity on brand attachment does not merely depend on the type of self-congruity but also individual consumers' characteristics (i.e., NFU) (Huber *et al*., 2018; Malär *et al*., 2011; Sirgy, 2018). It is noteworthy that NFU significantly interacts with self-congruity in explaining brand attachment and subsequently brand loyalty. Specifically, NFU positively interacts with ideal self-congruity but negatively interact with social self-congruity in influencing brand attachment and later brand loyalty. Consumers with a high

need for uniqueness tend to build connections with brands that reflect the ideal self as they believe that these brands will raise their self-esteem and this may lead to stronger brand attachment. This is consistent with Tian et al.'s (2001) finding that pursuit of differentness enhances one's self-concept. The results also show that NFU weakens the relationship between social self-congruity and brand attachment. This finding indicates the importance of social consistency in brand choice (Sirgy, 2018). Consumers with a low need for uniqueness are likely to form attachments with brands that allow them to express how they would like to be seen by others (i.e. social self). An academic contribution of this finding is that in addition to self-congruity, consumers' differences in pursuit of uniqueness plays a vital role in the development of brand attachment.

Managerial implications

This study also provides several important implications for brand managers on how and when they should invest in building strong brand attachment. First, the findings suggest that brand attachment is the key determinant of attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty. Given the opportunity to build longer-term brand loyalty, companies should pursue brand attachment as a tactical strategy. Second, understanding brand attachment through the lens of self-congruity is important because it provides practitioners with knowledge about how and when they should manage their brand personality pertaining to consumers' actual, ideal and social self-concept. It is evidenced that actual, ideal and social self-congruity have different impacts on brand attachment. Empirically, brand personality and its congruity with consumers' social self (i.e., social self-congruity) directly affect brand attachment, which suggests more effective strategies in building brand personalities tailor to the social self-concept of the targeted consumers when trying to increase brand attachment.

Marketers may imbue brands with a clear message that signals conformity and acceptance to certain reference groups or subcultures. For example, marketers may introduce

affinity or membership programs by communicating the message that "When I buy brand x, I am part of a closed club of aficionados". However, these strategies might not work with consumers who have a high need for uniqueness as this study shows that the need for uniqueness weakens the relationship between social self-congruity and brand attachment. In this case, marketers are suggested to prime consumers for an increased awareness of themselves as a member of a desired social group rather than as unique individuals.

Third, this study demonstrates that to connect consumers to their brands, marketers should include consumers' self-concepts and brand experience in their branding strategies. Specifically, for practitioners who wish to convey their brand's personalities as a means by which their customers can attain an actualized or idealized self-concepts, efforts should be directed toward exploiting personal and unique brand experiences which their customers desire to acquire. In doing so, systematic management of 'brand-related stimuli' which includes the brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments (Brakus *et al*., 2009) should be developed. In terms of product design, practitioners may provide self-related experiences with brands through brand co-creation. For instance, Lego allows customers to design any model they can imagine through 'Lego Ideas' (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010). Consumers use the Lego brand to express their identity (creative) and at the same time experience the joy of creating and personalizing their own Lego bricks.

Finally, customers with a high need for uniqueness (NFU) tend to prefer self-enhancing brands (i.e. with ideal self-congruity), whereas those with low NFU are more inclined to choose brands whose personality is consistent with their social self (Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Lynn and Harris 1997; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). Therefore, it is critical that managers distinguish between their low/high NFU customers to help ensure they target each customer with the right communication message and brand type – in an effort to optimize brand attachment and through that trigger the various forms of brand loyalty.

Limitations and future research

This study offers a number of useful insights into the formation of brand attachment and its outcomes but is not without limitations. First, this study uses publicly consumed brands; however, the effect of self-congruity on brand attachment may vary based on the product-related context (Malär *et al*., 2011; Tseng, 2020), such as publicly versus privately consumed brands. Hence, future studies may test the model presented in this paper for privately consumed brands, as the social self might play an important role in publicly consumed brands, whereas the actual self might play a prominent role in the context of privately consumed products. Second, the relationships between self-congruity types and brand attachment are contingent upon several boundary conditions (Huber *et al*., 2018; Malär *et al*., 2011; Tseng, 2020) but this paper only considered the need for uniqueness (NFU) as a moderator. It is quite possible other moderators could potentially effect the link between variables in our model, so whilst examining these was largely beyond the scope of this research future studies could consider their effects. Typically, consumers with different regulatory foci (Higgins, 1998) may activate the pursuit of different self-motives (e.g., self-verification) therefore the effects of regulatory focus on the relationship between self-congruity and brand attachment could be explored further. Similarly, since individualism/ collectivism is known to moderate the relationships between actual and ideal self-congruence and consumer satisfaction (Litvin and Kar, 2004) this important aspect regards branding in a cross-national/ cross-cultural context is also worth exploring further.

