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Consumer engagement in online brand communities: A solicitation of congruity theory

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to study the influence of self-brand image congruity and value congruity on consumer engagement in online brand communities (OBCs). A secondary purpose of this paper is to test whether gender moderates this relationship. Third, this study also examines the role of consumer engagement as a driver of brand loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach - Using an online questionnaire, 443 responses were collected from consumers who are members of at least one OBC on Facebook. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data.

Findings - The results revealed that both self-brand image congruity and value congruity significantly affect consumer engagement. A positive effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty was also observed. Third, the results revealed that gender did not moderate the examined relationships.

Practical implications - This research integrates and broadens existing explanations of different congruity effects on consumer engagement. This study thus suggests the value of developing their online brand communities to exhibit congruence with customers' self-image and value, which in turn, will contribute to the development of brand loyalty.

Originality/value - This research applies congruity theory to examine the impact of self-brand image- and value congruity on consumer engagement in online brand communities. Through the establishment of this novel theoretical link, this study furthers insight into the domain of social media marketing.

Keywords - Consumer engagement; Online brand communities; Congruity theory; Self-brand image congruity; Value congruity; Brand loyalty

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1. Introduction

In recent years emerging technologies, including social networking sites, have become increasingly important in consumers' lives and have affected their communication with products, brands and firms (Baumöl et al., 2016; Cheung et al., 2015; Hassan and Casaló Ariño, 2016; Sasser et al., 2014). As consumers are becoming increasingly proficient using social networking sites, firms are attempting to engage them through online brand communities (OBCs). An online brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In the last decade, OBCs have grown briskly, with around 50 per cent of the leading 100 global brands having created their own OBCs (Manchanda et al., 2015; Bowden et al., 2017). Specifically, OBCs provide platforms for customers to share their experiences with, and feelings towards, particular brands (Cheung and Lee, 2012; Islam et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2017). Typically, OBCs allow brands to post brand-related messages, generate brand-related content, develop a significant number of followers, develop or maintain customer relationships, and offer enhanced customer/brand interaction within real-time (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Lipsman et al., 2012; López et al., 2017).

Recent studies reveal that both large brands (70%), as well as small businesses (80%), tend to use social media to improve their business performance (Social Media Today, 2014; Hollebeek and Solem, 2017). To illustrate, in 2014 88% of surveyed customers affirmed that they follow online reviews to make purchase decisions, and consider these to be reliable (BrightLocal, 2014). Moreover, OBCs create value by building or maintaining consumer/brand relationships, expediting the development of customer-generated content, and enhancing the online purchase experience (Islam and Rahman, 2016b; Schivinski et al., 2016). Given OBCs'

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reported beneficial outcomes, including enhanced brand trust, positive word-of-mouth, purchase intentions, and loyalty, academics and organizations have shown a staggering interest in OBCs and the ways in which customers engage on these platforms (Kelley and Alden, 2016; Zhou et al., 2014; Naidoo and Hollebeek, 2016).

The need to better understand consumer engagement in OBCs has been documented in the literature (Bitter and Grabner-Kräuter, 2016; Islam and Rahman, 2016b; Khan et al., 2016). Relatedly, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) calls for increased scholarly attention in the area of consumer engagement (MSI, 2016). While research on consumer engagement in OBCs has accelerated in recent years (Fernandes and Remelhe, 2015), empirical investigation in this domain is still nascent (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015). Specifically, a need exists to examine the directionality and strength of relevant constructs' theoretical link to consumer engagement, thus identifying and empirically validating particular consumer engagement antecedents and consequences (Hollebeek, 2011b; Banyte et al., 2014; Islam and Rahman, 2016a; Hollebeek et al., 2016a), as undertaken in this study. Drawing on congruity theory, we explore the role of self-brand image and value congruity on consumer engagement, and engagement's ensuing effect on brand loyalty. Further, in the OBC context, scant research has analyzed the role of potential gender effects on ensuing consumer engagement; thus necessitating further research in this area (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015; Verbraken et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014).

Previous research has focused on relationship marketing (Brodie et al., 2013), service-dominant logic (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2016b), or social exchange theory (Verleye et al., 2014) as relevant theoretical prisms to explore consumer engagement within relevant broader nomological networks. However, a need exists to investigate consumer engagement

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from different theoretical perspectives (Brodie et al., 2013; Islam and Rahman, 2016c), including congruity theory. Further, existing literature highlights the need to study consumer engagement across countries and contexts (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2013; Brodie et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2016c). However, consumer engagement research has been largely conducted in developed countries like the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Islam and Rahman, 2016c); yet there is a dearth of studies on this concept in developing countries, like India. To illustrate, the number of Facebook users in India is expected to reach 279.7 million by 2020 (Statista, 2016a). Therefore, it is important to study consumer engagement in the developing world.

To address the above gaps, the current study enriches the literature by scrutinizing consumer engagement from a congruity theory perspective, and proposes a theoretical model of consumer engagement in OBCs based on this perspective. Congruity theory suggests that customers express positive attitudes and behaviors, if they attain beliefs congruent with events or experiences (Lee and Joeng, 2014). Specifically, this study examines how self-brand image congruity and value congruity influence consumer engagement in OBCs. Further, given the limited understanding in this area, we also examine the potentially moderating role of gender in the association between self-brand image congruity, and value congruity, on consumer engagement in OBCs. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study represents an initial attempt to incorporate an Indian sample to examine consumer engagement from a congruity theory perspective in OBCs. The study also examines the consequent effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty in OBCs.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, an extensive literature review is conducted, followed by the development of our conceptual model. Next, we provide an overview

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of the empirical study conducted, followed by a summary of the results. The paper concludes by providing a discussion of the findings, an overview of key theoretical and practical implications, limitations arising from the study, and an agenda for future research.

