INVESTIGATING CONNECTEDNESS TO BRAND USERS: HOW IMPORTANT IS SOCIAL INTERACTION?

WILLIAM C. MARTIN, University of North Dakota
JOEL E. COLLIER, Mississippi State University
BRIAN T. ENGELLAND, The Catholic University of America

While brand-related groups have become a major topic in the marketing literature, the psychological aspects of this phenomenon have yet to be thoroughly explored. In this manuscript, the theoretical groundwork is laid for a construct central to group-minded brand consumption: connectedness to brand users. A framework of connectedness to brand users, a perception of being linked to the users of a brand, is presented and demonstrated to be of importance to firms' branding efforts. Results indicate that the brand-oriented social interaction frequently referred to in the marketing literature may not play as vital a role in consumers' psychological connections to brand users as previously suggested. Discussion of the results is offered, as are limitations and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common human features is the need to belong, to fit in with some type of group (Atkin, 2004). With any group, there is something that its members hold in common with one another (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), such as a shared language, place of residence, faith, beliefs, or values. One such point of commonality is consumption, which can help consumers to coalesce and fulfill their need for affiliation and belonging with others (Cova, 1997). In recent years, marketing researchers have observed a movement among many consumers toward communal consumption, especially that related to brands (Arnould & Price, 1993; Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Goulding, Shankar, & Elliot, 2002; Kozinets, 1999; Patterson, 1998; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). Consumers today often do not purchase brands merely for the utility they offer; rather, consumption of a specific brand is often due to its ability to enable consumers to feel connected with one another (Cova & Cova, 2002).

In light of these findings, interest in the group aspects of branding has been intense in the marketing literature for a number of years. Instances of communal brand consumption studied to date have included brand tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002; Patterson, 1998), brand

cults (Belk & Tumbat, 2005), and brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007; de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2004; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; McWilliam, 2000; Muniz, 1997; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Schau & Muniz, 2002; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). A central element to these groups is that their members regularly engage in some form of social interaction involving the brand, such as discussing the brand online or attending a brand-related event. However, even in the absence of such social interaction and, consequently, any type of brand oriented group, consumers can still feel a psychological connection with other individuals via their mutual admiration for an object (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), such as brands (Ashworth, Dacin, & Thomson, 2009; Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006). Despite its acknowledged impact on consumers and firms' branding efforts, little is known about the workings of this psychological connection among the admirers of a brand.

Given this dearth of knowledge concerning a potentially vital aspect of brands, the purpose of this research is to examine this perception of being linked to the users of a brand, a construct referred to herein as connectedness to brand users, and to improve understanding of how it fits into the complex web of relationships that consumers have with brands. Within this article, a framework concerning connectedness

to brand users which details its antecedents and consequences, as well as potential moderating variables of specific relationships in the framework, is developed. In the following section, extant literature concerning connectedness to brand users is reviewed, provide the theoretical basis for this construct. Next, a model of connectedness to brand users is proffered in addition to related hypotheses. The methods used and the results of model testing are then provided. Lastly, the contribution of this research to marketing academicians and practitioners is discussed as well as directions for future research.

CONNECTEDNESS TO BRAND USERS

Research has consistently shown that individuals' consumption decisions frequently stem from a group oriented mindset (e.g., Bagozzi, 2000; Holt, 1997). Consumers regularly make consumption decisions which are reflective of their desire to associate themselves with others (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; 2005). In today's society, consumption among individuals is often reflective of their desired connections and relationships with other consumers (Bagozzi, 2000). Objects such as brands are often used as "signs of one's connection to or differentiation from other members of society" (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, p. 532). A major facet of consumers' relationships with brands is reflected by their desire to affiliate themselves with certain others (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

Much of the marketing literature concerning group related brand consumption has focused on the social aspects of brand-oriented groups, that is, emphasis has been placed on understanding the requisite conditions for such groups to form (McAlexander et al., 2002; McWilliam, 2000; Quinn & Devasagayam, 2005), how these groups operate (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005), the effects that these groups have on the brand and vice versa (Cova & Cova, 2002), and what influences consumers to participate in these groups (e.g. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). However, research clearly indicates that neither social interaction nor any recognizable brand related group is necessary for consumers to feel an implicit connection with other consumers of a

brand (Ashworth et al., 2009; Carlson et al., 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006).

