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Original Article (Mixed)

Identifying and prioritizing strategies for creating and impacting brand identity using the FCM method

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to identify and analyze the strategies for creating and consequences of brand identification using the FCM method. The present study is applicable in terms of its purpose, and exploratory in terms of data collection. Also, this research is a mixed (qualitative-quantitative) research based on the inductive deductive philosophy. The statistical population of the research is experts including university professors, food industry and restaurant managers in Lorestan and their customers, 29 of whom were selected using the purposive sampling method and based on the principle of theoretical saturation. The data collection tool in the qualitative part is an interview, whose validity and reliability were confirmed using content validity and theoretical validity and the intra-coder and inter-coder reliability measurement method. Also, the data collection tool in the quantitative part is a questionnaire, whose validity and reliability were confirmed using content validity and test-retest reliability. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis method and MaxQDA software, and quantitative data were analyzed using fuzzy cognitive mapping method and Gaffey software. The results of this study indicate that focusing on nostalgia and memory-making with the centrality index (11/16) and creating an inspiring brand story with the centrality index (05/16) are the most important strategies for creating brand identity and forming a sustainable identity bond (4/17) and strengthening competitive advantage through identity differentiation with the centrality index (33/17) are the most important outcomes of brand identity.

Keywords:

Identification,
Brand
Identification,
Fuzzy Cognitive
Map.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In today's dynamic and competitive markets, brands face numerous challenges in attracting, retaining, and interacting with customers. Increasing consumption options, rapid changes in consumer preferences and behaviors, and the influence of cultural, social, and psychological factors on purchasing decisions have forced organizations to seek innovative solutions to differentiate and strengthen their connections with their audiences (Seminari et al., 2022). Despite the increasing importance of the role of brand identification in forming emotional and lasting relationships between brands and consumers, there is still no comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of this phenomenon and its consequences, especially in sensitive and competitive industries such as the food industry. In a situation where multiple choices, increasing consumer awareness, and sensitivity to values such as health, sustainability, and authenticity have made purchasing behavior more complex (DeVecchio et al., 2024), brands are forced to move beyond product functions and align with consumers' identities, values, and lifestyles in order to build trust, loyalty, and lasting preference (Van der Westhuizen, 2018). However, there is a significant gap in the domestic and foreign literature on specific and effective strategies for creating brand identity and its consequences in the food industry, while this industry needs to create trust, transparency, and emotional connection with consumers more than other areas (Li et al., 2022→). This theoretical and applicable gap highlights the need for research that can provide a scientific and practical framework for identifying the factors affecting the creation of brand identity and explaining its effects on consumer behavior and attitudes. Therefore, the main question of this research is: What strategies lead to the creation of brand identity in the food industry and what consequences does this identity have for consumer behavior and brand performance?

Theoretical Framework

Brand Identity

Brand identity refers to a state in which a consumer sees himself aligned with the values, identity, and personality of a brand and considers it part of his personal or social identity. This phenomenon goes beyond simply purchasing a product or service and refers to the deep connection that a consumer establishes with a brand, such that the brand becomes a symbol of their beliefs, lifestyle, or even ideals (Van der Westhuizen, 2018). The importance of this concept in consumer behavior is that brand identification can lead to long-term loyalty, brand advocacy, and even influence others. When consumers identify with a brand, they feel a sense of belonging to that brand, and this feeling can strongly influence their purchasing decisions (Zafari & Nasimi, 2022). This emotional connection causes the consumer to continue to stick with their favorite brand even when faced with cheaper options or other competitors. From a psychological perspective, brand identification helps consumers to strengthen their identity or be accepted in certain social groups that are consistent with brand values. This is especially important in modern societies where consumption has become a part of individuals' social identity (Borjalilou & Emadinasab, 2025).

Abbasi Esfanjani & Basir (2025) conducted a study titled "Analytical Model of the Relationship between Brand Identification, Perception of Corporate Social Responsibility, and Digital Product Brand Preference". The findings and results showed that consumers' perception of digital product social responsibility has a significant effect on brand identification. Also, brand identification has a significant effect on brand preference for digital product products. Perception of social responsibility has a significant effect on brand preference for digital product products. Brand identification plays a mediating role in the

effect of perception of corporate social responsibility on brand preference for digital product products.