2. Theoretical development

2.1 Congruity theory

Different theories have been applied to explore consumer engagement, including relationship marketing (e.g., Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2014), and service-dominant (S-D) logic (e.g. Breidbach et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2013; Chathoth et al., 2014; Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek et al., 2016c). Both relationship marketing and S-D logic consider customers to be active contributors to brand interactions (Fournier, 1998; Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 2016; Brodie et al., 2011), thus exhibiting a theoretical fit with consumer engagement's interactive nature (Hollebeek, 2011b; Brodie et al., 2011).

However, other relevant consumer behavior theories, including those that acknowledge individual and/or social identity, also present useful perspectives for explaining, or predicting, consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011, 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Islam and Rahman, 2017). This study applies congruity theory to study consumer engagement in OBCs. Based on congruity theory's explicit orientation on fostering communication and persuasion (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), this perspective fits with OBCs' prime objectives, including the communication of relevant brand-related content with users, fostering the development of brand-related trust, and contributing to the brand's increased sales revenue. Congruity theory postulates that to minimize the development of cognitive dissonance, consumers will tend to express a positive attitude toward an object that they perceive to be consistent with their current belief(s) in some salient respect. Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955, p. 43) state that "c*hanges in evaluation*

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are always in the direction of increased congruity with the existing frame of reference." Highlighting the key role of consumers' individual identity (Hollebeek, 2017), congruity theory represents a relevant theoretical frame for investigating consumer engagement in OBCs.

As individuals are psychologically reluctant to experience cognitive dissonance, they attempt to minimize the existence of any inconsistency between their own beliefs, and their perceptions of a focal object (Lee and Jeong, 2014; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). Congruity theory proposes that the more congruent (i.e. consistent) the two beliefs, the greater the individual's preference for that object (e.g. a particular brand, product, event), because its symbolic attributes serve to confirm, and strengthen, the individual's existing perception. Congruity theory can be applied to OBC-based interactions by taking into account the perceptions held by both parties (i.e. the customer and the brand) towards one another. Adopting a congruity theory perspective, consumers are expected to exhibit positive behaviors towards the OBC and/or focal brands with which they have had positive experiences.

OBC-based congruity effects are important because the nature of consumer engagement in OBCs depends on their previous exposure to, and experience with, particular OBCs (Bowden et al., 2017). Individuals tend to spend time on activities that offer them favorable experiences, which help them approximate their ideal self-images and/or values. For instance, variety-seeking customers may tend to view themselves as outspoken, and exhibit a high tendency towards relationship building. They will tend to enjoy engaging with OBCs that foster these objectives, which will contribute towards the attainment of their perceived consistency between the OBC and their personal values or preferences; thus providing them with a perceived reward (e.g. gratification). If the attained reward is congruent with the individual's ideal self and provides him/her with value (e.g. by reaching 'platinum customer' status), the consumer's intrinsic

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motivation to engage with the OBC will be enhanced (Hollebeek et al., 2016c). Therefore, a positive OBC experience will exhibit congruence with the consumer's notion of perceived value, self-image, and/or ideal self.

Value congruity denotes customers' undertaking of mental comparisons to confirm the parity or disparity of their own values, relative to those perceived to exist in a focal object (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). Value congruity thus reflects the level of value resemblance between a customer and an object (e.g. a brand or event), with customers tending to respond positively to those objects that reflect, or confirm, their personal values (Lee and Jeong, 2014). Consequently, based on value congruity theory, firms are advised to deploy OBC-based communication strategies that will help consumers recognize the congruity between their own personal values and those of the brand. Value congruity holds that brands, which reflect consumers' (ideal) self, and key related values, will tend to shape consumer behavior towards interacting with (including purchasing) those brands. Consumers will develop their unique brand perceptions during, and as a result of, particular brand interactions facilitated through brand-related touchpoints (e.g. an OBC). If consumers perceive the existence of value congruence within (and ideally, across) those touchpoints, a favorable attitudinal shift will typically occur as a direct result of the observed congruity effect (Lee and Jeong, 2014). Further, demonstrating individuals' Internet usage patterns, uses and gratification theory advocates that people use the Internet to fulfill their content-related (informational) needs, relationship-oriented (social) needs, and/or pleasure-related (hedonic) needs (Lee and Jeong, 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016c); each of which has relevance in the OBC context.

2.2 Online brand communities and consumer engagement

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Recent advances in digital technologies have introduced new platforms for interaction and information sharing (Jang et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013), which are of interest to marketers. For example, 3.5 billion populace worldwide use the Internet (Statista, 2016b), and 1.72 billion people worldwide utilize Facebook (Facebook, 2016), thus presenting opportunities to connect with, and engage, consumers. OBCs, which have proliferated in the past decade (Islam et al., 2017; Shang et al., 2006), allow consumers to join particular brand-related, online groups, exchange (brand-related) information or experiences, and express their feelings toward the brand (Zaglia, 2013; Bowden et al., 2017). For consumers, OBCs provide a platform to interact with other, like-minded individuals, whilst for firms, OBCs represent a valuable relationship marketing tool that can be used to foster consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Zhang and Luo, 2016; Okazaki et al., 2015; Habibi et al., 2014; Schau et al., 2009; Zhou, 2011). However, to increase OBCs' return on investment, marketers require further insight into the development of consumer engagement within these environments (Hollebeek and Solem, 2017).

The current state of research on consumer engagement is relatively incipient (Dessert et al., 2015; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). The prevailing business environment demands organizations to implement customer management strategies that go beyond transactions, which are encapsulated in the consumer engagement concept (Wei et al., 2013; Groeger et al., 2016). A level of debate exists regarding the engagement's conceptualization. For example, while Brodie et al. (2011, p. 258) define customer engagement as a "a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal object," Hollebeek et al. (2016, p. 6) denote the concept as a customer's "volitional investment of operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social knowledge and skills), and operand resources (e.g. equipment) into brand interactions." In this study, we adopt Hollebeek et al.'s (2014, p. 154)

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conceptualization, which defines consumer engagement as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions."