The theory of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) provides insight into the psychological connection that individuals, including the users of a particular brand, may feel toward one another. This theory seeks to explain the underpinnings of individuals' feelings of being connected to others in any type of group, even in groups which are purely psychological and have no social element. According to this theory, a key dimension of sense of community is a sense of belonging or interpersonal relatedness (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2007). Applying this to brand-specific groups, research regarding brand communities has acknowledged that their members tend to feel that they have an implicit psychological connection with other members, that they tend to have a "well-developed sense of vast unmet fellow community members" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, p. 413) and "often share no connection other than an interest in a brand and its consumption" (McAlexander et al. 2002, p. 44). Similarly, communities of consumption (Cova 1997) are held together through a collective sense of other group members with similar consumption practices. Many consumers of brands feel implicitly connected to one another, though they are involved in very limited or no social interaction with one another. Researchers have noted that many consumers of brands such as Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006), Coca-Cola (Pendergrast, 1993), and Uneeda (Boorstin, 1974) perceive themselves to be linked together via their mutual esteem for the brand, though they are not involved in any type of social interaction involving the brand. In this study, this perception of being linked to the users of a brand is denoted as connectedness to brand users.

While conceptually similar, connectedness to brand users is notably different from other constructs which have been put forth as representative of a perceived kinship among brand users. Unlike the concepts of 'we-ness' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), 'psychological sense of brand community' (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008), and 'social-adjustive' (Ashworth et al., 2009), connectedness to brand users does not imply

that relational bonds or any type of active social relationship exist among a brand's admirers. Indeed, self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) affirms that social interaction is not necessary for psychological connections to develop in individuals' minds. Further, unlike Carlson et al.'s (2008) construct, connectedness to brand users can exist among users and non-users of a brand alike. While it appears probable that feelings of connection with a brand's users will be strongest among the actual users of a brand, it is quite plausible that those who don't actively use the brand may still feel a connection to those who do. For instance, an individual may not own a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, but this person may still feel connected to those who own one.

MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The model shown in Figure 1 is offered in an effort to explicate the constructs most closely associated with connectedness to brand users. In this section, the theoretical foundations of the relationships depicted in this model and

corresponding hypotheses are elaborated upon, beginning with the antecedents of connectedness to brand users.

In a social psychological context, individuals can identify with the entity that binds the group together (e.g. the brand itself), as well as with those associated with that entity (e.g. those who consume the brand) (Turner et al., 1987). As such, it is hypothesized that self-brand connection and brand user similarity are two key antecedents of connectedness to brand users.

Two important, hypothesized consequences of connectedness to brand users are brand commitment and influence over brand meaning. Brand commitment is a key outcome of the entire branding process (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000); influence over brand meaning refers to the extent of consumers' perceived degree of control over others' views of the brand and acknowledges that consumers are co-creators of brand meaning.

