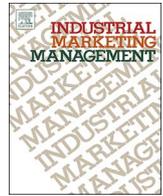




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Target and position article

## Influence of interfirm brand values congruence on relationship qualities in B2B contexts

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## ABSTRACT

Adopting a new perspective of brand values, this study explores the influence of brand values congruence between buyers and sellers on relationship qualities in B2B contexts. To expand knowledge on this issue, the authors introduce the construct of brand identification to explain how brand values congruence exerts influence. The results show that self-enhancement congruence and self-transcendence congruence positively affect brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through the mediating role of brand identification. In addition, brand sensitivity positively moderates the effect of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. However, the mediated moderation effect disappears in self-transcendence congruence. On the basis of these findings, the authors present implications for B2B companies with regard to developing effective branding strategies in accordance with brand values.

### 1. Introduction

In exceedingly competitive business environments, brand emotional benefits can lead to high satisfaction (Candi & Kahn, 2016; He & Wang, 2014) because commercial buyers are claimed to value the emotional security offered by a brand with a strong, positive image (Roper & Davies, 2010). In practice, B2B marketers have gradually realized the importance of brand information in clients' purchasing choices and thus, invest considerable resources to create unique brand values and establish differentiated brand images. Accordingly, in academics, a small number of studies have also shown that endowing a brand with human characteristics can create positive emotional associations and bring additional value to companies (Herbst & Merz, 2011; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). However, on the whole, the emotional benefits of B2B branding have not aroused sufficient academic attention (Candi & Kahn, 2016). Our comprehensive review of relevant extant literature reveals three important gaps that warrant further investigations.

First, to the best of our knowledge, no study incorporates human values into brand concepts and analyzes emotional benefits from the perspective of brand values in the B2B domain. It is noteworthy that as one of core constructs in brand personification, brand personality developed by Aaker (1997) represents an important early effort in analyzing emotional benefits and has been commonly adopted by scholars in the B2B domain as a theoretical basis for research (Herbst & Merz, 2011; Rojas-Méndez, Erenchun-Podlech, & Silva-Olave, 2004;

Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). However, this abstract trait-based construct lacks generalizability in cross-cultural settings (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati, 2012), which limits its usefulness in representing B2B brand concepts and in serving as a brand positioning strategy framework in the context of globalization. In contrast, brand values are motivation-based and driven by human needs. These values have shared meanings across different cultures and thus, can be universally understood (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012). Therefore, we try to extend human values to B2B brand concepts and provide new insights for B2B companies on their brand positioning strategies.

Second, relationship marketing (RM), as one of the dominant mantras in business strategy circles, has garnered extensive attention from both academics and practitioners (Hibbard, Brunel, Dant, & Dawn, 2001; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). So far, few B2B studies have examined RM from the perspective of brand values and explored how similar brand values affect the outcome of RM efforts. Notably, although shared values (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), similarity (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Palmatier et al., 2006), and salesperson similarity (Doney & Cannon, 1997) have been studied to emphasize the importance of similar interests, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status in building, developing, and maintaining relationships, these studies are yet to address the two following issues. First, they focus on short-term interpersonal-level commonality, rather than long-term interfirm-level commonality, thus

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ignoring the strategic orientation of values in RM. Second, they pay little attention to the mutual recognition of corporate brand similarity that may pave a way to interfirm relationships. Accordingly, this study reconsiders RM from brand values perspective and attempts to reveal how interfirm-level corporate brand values congruence (BVC) exerts influence on buyer-seller relationships.

Third, despite growing empirical evidence suggesting brands do matter in organizational buying decisions, little is known about the extent to which a buying center intends to rely on emotional benefits for decision-making purposes and which kind of emotional benefits is more influential. Given the conventional view being that the organizational decision-making process is rational (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012), studies in the B2B domain largely investigate the relationship between brand sensitivity and more functional or less emotional benefits (Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Donthu, 2012; Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2011; Hutton, 1997). However, B2C-based studies reveal that brand sensitivity is closely related with emotional benefits (Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006; Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003; Workman & Lee, 2013). Then, what about the relationship between brand sensitivity and emotional benefits in B2B contexts? It remains unclear whether brand sensitivity can affect the influence exerted by emotional benefits.