Consumer engagement's dimensionality also represents a topic of debate among marketing scholars. Consequently, a number of differing consumer engagement dimensions (and scales) have been proposed. For example, Van Doorn et al. (2010) adopt a uni-dimensional view focused on engagement behaviors, which are conceptualized as an individual's "behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (Beckers et al., 2017). By contrast, Dijkmans et al.'s (2015) two-dimensional view conceptualizes engagement as "a consumer's familiarity with a company's social media activities (i.e. cognition), and the online following of these activities (i.e. behavior)."

However, the majority of research conceptualizes consumer engagement as a three-dimensional construct comprising cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011, 2013; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b), which we adopt in this study. Following Hollebeek et al. (2014), we conceive of consumer engagement as a reflective second-order construct comprising cognitive processing, affection, and activation, which correspond to engagement's tripartite (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) dimensionality (for other reflective engagement measures see also Calder et al., 2009; Sprott et al., 2009; Baldus et al., 2015; Schivinski et al., 2016).

Contemporary consumers tend to actively contribute to a range of marketing activities, including product and service innovation, firm-related communication (e.g. by disseminating brand-related word-of-mouth), etc. (Malthouse et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016a). Consequently, consumers are increasingly being referred to as "pseudo-marketers," or "co-

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producers," who tend to be a highly credible source to other consumers, thus incurring cost reductions for firms, relative to employees (Harmeling et al., 2017; Kozinets et al., 2010). Contemporary consumers' participatory stance thus offers a significant opportunity to firms, which has led to an outburst of interest in consumer engagement. To illustrate, while a Google search returned 0 hits in 2007, it has now returns approximately six million search hits (Harmeling et al., 2017). Consequently, organizations are investing considerable resources in the development of consumer engagement (Verhoef et al., 2010; Beckers et al., 2017). With the rise in consumers' Facebook-based OBC usage, researchers are showing increasing interest in the ways in which firms can leverage consumer engagement in OBCs (Brodie et al., 2013; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). Since consumers spend considerable time interacting with OBCs, it is worthwhile to explore the dynamics typifying their engagement in these environments (Baldus et al., 2015). This study thus proposes a model that explains the effect of self-brand and value congruity on consumer engagement in OBCs.

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3. Research model and hypotheses

In line with congruity theory, self-brand image congruity and value congruity are modeled as key drivers of consumer engagement, and brand loyalty is adopted as a key consequence of consumer engagement in the model (see Figure I). This section discusses our key research variables and their hypothesized relationships.

Insert Figure I around here

3.1 Effect of self-brand image congruity on consumer engagement

While the effect of self-congruity on customer-brand relationships has been studied in previous research (De Vries and Carlson, 2014; France et al., 2016; Sprott et al., 2009), little is known regarding the effect of self-congruity on consumer engagement. Self-congruity theory

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posits that consumers anchor certain beliefs about their self-perceptions, and often behave in ways that strengthen their self-concept, or move them closer to their ideal self (Sirgy, 1986). Correspondingly, self-expression is a key reason consumers participate in OBCs (Wirtz et al., 2013), which in turn, can drive engagement, purchase decisions, and satisfaction (Sirgy, 1982; Kressman et al., 2006). Given that consumers evaluate brands by comparing its attributes to their (ideal) self, it follows that if customers perceive a fit between the two, they are more likely to express a favorable brand attitude (France et al., 2016; Sirgy, 1986).

In this study, we examine the effects of self-brand image congruity and value congruity on consumer engagement (Lee and Jeong, 2014). When consumers experience a higher synchronization between their (ideal) self and the OBC, they will tend to have greater interest in, and enhanced engagement with, the OBC (Hollebeek et al., 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014). In accordance with congruity theory, a matching OBC- and consumer self-image will create a greater level of consumer engagement with the OBC. The following hypothesis summarizes this rationale:

H1. Self-brand image congruity positively influences consumer engagement.

3.2 Effect of value congruity on consumer engagement

Researchers have suggested value congruity as an influential means to build and maintain long-term consumer relationships (Gaunt, 2006; Lee and Jeong, 2014). Values have a significant impact on consumer activities, and act as essential linking elements between customers and brands (Allen et al., 2002). Consumers tend to interact with brands that help them realize their (ideal) self-values (Belk, 1988), and tend to perceive OBCs that affirm their self-beliefs as more engaging, because such a match empowers and legitimizes their sense of (ideal) self (Tuškej et al., 2013). Value congruity relates to the perceived fit between consumers' own values and their

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perceptions of the brand's values, which may be exhibited by the brand's products and the OBC (Kristof et al., 2005). In this study, value congruity is deployed to examine the similarity in consumers' and organizational values. Given that values are impacted by consumer/firm interactions, OBCs serve as interactive platforms to build productive consumer/brand relationships. Consumers tend to join OBCs that help them approximate their ideal self, and its corresponding values (Belk, 1988). Therefore, if customers perceive value congruity between themselves and a particular OBC, they will tend to develop higher engagement with the OBC, leading to the second hypothesis:

H2. Value congruity positively influences consumer engagement.

3.3 Effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty

A need exists to develop and test (empirical) models that examine the relationship between consumer engagement and relevant other concepts within the nomological network (Brodie et al., 2011; MSI 2016). In particular, the effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty represents an important verification of engagement's true marketing impact (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Brand loyalty denotes "a consumer's favorable attitude toward a product/website/brand, along with repeat purchase behavior" (Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003; Liu et al., 2012). Specifically, while theoretical models have suggested engagement's positive effect on brand loyalty (Van Doorn et al., 2010; France et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2010), empirical validation of this relationship remains nebulous to date (Fernandes and Esteves, 2016; Islam and Rahman, 2016a).

OBC-based interactions may affect consumer preferences for, and attitude toward, a brand (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Consumer understanding of, and engagement with, the brand are expected to increase during this interactive process, thereby in turn, reinforcing brand loyalty

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(Dwivedi, 2015; Nadeem et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2011). Consumer engagement may also facilitate the development of strong emotional bonds that render increased consumer loyalty to particular OBCs (Gummerus et al., 2012; Hollebeek, 2011b). While engaging with OBCs, consumers tend to pursue particular gratifying experiences, including peer recognition, entertainment, and development of strong relationships through virtual interactivity (Brodie et al., 2013; Jin et al., 2017; Vivek et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016b), as specified under uses and gratifications theory. The following hypothesis is framed:

H3. Consumer engagement positively influences brand loyalty.