FIGURE 1:
Model of Connectedness to Brand Users
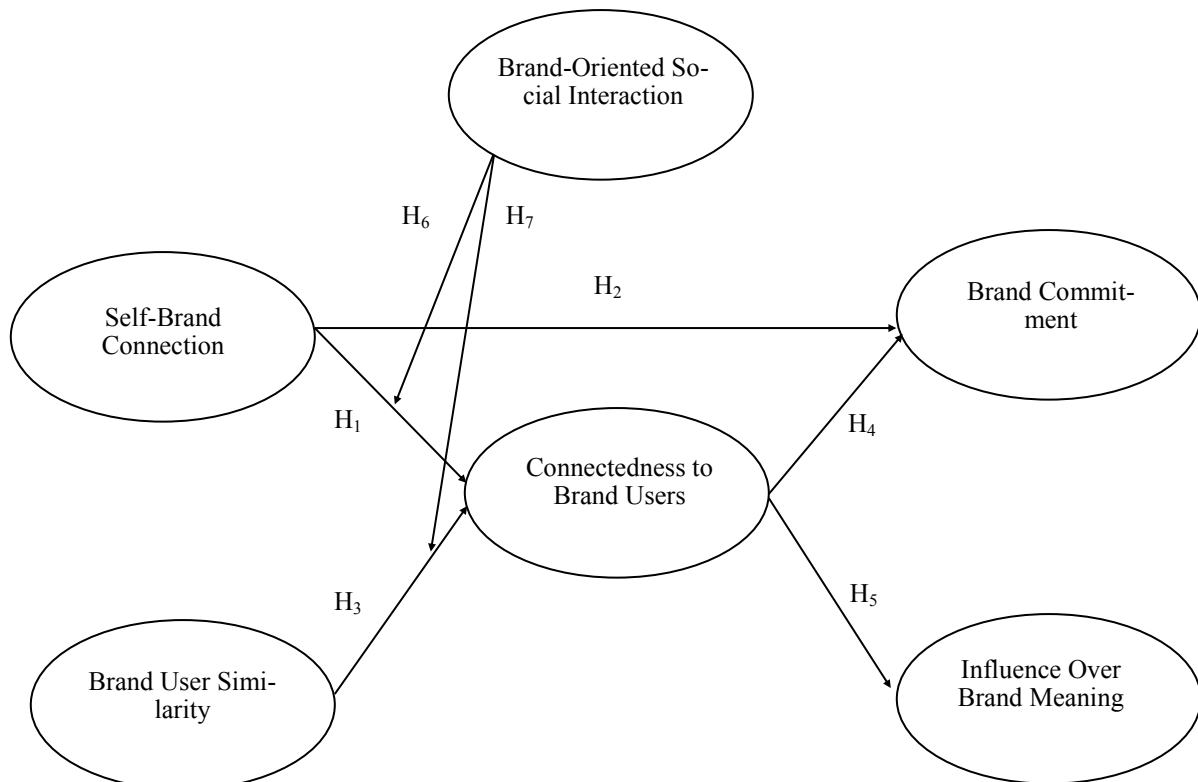
While not necessary for connectedness to brand users to exist, brand-oriented social interaction, a hypothesized moderator of selected relationships associated with connectedness to brand users, can play an important role in how consumers' view the communal aspects of branding (e.g. Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). When the focal point of a group is salient to individuals, their perceived connection to that focal point and the group itself is enhanced (Turner et al., 1987). Thus, brand-oriented social interaction is hypothesized to impact the salience of the brand in consumers' minds and, in turn, strengthen the relationships that connectedness to brand users has with other variables. The following sections expound upon these variables and how they fit into the model of connectedness to brand users.

Self-Brand Connection

Self-concept refers to the cognitive component of individuals' view of themselves and is comprised of their social as well as their personal self (Turner et al., 1987). Social identity theory asserts that people tend to identify with or categorize themselves as members of a group when they perceive similarity between themselves and others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When individuals have strongly incorporated an object into their self-concept, they are more likely to consider themselves linked to others who are associated with that object.

In the context of brands, the degree to which individuals feel a connection with the users of a brand is very likely to depend on the extent of their self-brand connection, which refers to the level to which an individual has incorporated a brand into his or her self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2000). The level of brand meaning referred to by self-brand connection is "the entire constellation, or gestalt, or the set of brand associations" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, p. 340) and is considered to be more indicative of brand meaning to the individual than the specific associations that a person may have with a brand. When individuals have strong self-brand connection, they are likely to consider themselves to be similar to other people who also use that brand. Based on social identity theory, it is likely that these

individuals will have a sense of belonging with other people who use the brand. Conversely, it appears unlikely that an individual who has no self-brand connection is likely to sense any type of bond with those who use that brand. Thus, a greater degree of self-brand connection results in greater connectedness to brand users.

> **H₁:** Self-brand connection is positively related to connectedness to brand users.

Apart from its relationship with connectedness to brand users, it is very likely that there is also a direct relationship between self-brand connection and brand commitment, as suggested by Carlson et al. (2008). When an individual has incorporated a brand into his or her self-concept, it is likely that this individual will feel committed to that brand as a result. This relationship may well exist apart from any psychological connection this individual may have to the users of the brand. For instance, if a college student feels that the Nautica brand represents who he feels he is, it appears very likely that this student will be committed to Nautica as a result, regardless of any felt connection with the users of Nautica.

> **H₂:** Self-brand connection is positively related to brand commitment.

Brand User Similarity

With regard to brands, individuals may perceive similarities not only between themselves and the brand, but also with those who use that brand (Fournier, 1998). Brand-user similarity is herein defined as the degree to which an individual's identity is perceived to overlap with that of the users of a brand. Much of the research involving brand communities has examined similarity with a brand's users only in contexts in which social interaction among members takes place (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

However, social identity theory affirms that social interaction is not necessary for individuals to feel that they belong to a group (Brewer, 1991), an empirically supported assertion (e.g., Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst,

2005; Reingen, Foster, Brown, & Seidman, 1984).   In addition, social identity theory contends that when individuals perceive similarity between themselves and others, they tend to feel a shared connection with those others.

> **H₃:** Brand user similarity is positively related to connectedness to brand users.