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Table 1. Sample profile (N = 428)

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
25-29	24	5.6
30-34	34	7.9
35-39	45	10.5
40-44	48	11.2
45-49	45	10.5
50-54	54	12.6
55-59	83	19.4
60-65	95	22.2
Gender		
Male	164	38.3
Female	364	61.7
Annual Income		
Below AU$20,000	89	20.8
AU $20,000 - AU $29,999	66	15.4
AU $30,000 - AU $39,999	47	11.0
AU $40,000 - AU $49,999	47	11.0
AU $50,000 - AU 59,999	24	5.6
AU $60,000 - AU $69,999	26	6.1
AU $70,000 - AU $79,999	32	7.5
Above AU $80,000	74	17.3
I do not have personal income	23	5.4
Education		
Less than high school	26	6.1
High school graduate	112	26.2
Some college	138	32.2
Bachelor's degree	122	28.5
Master's degree	27	6.3
Doctoral degree	3	0.7

Table 2. Scale items and descriptive properties

Scale Items	λ	M	SD
Actual Self-Congruity (Malär et al., 2011**)**			
The personality of Brand X is consistent with how I see myself.	.87	4.31	1.46
The personality of Brand X is a mirror image of me.	.87	3.61	1.54
The personality of Brand X reflects how I see myself	.93	4.10	1.49
Ideal Self-Congruity (Malär et al., 2011**)**			
The personality of Brand X is consistent with how I would like to be.	.93	4.38	1.47
The personality of Brand X is a mirror image of the person I would like to be.	.89	4.00	1.54
The personality of Brand X reflects how I would like to be.	.95	4.28	1.53
Social Self-Congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997)			
The personality of Brand X is consistent with how other people see me.	.93	3.89	1.48
The personality of Brand X is a mirror image of how other people see me.	.92	3.65	1.48
The personality of Brand X reflects how other people see me.	.86	3.81	1.47
Brand Attachment (Park et al., 2010**)**			
Self-brand Connection	.96	4.00	1.46
I feel personally connected to Brand X.	.87	4.25	1.54
I feel emotionally bonded to Brand X.	.93	3.88	1.57
Brand X is part of me or can represent me.	.92	3.81	1.58
Brand X says something to other people about who I am.	.92	3.96	1.54
Brand Prominence	.87	4.16	1.38
My thoughts and feelings toward Brand X are often automatic, coming to my mind seemingly on their own.	.93	4.13	1.46
My thoughts and feelings toward Brand X come to my mind naturally and instantly.	.93	4.21	1.45
Brand X automatically evokes many positive thoughts about the past, present and future	.85	4.28	1.55
I have many thoughts about Brand X	.83	3.96	1.54
Brand Experience (Brakus et al., 2009**)**			
Sensory Experience	.89	4.58	1.39
Brand X makes a strong positive impression on my visual sense or other senses	.92	4.62	1.43
Brand X gives me interesting sensory experience	.91	4.56	1.44
Brand X appeals to my senses in positive ways	.96	4.73	1.43
Emotional Experience	.94	4.71	1.39
Brand X induces positive feelings.	.91	4.91	1.38
I have strong positive emotions for Brand X	.94	4.56	1.45
Brand X evokes positive emotions	.96	4.68	1.46
Cognitive Experience	.94	4.46	1.41
I engage in a lot of positive thinking when I encounter Brand X	.83	4.47	1.48
Brand X makes me think positively.	.96	4.56	1.49
Brand X stimulates my curiosity and problem solving	.95	4.36	1.48
Behavioral Experience	.86	4.41	1.46
I engage in positive physical actions and behaviors when I use Brand X.	.92	4.44	1.52
Brand X results in positive bodily experiences	.92	4.24	1.57
Brand X is action oriented in a positive way.	.92	4.54	1.51
Need for Uniqueness (Ruvio et al., 2008**)**			