3.4 Moderating effect of gender

As a demographic variable, gender has been suggested as an essential personal attribute that affects customers' internet usage behaviors, including surfing, downloading, liking, sharing, and purchasing (Serenko et al., 2006). While gender effects have been examined in previous marketing research, little is known regarding the existence of potential gender effects with respect to consumer engagement, including in OBCs (Ladhari and Leclerc, 2013). Specifically, males and females tend to express different attitudes and behaviors toward Internet-based interactions. For instance, while males typically prefer 'enjoyable' interactions and hedonic or experiential values, females tend to seek more 'serious' interactions reflecting utilitarian (functional) benefits derived from their Internet usage (Ko et al., 2005); thus reflecting differing uses and gratifications theoretical motives across genders (Hollebeek et al., 2016b). Kamboj and Rahman (2016) suggest that in an online environment, males and females tend to show different behaviors toward the specific perceived benefits and costs related to making particular purchases.

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The literature also suggests gender as a major driver of consumers' self-image and value congruity (Das, 2014; Dolich, 1969). Psychological research suggests that males and females process information in different ways, thereby impacting on their decision-making process (Darley and Smith, 1995). Early literature describes male information processing as more analytical, logical, and value driven, and female information processing as more intuitive, subjective, and responsive to emotions (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Jeong and Jang, 2016; Khan and Rahman, 2016). The literature further reveals that females tend to be more expressive, and tend to extensively process purchase-related information to match their ideal self-image (Darley and Smith, 1995). In addition, prior research suggests that women prefer symbolic (hedonic) motives while shopping, as opposed to men who consider utilitarian values as more important during shopping (Garbarino and Strahilevitz, 2004; Bakewell and Mitchell, 2006), thus generating distinct gender-based shopping behaviors that may moderate the effect of self-brand image congruity and value congruity on consumer engagement. Thus, we develop the following hypotheses:

H4. The effect of self-brand image congruity on consumer engagement varies by gender.

H5. The effect of value congruity on consumer engagement varies by gender.

Research methodology

4.1 Sample and data collection

The data were collected via an online survey of students of a higher educational institute in India. Before the questionnaire was distributed, students were given a brief understanding of OBCs. Only those students who were members of at least one Facebook-based OBC were solicited as the respondents for this study. The informants were asked to name their favorite Facebook-based OBC, and answer the survey questions in respect of their preferred OBC. Before

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the surveys were distributed, they were checked and refined through an expert review process, followed by a survey pre-test comprising 50 undergraduate students as an initial validity check. During a three-week period in May 2016, the questionnaires were e-emailed to students enrolled in various courses in the institute. A total of 490 responses was received back, 47 of which were incomplete, which were thus excluded from further analysis. Thus 443 usable questionnaires were retained for further analysis.

Students were engaged as the respondents for this study, based on their (a) experience with using the Internet (Nadeem et al., 2015), (b) ranking as Facebook's highest demographic user group (Burbary, 2011); and (c) high usage of Facebook-based OBCs (Islam and Rahman, 2017). Facebook was used as this represents the most popular, widely used international social networking site (Kamboj and Rahman, 2016; Roblyer et al., 2010). Similarly, Facebook is used by a multitude of firms to develop brand-related OBCs for the purpose of engaging customers, and building and maintaining long-term customer relationships (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Since Facebook provides numerous OBCs, the population of Facebook users and their amount of time spent on the social networking site is expected to be on the rise (Zaglia, 2013), rendering its high relevance as a research context for this empirical study.

The use of an Indian sample is also appropriate based on India's collectivist cultural orientation. According to Hofstede (1980), "individualism/collectivism" is a value system that inclines an individual's relationship to his/her collectivity in a society. In individualistic cultures (e.g. the USA), individuality and independence are preferred. In OBCs, members of individualistic cultures are more likely to develop a larger number of relatively weaker and looser OBC-based relationships (Chu and Choi 2011). However, in collectivist cultures (e.g. India), group harmony and interdependence are paramount (Hollebeek, 2017). Therefore,

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collectivist OBC users will tend to be more open, and develop stronger and more intimate social relationships, relative to members from individualist cultures (Chow et al., 2000; Chu and Choi, 2011; Tsai and Men, 2014). Engaging with OBCs may afford consumers with opportunities to socialize with the firm and/or other community members (Tsai and Men, 2014). Given OBCs' interactive nature, Indian customers are more likely to exhibit active engagement on these platforms based on their relational focus. Further, collectivist consumers will tend to freely contribute to group activities, rendering their increased likelihood to share their experiences with other OBC members (Madupu and Coole, 2010). Moreover, India represents one of the world's fastest growing economies, warranting the adoption of an Indian sample.

Of the 443 respondents, 61% were male and 39% were female. All respondents were aged between 20-33 years. The respondents were enrolled in different courses of the institute, including 20% in Bachelor's of Technology (B. Tech.), 5% in Bachelor's of Architecture (B. Arch.), 10% in Master's in Technology (M. Tech.), 16% in Master's in Business Administration, 17% in Master's in Social Sciences, 13% in Master's in Sciences, and 19% in Ph. D courses; thus representing a range of degrees and subject areas studied. The average reported annual family income was INR 2,80,000 (approx. US$ 4189). The majority of reported OBCs were in the areas of retail, fashion and electronics. The results depicted that 63% of the respondents visit their preferred OBCs two to three times a week, with a further 27% daily checking their favorite OBC. Over 53% of the respondents reported spending one to two hours per week on their preferred OBCs, with their main activities including sharing brand-related experiences with other OBC members, participating in OBC-based discussions, playing (brand-related) games, and participating in (brand-related) surveys.