In this article, we propose a new perspective of abstract brand concepts based on human values to analyze emotional benefits in B2B contexts. Based on Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) and Torelli, Monga, et al. (2012), we extend the concept of brand values in the B2C domain to the B2B domain and explore how BVC between companies affect relationship qualities, including brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. In addition, since the importance of brand information in the purchasing process varies by companies, we adopt brand sensitivity as a moderator to analyze the differentiated influence of BVC on outcome variables. In sum, this study addresses the following three questions. First, how and why does BVC influence relationship qualities between companies? Second, how does brand sensitivity moderate the influence of BVC on relationship qualities? Third, will there be any difference if different dimensions of values are examined?

In examining the relationship between BVC and relationship qualities, this study represents an important first step toward a better understanding of how, why, and the extent to which brand values are relevant in business contexts. It is the first to propose an alternative perspective of abstract brand concepts based on human values to explore the effects of emotional benefits in the B2B domain. This study also contributes to the RM literature in two ways. First, unlike previous studies (Crosby et al., 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006), it focuses on interfirm-level, not interpersonal-level, similarity. Second, it concentrates on corporate brand similarity, which has received little attention in extant RM literature. Furthermore, our study provides insights on distinguishing differentiated roles “within” emotional benefits (self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence) in relationship qualities in terms of brand sensitivity, which is a supplement to “between” emotional benefits and rational benefits discussed in existing studies (Candi & Kahn, 2016; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Persson, 2010).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we begin with a background section, which includes (1) the theoretical background of brand values, and (2) more details about pivotal brand values in B2B contexts, that is, self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Then, we advance the conceptual framework and develop relevant hypotheses. Next, the methodological approach and hypotheses tests are reported. We conclude with a discussion, theoretical contributions, and managerial implications, followed by suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature review and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Brand values

#### 2.1.1. Theoretical background

According to consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), firms often use brands as symbolic resources from which consumers can construct their unique identities in ways that are meaningful, not merely utilitarian. Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone (2012) argue that people tend to relate to brands in ways that are similar to how they relate to people. One way brands can bear cultural significance is by imbuing brands with human values. In line with this thinking, brand values can be viewed as abstract brand concepts that are representations of human values (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012), thus making brands function as human.

Brand values originate from the general human values system proposed by Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Schwartz (1992) suggests that values represent abstract representations of desired end-states that guide people in their pursuit of human needs for living, including individualistic needs and collective needs. He and his colleague (2004) further classify human values into 11 categories—power, achievement, stimulation, self-direction, social concerns, concerns with nature, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, and hedonism—and verify a quasi-circumplex structure of this values system, wherein values are arranged continuously. Adjacent values in this structure are compatible (i.e., individuals can pursue these values simultaneously), while values located opposite to each other are incompatible (i.e., individuals cannot pursue these values simultaneously) (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012). In line with this compatibility and incompatibility, these values can be further summarized into four higher-order value domains, forming two basic, bipolar dimensions. The first dimension includes two incompatible higher-order values: openness to change (including stimulation and self-direction) and conservation (including security, conformity, and tradition).<sup>1</sup> The second dimension includes the other two higher-order values: self-enhancement (including power and achievement) and self-transcendence (including social concerns, concerns with nature, and benevolence).

#### 2.1.2. The values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence in B2B contexts

This study focuses on the second dimension of self-enhancement and self-transcendence—the paired values are contrasting, but of particular relevance in B2B contexts.