Zafari & Nasimi (2022) conducted a study titled "The Effect of Brand Identity and Trustworthiness on Customer Attachment and Loyalty to Sports Brands". The results of the study show the effect of brand identity on brand attachment, product identity on product attachment, brand trustworthiness on brand attachment, product trustworthiness on product attachment, product attachment on brand attachment, brand attachment on brand loyalty, and product attachment on brand loyalty. The findings indicate that brand attachment and product attachment directly and positively affect brand loyalty.

Research Methodology

This research is exploratory in nature and is based on the inductive deductive paradigm.

Research Findings

The results of the qualitative section indicate the strategies for creating and consequences of brand identity in the food and restaurant industry. Accordingly, strategies for creating brand identity include creating an inspiring brand story, actively engaging with audiences on social media, creating personalized experiences, using relevant influencers, emphasizing social responsibility, focusing on a strong, coherent, and engaging visual identity, creating brand-centric rituals, characterizing the brand as an emotional narrator, creating interactive and playful content, and focusing on nostalgia and memory-making. Also, the consequences or downstream factors of brand identity in the food and restaurant industry are strengthening competitive advantage through identity differentiation, forming self-sustaining brand-centric communities, forming a sustainable identity bond, increasing the synergy rate in the brand ecosystem, creating a brand halo effect, reducing the churn rate in the customer life cycle, strengthening resilience against competitive disruptions, increasing perceived value beyond service, creating sustainable revenue streams, and enhancing brand symbolic capital. Also, the results of the quantitative part of the research include measuring the importance and prioritization of strategies for creating and consequences of brand identity in the food industry. Accordingly, the most important strategies for creating brand identity are focusing on nostalgia and memory, creating an inspiring brand story, and focusing on a strong, coherent, and attractive visual identity. Focusing on nostalgia and memory in brand identity creates a deep emotional connection with the audience. This approach strengthens brand loyalty by evoking positive emotions and shared memories. An inspiring brand story establishes a deep connection with the audience by creating a meaningful and emotional narrative. These stories strengthen customer identification and loyalty by conveying brand values and identity. Also, a strong, coherent, and attractive visual identity strengthens brand recognition in the audience's mind by creating a distinctive and memorable image. This visual coherence deepens trust and emotional connection with the brand and increases identification. Also, the formation of a sustainable identity bond, strengthening competitive advantage through identity differentiation, and reducing the churn rate in the customer life cycle were identified as the most important consequences of brand identification. Brand identification plays a key role in the formation of a sustainable identity bond by creating an emotional and value connection between the consumer and the brand. This connection creates a long-term and meaningful relationship between the individual and the brand by strengthening the sense of belonging and loyalty. Brand identification strengthens identity differentiation by creating a deep emotional connection between the consumer and the brand. This differentiation creates a sustainable competitive advantage and increases customer loyalty. Brand identification also

increases the sense of belonging of customers by creating a strong emotional bond. This deep connection reduces the churn rate in the customer life cycle and strengthens long-term loyalty. Overall, the research findings show that brand identification in the food industry in Iran is rooted in identity, emotional, and cultural experiences, rather than being influenced by advertising activities or direct interactions.

Conclusion

According to the results of the present study and the reviewed research background, most of the findings are in line with previous research. Most studies have emphasized that brand identification as an identity-affective construct has a significant role in strengthening brand preference, customer loyalty, brand attachment, and repurchase intention. Studies of Abbasi Esfanjani & Basir (2025), Hoseini ravesh et al. (2024), Zafari & Nasimi (2022), and Rabiei Rudsari et al. (2019) all show that brand identification and its related factors (perceived social responsibility, brand trustworthiness, actual and ideal identification) have a direct impact on brand preference, brand attachment, and customer loyalty. Findings from international studies, including Kini et al. (2024), Li et al. (2022), and McManus et al. (2022) also reinforce this path, stating that self-concept, brand personality traits, and emotional-identity bonds influence brand loyalty and preference through the mediation of brand identification. This broad alignment shows that the mechanisms for forming identity bonds between customers and brands vary across cultures and industries, and supports the current study's view of the importance of strategies such as brand narrative, nostalgia, personalized experience, and social responsibility. On the other hand, some of the research background also highlights points of distinction that can be considered as cases of misalignment or differences in emphasis. For example, research of Kini et al. (2024) shows that self-concept alone does not lead to loyalty and only operates through customer engagement and brand identification; this finding emphasizes that identity bonds require the presence of complementary behavioral mechanisms, while some domestic research (e.g. Rabiei Rudsari et al., 2019) places a more direct emphasis on the impact of actual and ideal self-identification on purchase intention.