4.2 Measures

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All constructs deployed in this study were measured by well-established scales. Minor alterations were made to the scales where relevant, such as to ensure appropriate fit with the study context. Multi-item scales were used, anchored in seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 7 ("totally agree"). The questionnaire was divided into five parts with questions related to (1) the respondents' preferred OBCs (e.g. frequency of OBC visits, OBC experience), (2) self-brand image congruity measured through De Vries and Carlson's (2014), and Gabisch and Gwebu's (2011) instruments, (3) value congruity assessed through Lee and Jeong's (2014) measure, (4) consumer engagement (second-order construct) measured by borrowing items from Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) scale, (5) brand loyalty gauged by items from Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Parasuraman et al. (2005), and (6) demographic respondent information.

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4. Data analysis and results

To examine the two types of congruity effects on consumer engagement in OBCs and its selected consequences, a two-step approach comprising confirmatory factor analysis (CFA and structural equation modeling (SEM) was adopted. AMOS 20 SEM software was deployed to test the proposed conceptual framework. Specifically, CFA was run to check the reliability and validity of the variables (Hair et al., 2010).

The factor loadings, Cronbach's α, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) for the constructs are presented in Table I. All loadings were above 0.5, thereby fulfilling convergent validity criteria (Bagozzi, 1994). The constructs' Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.78 to 0.83, reflecting acceptable levels of inter-item reliability. The CR values ranged from 0.75 to 0.87, and the values of AVE ranged from 0.55 to 0.70, thus signifying acceptable values (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

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All constructs were measured using multi-item self-report scales, thus generating a possibility of common method bias that may result for constructs sharing common measurement methods (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To test for common method bias, we followed Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommendations. First, the respondents were informed that there are no right or wrong answers to the survey questions, but only their perceptions and evaluations of particular survey items (e.g. un/favorable). They were also informed that all survey responses will be kept confidential, allowing them to answer the questions as honestly as possible. Next, we deployed Harman's single-factor test to test for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Using this test, when a single factor accounts for most of the covariance, the presence of common method bias is suggested. Our results show that the variance explained by the first factor was 21.27% (i.e. < 50%), confirming that common method bias does not pose an issue in this study, and is unlikely to have affected the results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Further, Pavlou et al. (2007), and Hu et al. (2016) suggest that common method bias is unlikely if correlations are not excessively high (i.e. not > 0.9). Therefore, we checked the correlation matrix and found that that common method bias is not an issue here, given the absence of extremely high correlation values (see Table II).

Insert Table I around here

We also assessed discriminant validity by comparing the squared root of the AVE of each construct with its corresponding correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The findings indicated that the squared root of the AVE of each construct exceeded the relevant inter-construct correlations, suggesting an acceptable level of discriminant validity (see Table II; Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Insert Table II around here

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4.1 Structural model

To determine the model's goodness-of-fit, we used χ^2 and six key fit indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Lee and Joeng, 2014; Mahrous and Abdelmaaboud, 2017). Acceptable model fit is reflected by CFI>0.95, GFI >0.90, IFI>0.90, NFI>0.9, TLI>0.90, and RMSEA<0.06 (Hair et al., 2010). The model in Figure I (without gender as a moderating factor) exhibited an acceptable level of overall fit (χ^2=242, p<0.05, *df*=81, χ^2/df=2.987, CFI=0.939, GFI=0.938, IFI= 0.944, NFI=0.927, TLI=0.931, and RMSEA=0.058).

4.2 Hypothesis testing

The structural model results presented in Table III show that H1, H2, and H3 are supported by the data. Hypotheses 1 and 2 examined the effect of self-brand image congruity and value congruity on consumer engagement. Self-brand image congruity (β= 0.42; t= 4.03, p <0.05) and value congruity (β= 0.46; t= 4.07, p <0.05) positively affect consumer engagement in OBCs; thus supporting H1 and H2. The results also show that consumer engagement in OBCs has a significantly positive effect on brand loyalty (β= 0.53; t= 5.11, p <0.05), supporting H3. Figure II presents the relationship paths between constructs and interprets the model.

Insert Table III around here

Insert Figure II around here

4.3 Testing an alternate model

The literature suggests that given the process-based nature of consumer engagement (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011) some constructs (e.g. brand loyalty) acting as consumer engagement consequences may form an iterative feedback loop, and consequently act as

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consumer engagement drivers in subsequent interactions (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Islam and Rahman, 2016c). Therefore, this study investigated an alternate model to examine the impact of brand loyalty on consumer engagement. The alternate model displayed an acceptable overall fit (χ2=274.53, p<0.05, df=88, χ2/df=3.119, CFI=0.935, GFI=0.901, IFI= 0.917, NFI=0.900, TLI=0.929, and RMSEA=0.062). The relationship results of the alternate model (presented in Table IV) reveal that self-brand image congruity (β= 0.40; t= 4.01, p <0.05) and value congruity (β= 0.42; t= 4.03, p <0.05) positively influence consumer engagement in OBCs. The results further indicate a positive effect of brand loyalty on consumer engagement (β= 0.19; t= 2.01, p <0.05). However, this effect is weaker than the effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty.

Insert Table IV around here

Finally, to test for the moderating effect of gender on the path relationships between self-brand image congruity and value congruity on OBC-based consumer engagement, the sample was split into two groups: male (n= 272) and female (n= 171). The model (with gender as a moderating factor) exhibited a reasonable overall fit: χ2=321.52, p<0.05, df=89, χ2/df=3.612, CFI=0.902, GFI=0.911, IFI= 0.921, NFI=0.901, TLI=0.934, RMSEA=0.067. A multi-group analysis was run, which compared differences in path coefficients of the corresponding structural paths for the male and female sample groups (Zhou et al., 2014). As shown in Table V, the significant impact of self-brand image congruity on consumer engagement is consistent across gender (male: β= 0.36; t= 3.73, p <0.05; female: β= 0.38; t= 3.91, p <0.05), not supporting *H4*. Similarly, the effect of value congruity on consumer engagement did not vary across gender in the data (male: β= 0.42, t= 4.25, p< 0.05; female: β= 0.40, t= 4.19, p< 0.05), resulting in a lack of support for *H5*.