Creative Choice

	λ	M	SD
I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image that cannot be duplicated.	.78	3.92	1.42
I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.	.84	4.45	1.36
I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.	.87	4.01	1.52
Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image.	.90	4.24	1.45

Unpopular Choice

When it comes to the products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I have broken customs and rules.	.81	3.73	1.51
I have often violated the understood rules of my social group regarding what to buy or own.	.88	3.80	1.43
I have often gone against the understood rules of my social group regarding when and how certain products are properly used.	.92	3.58	1.51
I enjoy challenging the prevailing taste of people I know by buying something they would not seem to accept.	.71	3.74	1.51

Similarity Avoidance

When a product I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less.	.86	3.25	1.52
I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population.	.96	3.42	1.55
As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily bought by everyone.	.88	3.24	1.54
The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general population, the less interested I am in buying it.	.93	3.27	1.59

Brand Loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001**)**

Attitudinal Brand Loyalty

I would be willing to pay a higher price for Brand X over other brands.	.83	3.83	1.69
I am committed to Brand X	.95	3.97	1.65

Behavioral Brand Loyalty

I will buy Brand X the next time I buy a product that Brand X offers.	.91	4.63	1.56
I intend to keep purchasing Brand X.	.94	4.81	1.52

λ = Standardized parameter estimates (Factor loadings); M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

Table 3. Correlations table and discriminant validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Actual self-congruity	**.89**													
2. Ideal self-congruity	.80	**.92**												
3. Social self-congruity	.79	.73	**.91**											
4. Self-brand connection	.76	.71	.72	**.91**										
5. Brand prominence	.62	.61	.60	.87	**.89**									
6. Sensory experience	.71	.72	.60	.74	.63	**.93**								
7. Emotional experience	.73	.73	.61	.78	.68	.88	**.94**							
8. Cognitive experience	.71	.70	.70	.79	.74	.82	.89	**.92**						
9. Behavioral experience	.70	.68	.68	.77	.75	.76	.84	.87	**.92**					
10. Creative choice	.52	.43	.48	.58	.50	.51	.50	.51	.50	**.85**				
11. Unpopular choice	.24	.16	.26	.30	.27	.19	.22	.24	.27	.54	**.84**			
12. Avoid similarity	.17	.10	.21	.21	.18	.06	.07	.13	.16	.50	.59	**.91**		
13. Attitudinal brand loyalty	.63	.57	.60	.71	.68	.64	.67	.65	.60	.48	.26	.22	**.89**	
14. Behavioral brand loyalty	.55	.57	.45	.78	.63	.66	.70	.68	.62	.41	.18	.03	.78	**.93**
Mean	3.95	4.22	3.78	4.00	4.16	4.58	4.71	4.46	4.41	4.16	3.70	3.30	3.90	4.71
Standard deviation	1.41	1.45	1.42	1.46	1.38	1.39	1.39	1.41	1.46	1.28	1.30	1.45	1.60	1.50
Average variance extracted	.79	.85	.82	.83	.79	.87	.88	.84	.85	.72	.70	.83	.80	.86
Maximum shared variance	.69	.65	.69	.75	.75	.77	.78	.78	.76	.33	.35	.35	.64	.64
Composite reliability	.93	.95	.97	.95	.94	.95	.95	.94	.94	.91	.90	.95	.93	.89

Note: Square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) are on the diagonal in bold. All correlations are significant at $p \leq .01$ level

Table 4. Confirmatory factor analysis - Alternate measurement models

	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model 1	2032.0	854	2.37	.95	.94	.92	.06	.05
Model 2	2065.6	865	2.25	.96	.95	.93	.05	.04
Model 3	2001.0	883	2.26	.95	.95	.92	.05	.05
Model 4	1936.8	851	2.26	.96	.95	.92	.05	.04