Self-enhancement is in accordance with individual concerns, while self-transcendence aligns with collective ones, that is, the former focuses on personal welfare, and the latter on social welfare (Steenkamp & Jong, 2010). To elaborate further, self-enhancement refers to people's pursuit of personal benefits, including social status, authority, and personal fulfillment. Self-transcendence, on the other hand, represents people's transcendence of personal benefits and caring for social development, justice, and the environment (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Extending these meanings to B2B contexts, on the one hand, many studies have shown that market position, market power, and market performance can effectively improve companies' competencies in B2B markets (Keller, 2013; Kotler & Keller, 2015; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Such abilities are embodied in self-enhancement, which constitutes companies' core competitiveness. When imbued with human values of self-enhancement, a company can be perceived analogously to an ambitious person who pursues power and capability. For example, *Microsoft* and *Oracle* can be considered “pioneers” (Keller, 2013). On the other hand, Kotler and Keller (2015) highlight that social responsibility

<sup>1</sup> Hedonism is a separate values located between openness to change and self-enhancement.

is one of the three most important forces influencing the success of modern marketing. According to the general human values system, social responsibility is embodied in self-transcendence, a values that is widely acknowledged by companies. It indicates that companies transcend private benefits and strive for social welfare. For example, Google adopts “Do not be evil” as its brand values with an aim to enhance social welfare and promote human progress (Brandt, 2009).

In addition, the chosen paired values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence are closely linked with the well-established stereotype content model. According to this model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012), brand image can be perceived based on two fundamental dimensions—warmth and competence—which is drawn on the idea that the two dimensions organize the way people perceive the social world around them. Warmth is related to what other's goals would be vis-à-vis the self (i.e., positive or negative intentions toward the self), whereas competence refers to the level of effectiveness in pursuing these goals (i.e., competence or incompetence). Accordingly, a warm brand is associated with helpfulness, sincerity, friendliness, and trust worthiness, while a competent brand is associated with efficiency, intelligence, conscientiousness, and skills (Kervyn et al., 2012). In B2B contexts, a warm company image is driven by the motivation of self-transcendence, indicating that the company pursues social welfare, while a competent company image is driven by the motivation of self-enhancement, suggesting that the company pursues private welfare.

In sum, it can be concluded that the two types of values, self-enhancement and self-transcendence, are particularly relevant and important in B2B contexts. However, their connotations are considerably different and in some ways, opposed to each other (Shepherd, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2015).

## 2.2. Self-congruity theory and brand values congruence (BVC)

According to self-congruity theory (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, 1982), individuals tend to favor products or brands that reflect their self-concept to maintain self-esteem and self-consistency. Self-congruity is generally characterized as the “match” or “mismatch” between consumers' self-image and their mental representations of products or brands. Traditionally, researchers measure match or mismatch by estimating the congruence between a brand or product image and a consumer's perceived self-image. On the basis of this pattern, researchers in the B2C domain adopt brand personality (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011), personality characteristics (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011), and identity (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012) to represent a brand or product image to examine the degree of congruence between a consumer's self-image and brand or product image.

Drawing on research on the self-congruity paradigm, we use brand values to represent corporate brand image and define BVC as the “match” or “mismatch” of corporate brand values between buyers and sellers. Specific to the two types of BVC highlighted in this study, self-enhancement congruence refers to the “match” or “mismatch” of self-enhancement corporate brand values between buyers and sellers, while self-transcendence congruence refers to the “match” or “mismatch” of self-transcendence corporate brand values between buyers and sellers. Notably, there is a significant difference between BVC in our study and shared values (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), similarity (Crosby et al., 1990; Palmatier et al., 2006), and salesperson similarity (Doney & Cannon, 1997) in previous studies. Studies that involved such concepts tend to stress an interpersonal-level focus, such as the commonality in lifestyle and status between individual boundary spanners, where the mobility of boundary staff between companies renders the influence of interpersonal similarity relatively less important. In contrast, deeming companies as human, this study examines similarity at interfirm-level and measures BVC between companies. Therefore, compared to the commonality in lifestyle and status between individual boundary staff, BVC between companies is more strategy oriented and has longer lasting effects.