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Insert Table V around here

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to demonstrate how congruity theory can be employed to understand the influence of self-brand image congruity and value congruity on consumer engagement in OBCs. With three of the five proposed hypotheses accepted, the results demonstrate some valuable findings. The present results suggest that in OBCs, the development of consumer engagement (an important predictor of brand loyalty) is driven by consumer/OBC self-brand image congruity and value congruity. This finding suggests marketers should develop OBC features that offer a high level of perceived fit with (a) consumers' self-image, and (b) consumer values. These types of congruity are expected to facilitate the attainment of higher and/or more favorable consumer engagement with focal OBCs, which are conducive to building a more loyal customer base.

Our model thus offers insight into self-brand image- and value congruity as influential drivers of consumer engagement. Based on our findings, managers are advised to focus their online communication strategies on developing consumers' self-brand image congruity, which in turn, have the capacity to positively impact on consumer brand evaluations. Our results suggest managers should focus on presenting their brand-related (organizational) values to consumers via OBCs in a way that matches these individuals' personal (ideal) self-image and values, whilst maintaining the brand's (organization's) core values to deliver a distinctive offering.

We also studied the ensuing impact of consumer engagement on brand loyalty. The functionality of OBCs has progressed markedly in the past decade, enabling a range of consumer/brand interactions (e.g. private messaging, public posting), thus providing increasing ways for marketers to induce, or develop, consumer engagement and strengthen brand loyalty.

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In today's highly networked era (Hollebeek and Brodie, 2016), the development of a loyal consumer base is a real organizational challenge. The present findings suggest the adoption of a managerial consumer engagement orientation to build and maintain brand loyalty (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). By validating brand loyalty as a consumer engagement consequence, we empirically validate previous conceptual findings (Bowden 2009; Van Doorn et al. 2010; Brodie et al. 2011; Gummerus et al. 2012).

This study also examined the role of gender as a moderating variable in the relationship between self-brand image congruity, and value congruity, respectively, on ensuing consumer engagement. The results revealed the existence of no significant gender effect of self-brand image congruity, or value congruity, on ensuing consumer engagement; thus suggesting that a gender-based segmentation of OBC consumers is not expected to optimize consumer engagement and loyalty. Gender's unsupported moderating effect implies that both male and female consumers tend to interact with brands to help them enhance their self-concept and approximate their ideal selves, congruous with the findings attained in previous Internet-based studies (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Ladhari and Leclerc, 2013; Nadeem et al., 2015; Zha et al., 2014). However, our findings suggest it is essential for OBC practitioners to focus on self-brand image congruity, and value congruity, to develop consumer engagement, which in turn, generates heightened brand loyalty.

6.1 Implications

This study adds to the literature by (a) furthering our understanding of the role of self-brand image and value congruity effects as key drivers of consumer engagement in OBCs; (b) the effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty; (c) the role of brand loyalty in shaping subsequent consumer engagement in OBCs; and (d) examining the role of gender as a

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moderating factor in the effect of self-brand image and value congruity on consumer engagement. Theoretically, our model provides a step toward the development of understanding of the stated congruity effects on consumer engagement, which remains notably absent in the literature to date. While existing research has viewed consumer engagement predominantly from relationship marketing or S-D logic perspectives (Vargo and Lusch, 2017), our adopted congruity theory-informed lens of consumer engagement serves to further academic understanding of this conceptual association. Overall, this study contributes to the engagement literature by validating the role of consumer-perceived congruity effects in OBCs, which render individuals likely to develop more positive perceptions of and/or increasingly favorable behaviors towards their preferred OBCs.

Second, while the significance of congruity effects has been acknowledged in previous research, including in the retail (Das, 2014) and hotel sectors (Lee and Jeong, 2014), the role of congruity theory in OBCs has remained under-explored to date. This study thus acts as a stepping-stone in affording enhanced understanding of the role of relevant congruity effects on consumer engagement in OBCs.

Third, while gender represents a widely documented variable in the literature, scant research has investigated the existence of gender effects with respect to consumer engagement. We thus examined the potentially moderating role of gender on the relationship between self-brand image- and value congruity to determine whether marketers would benefit from adopting gender-specific segmentation strategies in OBCs. However, we found that this association was not significantly affected by gender, thus providing an additional theoretical contribution of this work.

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Fourth, this work also contributes to the engagement literature through the conduction of its empirical study in a non-Western setting, thereby affording an initial understanding of OBC-based consumer engagement in a collectivist, emerging economy context (Hollebeek, 2017). Although developing economies like India represent the most rapidly expanding markets with significant business (growth) opportunities for multinational companies (Fatma et al., 2016; Visser, 2007), scant consumer engagement research has been undertaken in emerging, and/or bottom-of-the-pyramid economic contexts (Islam and Rahman, 2016c), as addressed in this study.

Beyond the stated theoretical implications, this study offers a number of implications for marketing practitioners. In the era of big data, one-to-one marketing and user-generated (including peer-to-peer) content, consumer engagement becomes increasingly important for the strategic enhancement of consumer brand commitment and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011). In this environment, congruity effects play an important role in fostering consumer motivations to join, and/or stay with, particular OBCs. Marketers are advised to offer consumer opt-in to specific (customized) OBC content that matches individuals' self-image and values. Consumers' OBC-based brand interactions may occur as a precursor to brand purchase, thus presenting a strategic opportunity to develop enduring consumer relationships and lifetime value (Malthouse et al., 2013). OBC-based engagement tactics should thus serve to strengthen consumers' perceived self-brand image fit and value congruity. We recommend marketing practitioners, in conjunction with information and communication managers, to develop OBC-based chatrooms that offer high levels of interactivity, rich, customized information available in real time, and/or entertainment to OBC members. It is also advised to regularly offer personalized benefits to consumers, including competitions, online sweepstakes, special offers,

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virtual medals, referrals, and access to particular (consumer status-related, e.g. VIP) information, etc. (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2017). Organizations should also keep track of particular consumers' contribution history, and adopt related badges of recognition, such as '*best contributor*' or '*star OBC member*,' which may be made public to the broader community with the recipient's consent. Marketers may also wish to devise tailored offers for particular OBC members, including by communicating with relevant OBC members via individual (e.g. private) messages addressing particular topics of the individual's interest that are traceable, for example, by examining the individual's OBC browsing patterns. The development of targeted content will be conducive to the development of consumers' sense of OBC-related belonging, stimulating their future commitment to the OBC and brand purchase. Firms will thus be able to expedite the development of consumer engagement, and subsequently, brand loyalty.