Table 5. Hypotheses tests and results

H#	Path	β	C.R.	Result
H1a	Actual self-congruity → Brand attachment	.06	.87	Not supported
H1b	Ideal self-congruity → Brand attachment	-.07	-1.33	Not supported
H1c	Social self-congruity → Brand attachment	.24***	4.93	Supported
H2	Brand experience → Brand attachment	.73***	13.45	Supported
H3a	Brand attachment → Attitudinal brand loyalty	.72***	17.15	Supported
H3b	Brand attachment → Behavioral brand loyalty	.76***	17.27	Supported

*Note: β = Standardized coefficient, CR = Critical ratio; *** p < .001*

Table 6. Mediation analysis

Hypothesized Path	Direct effect		Indirect effect		Type of mediation
	β	Confidence interval	β	Confidence interval	
H4a: ASC → BE → BA	.06	(-.08, .21)	.29***	(.16, .46)	Full mediation
H4b: ISC → BE → BA	-.07	(-.22, .06)	.29***	(.17, .43)	Full mediation
H4c: SSC → BE → BA	.24**	(.10, .40)	.04	(-.06, .14)	No mediation

*Note: ASC: Actual self-congruity, ISC: Ideal self-congruity, SSC: Social self-congruity, BE: Brand experience, BA: Brand attachment, *** p < .001; ** p < .05*

Table 7. Moderation analysis

Path	Unstandardized regression	C. R.	p-value
H1a: ASC → BA	.04	.85	.39
H1b: ISC → BA	.04	.89	.37
H1c: SSC → BA	.21	4.88	***
H2: BE → BA	.59	13.21	***
H3a: BA → ABL	.81	17.31	***
H3b: BA → BBL	.76	17.29	***
H4a: ASC → BE	.31	5.95	***
H4b: ISC → BE	.36	7.40	***
H4c: SSC → BE	.09	1.95	.06
NFU → BA	.12	3.47	***
H5a: ASC x NFU → BA	.03	.82	.42
H5b: ISC x NFU → BA	.08	2.02	**
H5c: SSC x NFU → BA	-.09	-2.98	**

*Note: ASC: Actual Self-Congruity, ISC: Ideal Self-Congruity, SSC: Social Self-Congruity, BA: Brand Attachment, NFU: Need for uniqueness, ABL: attitudinal brand loyalty, BBL: behavioral brand loyalty; *** p < .001; ** p < .05*

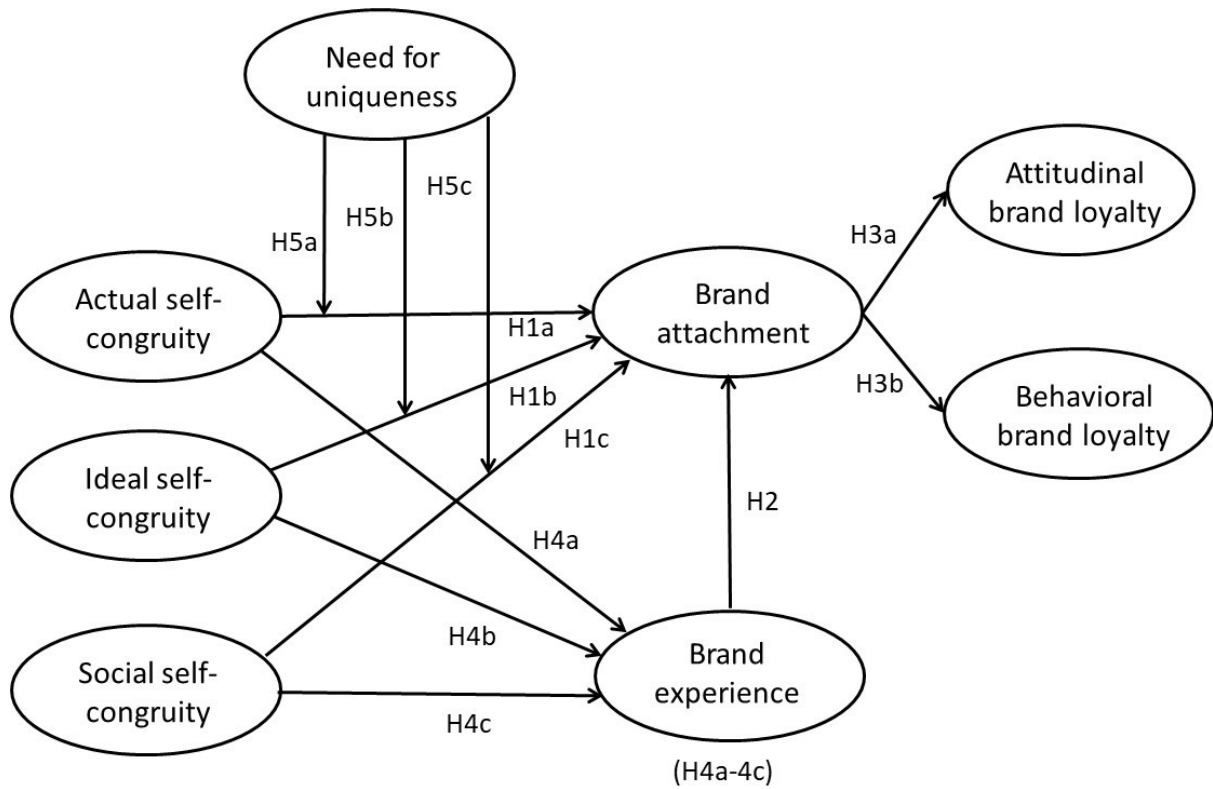**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