Brand Commitment

Similar to previous definitions of commitment (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Fournier, 1998; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Yoo et al., 2000), brand commitment is defined as individual's enduring desire to maintain his or her relationship with the brand.   Brand commitment is of great concern to marketers as it is not only associated with variables such as brand preference and word-of-mouth intentions, but that it is the primary building block of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment to the brand implies that consumers will continue to purchase the brand, avoid other brands, and say positive things about the brand to others.

According to the theory of sense of community, when individuals perceive themselves to be part of a group, they are generally willing to personally invest themselves in support of the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).   When consumers feel a connection with the users of a brand, it follows that they will be supportive of the point of commonality which links them to one another, the brand. They are likely to enjoy the psychological kinship with others that the brand is able to bring them and be apt to support it.   For such individuals, switching brands may result in perceptions of being disconnected from the users of the brand. Hence, when individuals feel a connection with the users of a brand, they are likely to be committed to that brand.

> **H₄:** Connectedness to brand users is positively related to brand commitment.

Influence over Brand Meaning

Influence over brand meaning refers to an individual's perceived degree of control over the meaning of a brand to others. Though not previously identified as a unique construct, the notion of perceived influence over brand meaning is very much present in prior research (e.g. Patterson, 1998). Modern consumers want to become active contributors in the process of value creation (Firat & Schultz, 1997). Current perspectives in marketing affirm that the marketer is not solely responsible for defining the brand (Atkin, 2004) and call for explicit recognition of the customer as a co-creator of value (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

As in other areas, consumers are gaining increasing control over brands and their meaning to others. For instance, after Apple abandoned the Newton, a personal digital assistant, members of the brand community justifiably felt that defining the meaning of the brand was left up to them (Muniz & Schau, 2005).   Even when marketers are actively involved in the branding process, however, consumers may literally take control of the brand in a process known as serendipitous brand hijack (Atkin, 2004).

As such, it is hypothesized that the more that an individual perceives a connection with the users of a brand, the greater the influence over what that brand means to other individuals they will perceive themselves to possess.   When an individual, even one that is dedicated to a brand, feels that she is consuming the brand as a single individual, it is unlikely that she will perceive herself to have significant influence over what the brand means to other people. However, when an individual feels connected to the users of a brand, she may well feel that the group of which she is a part has considerable influence over the brand, resulting in a personal feeling of influence over the meaning of the brand.

> **H₅:** Connectedness to brand users is positively related to influence over brand meaning.

Brand-Oriented Social Interaction

Even though individuals may feel self-brand connection and identify with the users of a brand, the degree to which they perceive a connection with the users of that brand is likely to hinge on the salience of that brand and its users in their mind. According to self-categorization theory, an individual does not feel a strong bond with every group of which they are a part at the same moment in time. Rather, the degree to which individuals feel connected to any specific group at any given point in time is dependent on the salience of that group in their mind. To the extent that an individual's self-categorization with a specific group is made salient, that individual becomes cognizant of his or her membership in that group (Oakes, 1987). As such, individuals are more likely to feel that they are part of a group and that they are connected to the members of that group when that group is made salient to them.

While social interaction is not necessary for individuals to perceive themselves to be a part of some type of group (Turner et al., 1987; Cova & Pace, 2006), social interaction regarding the focal point of the group can strengthen the psychological connection that such individuals have toward one another. In this context, brand-oriented social interaction, the extent of an individual's ongoing communication with others involving the brand, can strengthen the salience of the brand and, in turn, those who consume it in consumers' minds. This interaction can occur through such means as attending brandfests (McAlexander et al., 2002), discussing the brand online (Dholakia et al., 2004; Flandez, 2008; Muniz & Schau, 2005), attending meetings (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), or even just casual conversations involving the brand (Muniz & Schau, 2005). Consumers who are frequently engaged in brand-oriented social interaction are more likely to be cognizant of the brand and those associated with it. The enhanced salience of the brand and its users produced by this interaction is likely to strengthen the relationship between self-brand connection and connectedness to brand users as well as the relationship between brand user similarity and connectedness to brand users.

H₆: Self-brand connection has a stronger relationship with connectedness to brand users when brand-oriented social interaction is high.

H₇: Brand user similarity has a stronger relationship with connectedness to brand users when brand-oriented social interaction is high.

METHODS

In this section, the methods used in this study are reviewed. Information regarding existing measures used in this research is provided followed by a discussion of the scale-development methods used to create new measures for four constructs. Last, the methods used to test the hypotheses are reviewed.