This study also confirmed the significance of value congruity as a driver of consumer engagement in OBCs. Based on this finding, we recommend firms to develop, and clearly communicate, the brand's core values to OBC members, and ensure the existence of a match between these. When consumers compare and recognize resemblances between their own, personal values and those communicated by the brand's OBCs, they are more likely to exhibit favorable brand-related responses. As the capability of self- and brand-related values to affect consumer engagement relies on the undertaking of consumer/brand interactions, OBCs need to foster those types of interactions that will be particularly conducive to communicating, and instilling, key brand-related values into consumers' minds. Thus, to strengthen the self-brand image- and value congruity, marketers are advised to periodically study OBC members' key values and interests, which will help them develop brand-related offerings that match these values, which may change over time. OBC managers are also recommended to focus their

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marketing activities on customized, or personalized, marketing approaches (rather than mass marketing) to appropriately reflect those values that are core to individual consumers - and which are likely to differ across consumers. To gauge consumers' core values, tests or quizzes may be used to uncover relevant insight. The results of these tests, subsequently, may be used to develop particular brand-related content that reflects individual consumers' core values (Matzler et al., 2011).

Many organizations have successfully used OBCs to improve their market position. For example, Coca-Cola has 90 million Facebook followers, Pepsi has 2.5 million Twitter followers, and Nike has 22 million Facebook followers (Kelley and Alden, 2016). However, many firms are also struggling to capitalize on their OBCs. Therefore, to improve OBCs' return on investment (ROI), organizations require in-depth insight into consumer motivations for engaging with OBCs (Hollebeek and Solem, 2017). In this study, we identified the key role of self-brand image and value congruity as key drivers (motivating factors) for the development of consumer engagement.

Practitioners also ought to understand the development of consumer engagement not only with their own brands' OBCs, but also with those of competing organizations, which can be achieved through marketing research (e.g. by conducting netnographic research of relevant competitors' OBCs; Bowden et al., 2017). Relatedly, marketers need to understand the dynamics characterizing consumers' engagement shifts, such as a mere follower transitioning into a highly engaged OBC member, or vice versa. The development of enhanced understanding of the role of self-brand image and value congruity in these contexts also represents a relevant area for managerial research into OBC-based consumer engagement.

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6. Limitations and future research

Despite the stated contributions, this study has a number of limitations that offer scope for further research. First, the study context is limited to a single (Indian) cultural and economic context; thus a cross-cultural study could be conducted that empirically examines the effect of culture on consumer engagement (Hollebeek, 2017). Second, this study is cross-sectional in nature, conducted at a particular point in time. However, given the dynamic nature of consumer engagement, the undertaking of longitudinal research is recommended to further explore the development of OBC-based consumer engagement over time (Viswanathan et al., 2017). Third, this study is limited to Facebook-based OBCs; thus little is known about the observed dynamics on other social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, etc.). For example, LinkedIn's more utilitarian nature may reveal differing findings to those attained for the Facebook community studied. Fourth, this study can be extended in specific industry- (e.g. consumer electronics, fashion, etc.), or brand-related (e.g. service, B2B or luxury brand-based) OBC contexts, to confirm this study's external validity. Fifth, given the need for further insight into consumer engagement's role within the broader nomological network, future research may wish to consider incorporating different constructs into particular empirical models, including brand experience, commitment, trust, etc. (Brodie et al., 2011). Sixth, this study was conducted in a collectivist culture. Future research may thus wish to explore the conceptual model in differing cultural settings, including more individualistic cultures (Hollebeek, 2017). Finally, alternate theoretical frames (other than congruity theory) may be applied to consumer engagement in OBCs, including resource exchange theory, social practice theory and social penetration theory, which may provide unique findings that can be compared and contrasted to those attained in this study.

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Tables:

Table I: Reliability and validity of the constructs

Construct	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach α	Composite reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Self-brand image congruity			0.83	0.87	0.70
	SbiC1	0.75			
	SbiC2	0.77			
	SbiC3	0.72			
	SbiC4	0.81			
	SbiC5	0.79			
	SbiC6	0.76			
Value congruity			0.81	0.84	0.65
	VC1	0.82			
	VC2	0.78			
	VC3	0.79			
Cognitive processing			0.81	0.78	0.58
	CP1	0.75			
	CP2	0.73			
	CP3	0.78			
Affection			0.78	0.76	0.56
	AF1	0.69			
	AF2	0.74			
	AF3	0.72			
Activation			0.81	0.75	0.55
	AC1	0.78			
	AC2	0.79			
Brand loyalty			0.79	0.83	0.63
	BL1	0.80			
	BL2	0.79			
	BL3	0.81			

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Table II: Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	SbiC	VC	CP	AF	AC	BL	Square root of AVE
SbiC	4.17	1.10	-						**0.836**
VC	4.09	1.29	0.48*	-					**0.806**
CP	4.18	1.07	0.47*	0.41*	-				**0.761**
AF	4.05	1.13	0.46*	0.39*	0.50*	-			**0.748**
AC	4.22	1.18	0.42*	0.38*	0.48*	0.47*	-		**0.793**
BL	4.37	1.15	0.39*	0.36*	0.46*	0.39*	0.42*	-	**0.793**

(Note: SbiC depicts Self-brand image congruity, VC depicts Value congruity, CP depicts cognitive processing, AF depicts affection, AC depicts activation and BL depicts brand loyalty. *Correlation significance at 0.01 level; N=443)