## 2.3. Brand values congruence and brand identification

Brands, as carriers of symbolic meanings, play an important role in consumers' identity projects insofar as consumers can rely on brands to express themselves (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015). Because brands can be “regarded by their owners as having different degrees of centrality to one or more of their individual or aggregate senses of self” (Belk, 2013, p. 477), individuals may generate positive feelings toward brands, especially toward those highly reflecting their own self-image. In line with this logic, brand identification can be defined as the degree to which a consumer's perceived state of oneness and belongingness with a brand (Bartsch, Diamantopoulos, Papatoidamis, & Chumpitaz, 2016; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Some B2C-based studies that involved brand identification reveal that greater similarity between consumers and their brands is more likely to lead consumers to identify with such brands (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). For example, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) demonstrate that the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to have a personality that is similar to theirs has a significant positive influence on their brand identification. Likewise, Lam et al. (2013) argue that self-brand congruity represents a symbolic driver of consumers' identification with a brand, and consumers who perceive a new brand as highly congruent with their self-image have higher initial levels of brand identification.

In the B2B domain, it is worth noting that some studies suggest industrial brands can be imbued with human characteristics and act as human (Gupta, Bourlakis, & Melewar, 2010; Herbst & Merz, 2011; Simões, Singh, & Perin, 2015; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). For example, Herbst and Merz (2011) argue that industrial brands that are categorized under the relationship business dimension can be seen as reliable partners and high performers. In a similar vein, Veloutsou and Taylor (2012) assert that B2B brands can be described as belonging to a specific social class, with some viewed as elitist, prestigious, or upper class and others as middle or lower class. Similar views are also reflected in Fournier's (1998) research, which indicates that brands can be considered relationship partners, and owners can be considered agents of their brands. More directly, Simões et al. (2015, p. 61) propose that “CB personality needs to be expressed in the company's website as a way to set the character and tone for the brand”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the human attribute of a personified brand can serve as a real interface between companies, and its metaphoric properties promote interaction, which can strengthen buyer-seller relationships (Gupta et al., 2010). In addition to complementary traits, firms would choose their cooperative firms whose personalities match their own to enhance mutual understanding and improve financial performance (Campbell, Papania, Parent, & Cyr, 2010). In other words, “like tends to mate with like”, firms with similar values and outlooks tend to understand and appreciate each other, while the dissimilar ones are more likely to have “affairs” rather than “marry” (Wilkinson, Young, & Freytag, 2005).

Applying the insights above to our study, we postulate that when imbued with human values, corporate brands can be seen as human, and the greater the BVC between the two sides perceived by the buyer side, the more the buyer side will identify with the seller's company. It assumes that the buyer side generally compares its corporate brand values with those of the seller side to evaluate congruence, which in turn, enhances identification with the seller's company. Consequently, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** Self-enhancement congruence between the two sides positively influences the buyer side's brand identification with the seller's company.

**H1b.** Self-transcendence congruence between the two sides positively

<sup>2</sup> CB is the abbreviation of corporate brand.

influences the buyer side's brand identification with the seller's company.

#### 2.4. Brand values congruence, brand identification, and relationship qualities

Identification induces people to engage in identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors, such as global/local brand preferences (Bartsch et al., 2016), word of mouth (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013), brand loyalty (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010), and resilience to negative information (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016). In fact, the aforementioned constructs can be categorized into two groups, as proposed by Lam, Ahearne, and Schillewaert (2012): identity-sustaining behavior, which emphasizes I-intention and helps individuals support and maintain their identity; and identity-promoting behavior, which highlights we-intention and enables individuals to deepen their understanding about others' perception of the identity and advances such identity to acquaintances. In this study, we focus on three constructs that reflect relationship qualities—one identity-sustaining (brand trust) and two identity-promoting (word of mouth and value co-creation) constructs. This is because, on the one hand, some studies argue that trust is the key variable in the RM literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006) and critical for building B2B brand equity (Jensen & Klastrup, 2008). On the other hand, with the rise of digitization and sharing economies, value creation activities are no longer limited to simple transactions and exchange interfaces. By contrast, word of mouth and value co-creation, which emphasize continuous interactions among multiple stakeholders, are becoming increasingly important for B2B companies (Molinari, Abratt, & Dion, 2008; Scandeliu & Cohen, 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2011).