Existing Measures

The measure of self-brand connection used was developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003) and utilizes a Likert-type response category anchored by "Not at All" and "Extremely Well." The seven items comprising this measure were used with no adaptation, with the exception of the sixth item, "I consider Brand X to be 'me' (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others)." Due to this last statement in parentheses, this item reads as double-barreled and is likely to be confusing to respondents (DeVellis, 2003). As such, the statement in parentheses was eliminated from this item.

Brand commitment was measured using a combination of existing scales developed by Beatty and colleagues (1988) and by Yoo and colleagues (2000). Items from these scales which are negatively worded were either altered or not used as they can degrade a measure's unidimensionality (Herche & Engelland, 1996).

Scale Development

Measures were developed for the remaining four constructs. Scale development procedures followed the process recommended by DeVellis (2003). Following the development of forty-four items based on the definition and conceptualization of each respective construct,

each item was evaluated by a panel of six expert judges for face validity, wordiness, and clarity. These judges consisted of four professors of marketing who had expertise in experience in scale development and two doctoral students in marketing who had recently completed a doctoral seminar in scale development. Items deemed by the judges to lack face validity or be otherwise unacceptable were deleted.

The item pools were then administered to a convenience sample in order to purify the measures. The focal brand was that of the football team of a major university in the southeastern U.S. Students enrolled in various marketing courses at this university were offered course credit for participation. To increase the sample size, the student referral method, which has been utilized successfully in prior research (e.g., Babin, Hardesty, & Suter, 2003), was employed. Each student completed a single questionnaire and was asked to recruit up to five other students to complete the questionnaire. This was augmented by additional data gathered from a random sample of alumni of the same university via email invitations. A total of 230 responses were collected. Eighteen responses which appeared to exhibit acquiescence response bias were eliminated, leaving the final sample size at 212. Respondents' mean age was 33; 60% of respondents were male.

A principal components analysis (PCA) of the items was then conducted. As anticipated, six components had an eigenvalue greater than one. After these components were rotated using Promax rotation, which is recommended when components are anticipated to be correlated with one another (DeVellis, 2003), all items loaded above .60 on their respective components with no cross-loadings greater than .40 present except for one item related to brand user similarity which was deleted.

Each measure's reliability was then evaluated. Coefficient alpha was greater than .80 for each measure, indicative of good reliability. However, at this stage in the scale development process, several measures contained items that were quite redundant in that they used similar words or phrasing. Excessive redundancy among the items in a purified measure should be avoided since such items do not contribute to a measure's construct validity (Boyle, 1991). As such, an effort was made to eliminate items which had highly similar words or wording. After this paring, a PCA and reliability analyses were again conducted. This indicated that each measure still exhibited unidimensionality and high reliability.

Next, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of all six construct measures was then conducted using maximum likelihood estimation of the covariance matrix. The fit of this model was good (χ^2 = 538.58, df = 237, p <.001; RMSEA = .078; CFI = .95; NNFI = .94). Standardized loading estimates for each item were .70 or greater. Average variance extracted (AVE) was greater than .60 for each measure, and construct reliability was greater than .85 for each measure. For each pair of construct measures, the AVE of both constructs was greater than the squared correlation coefficient between the constructs. Thus, the measures demonstrate unidimensionality, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2006).

Main Test

In the main test, the focal brand studied was iPod, a subsidiary brand of Apple. There are two reasons as to why this is an excellent brand to study in this context. First, there is a broad spectrum of brand-oriented social interaction and involvement involving this brand. Many consumers of the iPod regularly discuss this brand in online forums, for instance, while many others merely own the brand and could name very few, if any, competing brands of MP3 players. This considerable variance in levels of interaction surrounding the brand makes the results of research studying this brand generalizable to a wide array of brands. Second, previous research involving Apple and its subsidiary brands has been shown to be generalizable to many other brand oriented groups. For instance, the results of research involving brand communities oriented around Apple (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) has been shown to be applicable to other brands oriented around diverse products, such as sport utility vehicles (McAlexander et al., 2002), hazelnut butter spread (Cova & Pace, 2006), motorcycles (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), and automobiles (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Data were gathered in two ways so as to make the sample as broad as possible. First, an invitation to complete the questionnaire online was posted in eight online forums oriented around Apple and the iPod. An incentive of entry into a drawing for one of five $25 iTunes gift certificates was offered to these respondents. Second, students of a major university in the southeastern U.S. were sent an invitation to complete the questionnaire. The incentive offered to these respondents consisted of entry into a drawing for one of five $25 iTunes gift certificates. In sum, the total number of respondents to the survey was 867. Mean respondent age was 25, and 55% of respondents were female.