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Table III: Hypothesis testing results

Hypotheses	β	*t*-values	Result
H1: self-brand image congruity $\rightarrow$ consumer engagement	0.42	4.03	Supported
H2: value congruity $\rightarrow$ consumer engagement	0.46	4.07	Supported
H3: consumer engagement $\rightarrow$ brand loyalty	0.53	5.11	Supported

Table IV: Alternate model results

Hypotheses	β	*t*-values	Result
H1: self-brand image congruity $\rightarrow$ consumer engagement	0.40	4.01	Supported
H2: value congruity $\rightarrow$ consumer engagement	0.42	4.03	Supported
H3: brand loyalty $\rightarrow$ consumer engagement	0.19	2.01	Supported

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Table V: Path comparison results across gender

Hypotheses	Male (N=272)		Female (N=172)		Result
	β	*t*-values	β	*t*-values	
*H4:*self-brand image congruity → consumer engagement	0.36	3.73	0.38	3.91	Not supported
*H5:*value congruity → consumer engagement	0.42	4.25	0.40	4.19	Not supported

Figures:

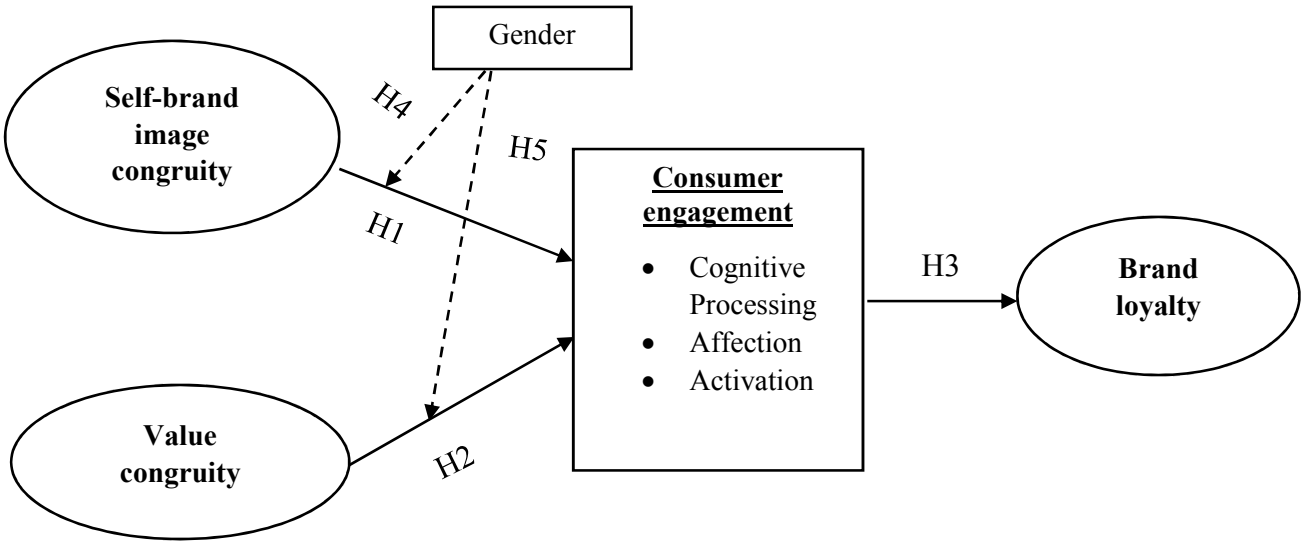

Figure I: Relationship model

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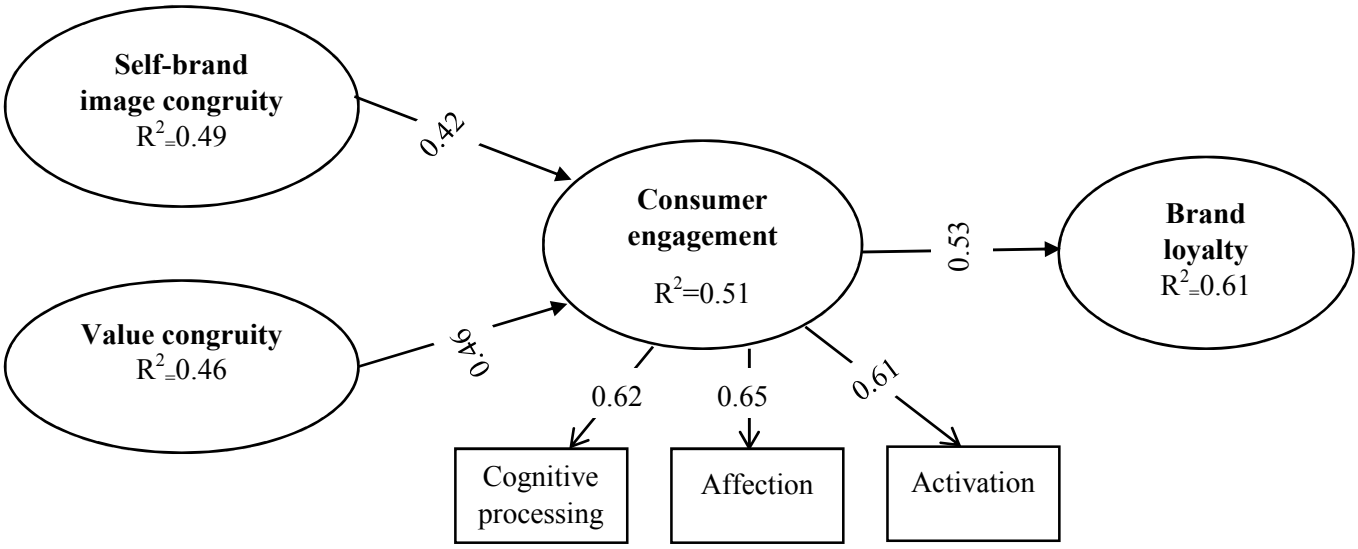

Figure II: Path diagram.

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