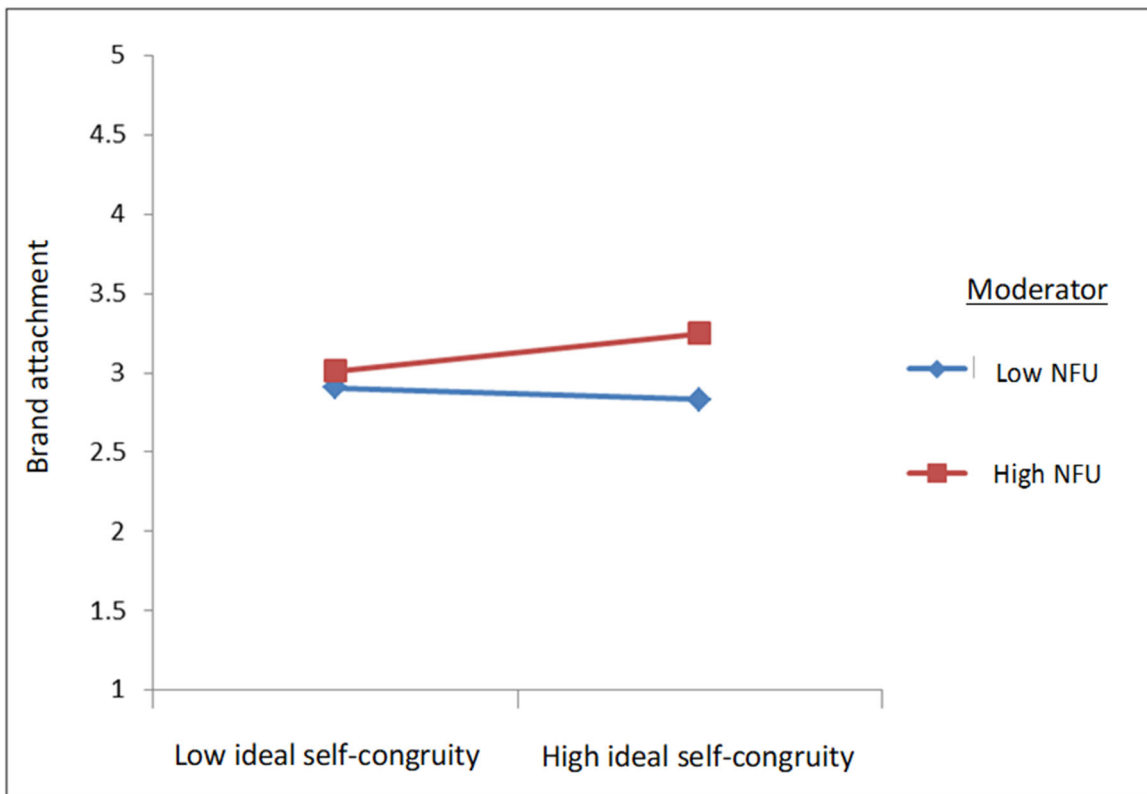Figure 2A. Moderating effect of NFU on ideal self-congruity → brand attachment

Figure 2B. Moderating effect of NFU on social self-congruity → brand attachment