Five responses had more than 15% missing data and were deleted, leaving the final usable sample size at 862. Missing data were replaced using regression imputation. A PCA of the seven measures was then conducted. Six components were extracted, and all items loaded above .70 on their respective components with no items having cross-loadings greater than .40. Next, a CFA of all six construct measures was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation of the covariance matrix. This initial CFA revealed that two items had high modification indices and residuals. As such, these items were deleted and another CFA was conducted; all of the measures used are shown in Table 1, along with their standardized loading estimates. In the final CFA, model fit was good (χ^2 = 1158.83, df = 237, p <.001; RMSEA = .067; CFI = .97; NNFI = .96). The standardized construct correlation matrix for this CFA is shown in Table 2; in this matrix, the diagonal values represent the AVE for each construct; values below the diagonal are correlation estimates with t-values shown in italics on the line below; and values above the diagonal are squared correlation estimates. Also, coefficient alpha for each measure is shown at the bottom of this matrix. Standardized loading estimates for each item were .75 or greater, AVE was greater than .75 for each measure, and construct reliability was greater than .90 for each measure. For each pair of construct measures, the AVE of both constructs was greater than the squared correlation coefficient between the constructs. In sum, the measures continue to demonstrate unidimensionality, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and high reliability.

Results

To test the hypotheses, the structural model, shown with standardized loading estimates in Figure 2, was analyzed using maximum likelihood estimation of the covariance matrix. The latent variable structural model was analyzed as opposed to path analysis of construct means. This model fit the data well (χ^2 = 914.81, df = 161, p <.001; RMSEA = .074; CFI = .97; NNFI = .96). The proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs explained by the model for connectedness to brand users, brand commitment, and influence over brand meaning was .65, .38, and .27, respectively. Thus, the model appears to have good explanatory power. All of the relationships are significant and in the hypothesized direction. This provides support for H_1-H_5. To further examine the impact of self-brand connection and brand user similarity in the model, the indirect effects of each of these constructs on brand commitment and influence over brand meaning were investigated. Self-brand connection has a significant indirect effect on brand commitment (.08, p < .05) and influence over brand meaning (.29, p < .01), as does brand user similarity (.12 for brand commitment, p < .05; .42 for influence over brand meaning, p < .01).

To examine the moderating effect of brand-oriented social interaction, multi-group analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling. Two groups were created via a median split. The "high" group had 444 respondents (mean = 4.68), and the "low" group had 418 respondents (mean = 1.95). Results of these analyses are shown in Table 3 and indicate that while both of the relationships hypothesized to be moderated by brand-oriented social interaction appear to be stronger when brand-oriented social interaction was high, only the relationship between brand user similarity and connectedness to brand users is significantly different. The results support H_7 but not H_6.

TABLE 1:
CFA Results with Primary Data

Construct Measure Model Fit: χ^2=1158.83, df =237, p<.001; RMSEA=.067; CFI=.97; NNFI=.96	Standardized Loading Estimate	t-value
Self-Brand Connection		
This brand reflects who I am.	.86	31.54
I can use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.	.87	31.91
I think that this brand could help me become the type of person I want to be.	.90	33.61
I consider this brand to be "me."	.92	35.35
Brand User Similarity		
Most of the people who use this brand have a nature that is very much like mine.	.86	31.51
The identity of the people who use this brand is almost identical to my own.	.92	34.76
When I think of the people who use this brand, I think of myself.	.85	30.75
My identity is very similar to that of the people who use this brand.	.93	35.96
Connectedness to brand users		
I feel linked to those who use this brand.	.92	35.64
I sense a bond with others who use this brand.	.92	35.60
I sense a connection with those who use this brand.	.95	37.75
When I think about this brand, I feel attached to those who use it.	.95	37.61
Brand Commitment		
I consider myself to be highly committed to this brand.	.96	38.26
I feel strongly devoted to this brand.	.95	37.33
Even if another brand were less expensive, I would always purchase this brand.	.81	28.39
This brand would be my first choice of brands in this product category.	.75	25.76
Influence Over Brand Meaning		
What this brand means to others depends on me.	.87	32.09
My actions influence what others think about this brand.	.91	34.98
What I do has a big impact on what this brand means to others.	.97	39.13
My influence over the meaning of this brand is quite strong.	.94	36.68
Brand-Oriented Social Interaction		
I often mention this brand when speaking with other people.	.87	32.00
My conversations with others frequently involve this brand.	.94	36.67
I regularly talk with other people about this brand.	.94	36.20
I often exchange information about this brand with other people.	.85	30.59

DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of this research are discussed, along with its implications for researchers and practitioners. First, the results of this research indicate that connectedness to brand users has a positive impact on brand commitment. Consumers who feel linked to a brand's users are more committed to that brand than are other consumers. This is an important finding since the focus of prior research on communal brand consumption has been on its social elements. By demonstrating that only a psychological connection among brand users can lead to greater brand commitment, this research expands understanding of communal

brand consumption to a potentially much wider assortment of brands than has been previously identified. Some brands, for instance, are unlikely to educe substantial brand-oriented social interaction. These brands may still be capable of encouraging connectedness to brand users.

Connectedness to brand users was also found to be positively related to influence over brand meaning. The stronger the connection that consumers feel toward the users of a brand, the more influence they feel that they have over what the brand means to other individuals. This perceived influence may help individuals feel that they truly are a part of the value

TABLE 2:
Standardized Construct Correlation Matrix with Primary Data

	Self-Brand Connection	Brand User Similarity	Connected-ness to Brand Users	Brand Commitment	Influence Over Brand Meaning	Brand-Oriented Social Interaction
Self-Brand Connection	**.79**	.46	.50	.36	.30	.31
Brand User Similarity	.68 *32.87*	**.79**	.58	.21	.31	.24
Connectedness to Brand Users	.71 *38.38*	.76 *47.16*	**.88**	.26	.30	.36
Brand Commitment	.60 *25.76*	.46 *15.94*	.51 *19.56*	**.76**	.12	.22
Influence Over Brand Meaning	.55 *21.95*	.56 *22.61*	.55 *22.50*	.35 *11.08*	**.86**	.31
Brand-Oriented Social Interaction	.56 *21.86*	.49 *17.64*	.60 *25.46*	.47 *16.99*	.56 *22.68*	**.81**

FIGURE 2:
Results of Model Testing
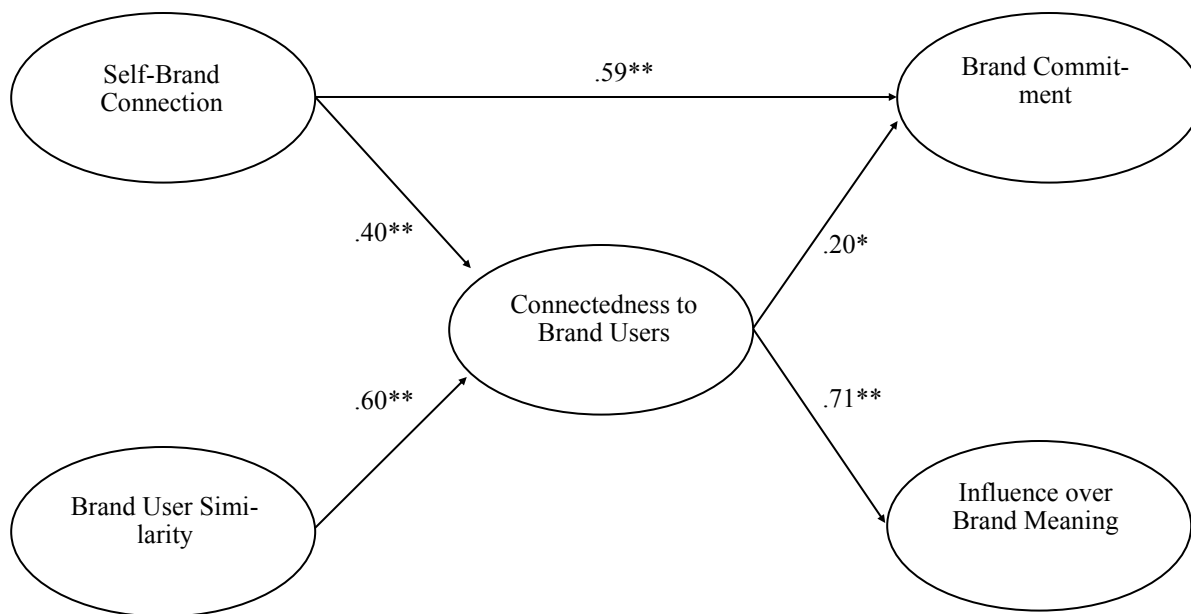
* p-value < .05, ** p-value < .01
Model fit: $\chi^2 = 914.81$, df = 161, p <.001; RMSEA = .074; CFI = .97; NNFI = .96

TABLE 3:
Results of Moderation Analyses

Brand-Oriented Social Interaction	Standardized β		$\chi^2_{\text{difference}}$
	Low Brand-oriented Social Interaction (N = 418)	High Brand-oriented Social Interaction (N = 444)	
Self-Brand Connection → Connectedness to Brand Users	.31**	.37**	.86
Brand User Similarity → Connectedness to Brand Users	.52**	.61**	3.92*
Connectedness to Brand Users → Influence Over Brand Meaning	.58**	.67**	1.23

* p-value < .05, ** p-value < .01

creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). However, this may be a two-edged sword for marketing practitioners. If consumers feel that they possess strong influence over the meaning of a brand, they may feel that they are part 'owners' of the brand and respond negatively if the firm manages the brand in a manner in which they do not approve. For instance, when Apple dropped the Newton, many customers of this brand were highly critical of Apple and took it upon themselves to convey to others what they deemed the Newton brand to truly mean (Muniz & Schau, 2005).

Self-brand connection was found to have a direct, positive effect on both connectedness to brand users and brand commitment, as well as a significant indirect effect on both brand commitment and influence over brand meaning. When individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept, they feel a greater connection to those who use that brand. This finding is consistent with the contention that the psychological basis for group development is individuals' perception that they share something in common with one another (Tajfel, 1970; Turner et al., 1987). Further, the relationship between self-brand connection and brand commitment suggests that when consumers of brand feel that a particular brand represents who they are, they feel committed to that brand, regardless of whether they feel linked to the users of that brand. This provides additional evidence of the strong impact that integrating a brand into one's self-concept has on consumers' attitudes toward that brand.

Brand user similarity had a strong positive effect on connectedness to brand users, accounting for more than twice as much variance in connectedness to brand users as self-brand connection. This is not an altogether surprising result. The greater one identifies with the members of a group, the more likely one is to feel an implicit connection to those group members.

The key significance of this research to marketing researchers is that it expands understanding of the communal aspects of branding beyond those focused on social interaction to include the social psychological components of this phenomenon. Whereas brand-oriented groups such as brand communities may have limited applicability, marketers of a wide variety of brands can potentially encourage connectedness to brand users amongst their customers and, in so doing, improve these customers' commitment to their brands.

Perhaps the most significant implication of this research for marketing practitioners is the relationship between connectedness to brand users and brand commitment. This means that firms' efforts to build connectedness to brand users among the consumers of their brands may prove beneficial even if these consumers are not engaged in ongoing social interaction focused on the brand. Building connectedness to brand users, rather than social groups such as brand communities, may be a more viable option for brands which are unlikely to serve as the focal point of consumers' social interactions with one another. Another finding of particular relevance to marketing practitioners is that commitment to the brand can be improved by strengthening the level of self-brand connection among consumers. This enhances brand commitment both directly and indirectly via

connectedness to brand users. Brand commitment can be bolstered further by strengthening brand user similarity among a brand's consumers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As is always the case, this research has several limitations. First, the hypothesized model was tested only among the consumers of a single brand and may not be generalizable to other brands. Also, since cross-sectional data were utilized, clear evidence of causation between the constructs investigated cannot be provided.

An avenue for potential future research would be to investigate how the conceptual framework of connectedness to brand users is affected by differences in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Members of individualistic cultures, such as that of the U.S., are more concerned over personal goals than the goals of their in-groups, while the inverse is true of members of collectivistic cultures, such as that of China (Triandis, 1989). While members of individualistic cultures tend to have many in-groups, the ties binding these in-groups to the individual are relatively weak. Conversely, collectivistic cultures tend to have relatively few in-groups, though these in-groups usually have strong bonds with the individual (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Given these differences, connectedness to brand users, a type of psychological bond to a group, may be weaker among brand consumers in collectivistic cultures who are not strong admirers of a particular brand than among consumers in individualistic cultures. When such consumers are admirers of a brand, however, their connectedness to brand users may be stronger as well as its effects on their attitudes toward the brand, such as brand commitment. Thus, future research should examine what effect cultural differences have on the conceptual framework of connectedness to brand users.

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