With respect to how identity congruence lead to identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors, we draw on self-congruity theory (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, 1982) and previous studies (e.g. Elbedweihy et al., 2016; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010; Tuškej et al., 2013) to elaborate on the mechanism through which BVC influences brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Self-congruity theory assumes that individuals generally compare their self-image with a brand image to assess dissimilarity and similarity. If individuals perceive the brand image to match their self-image, they generate higher brand identification (Elbedweihy et al., 2016; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010), which in turn, leads to identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors, such as repurchase intention and net behavior (Lam et al., 2012). Following this logic, some studies suggest that brand identification is the key mechanism underlying the influence of identity congruence on identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010; Tuškej et al., 2013). For example, Kuenzel and Halliday's (2010) study shows that the congruence between the personality of car owners and their car brands positively influences their identification with the given brands, which further enhances loyalty toward them. Likewise, Tuškej et al. (2013) demonstrate that consumers' identification with brands mediates the influence of shared values between consumers and brands on affective brand commitment and word of mouth.

Applying the insights above to our study in buyer-seller contexts, it is reasonable to assume that BVC between the two sides (identity congruence) influences relationship qualities (identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors) through brand identification, that is, brand identification is the mechanism through which BVC influences identity-congruent attitudes or behaviors. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

**H2a.** Brand identification mediates the influence of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust (a), word of mouth (b), and value co-creation (c).

**H2b.** Brand identification mediates the influence of self-transcendence congruence on brand trust (a), word of mouth (b), and value co-creation (c).

#### 2.5. The moderation of brand sensitivity

Brand sensitivity refers to the degree to which brand names and/or corporate associations are actively considered in organizational buying deliberations (Kapferer & Laurent, 1988; Zablah, Brown, & Donthu, 2010). Partly because B2B companies were traditionally viewed as rational entities, and the main role of brand information was to serve as a means to facilitate the identification of products, services, and businesses or to reduce the risk and complexity of buying decisions (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006), studies on B2B branding generally attempt to relate brand sensitivity with more rational or less emotional benefits (Brown et al., 2011, 2012; Hutton, 1997). For instance, a study conducted by Hutton (1997) demonstrates that a organization tend to be more brand sensitive when (1) product failure has dire consequences on the buyer's organization, (2) the product requires greater service or support, and (3) the product is complex or the buyer's organization is faced with time and/or resource constraints. Similarly, Brown et al. (2011) suggest that both low- and high-risk buying situations can induce high levels of brand sensitivity. In low-risk buying situations, buying centers tend to use brand information to simplify choices, while in high-risk buying situations, brand information can reduce the overwhelming amount of factors with which buying centers need to deal. The same relationship pattern can be applied to purchase complexity and brand sensitivity (Brown et al., 2012).

However, while a majority of previous studies notably assume B2B companies to be rational and primarily rely on brand functional components, more emotional or less rational benefits also hold considerable significance in making purchasing decisions (Candi & Kahn, 2016; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Hence, the associations a buying center makes with an industrial brand personality can be viewed as a preliminary heuristic for deciding whether to become involved with the organization (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Unfortunately, unlike brand rational benefits, studies on the relationship between emotional benefits and brand sensitivity have received less academic attention. A particularly important manifestation of this knowledge gap is the lack of B2B-based studies that compare the level of influence of different emotional benefits on relationship qualities. Drawing on Zablah et al.'s (2010) research and distinct characteristics of different emotional benefits (self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence), we relate emotional benefits with brand sensitivity and develop hypotheses regarding the relative impact of BVC on relationship qualities through brand identification.

Zablah et al. (2010) argue that the more branding permeates organizational buying deliberations, the greater the relative importance of brand names or corporate associations, such as company history, reputation, and others' overall view. They find that brand sensitivity positively impacts brand importance, indicating that the influence of emotional benefits on buyer-seller relationships increases with a rise in brand sensitivity. In light of these findings, it is reasonable to assume that compared to companies with low brand sensitivity, those with high brand sensitivity assign greater value to emotional benefits. Therefore, such emotional benefits might exert a greater influence on constructing brand identification, which in turn, has a larger impact on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation.

However, as mentioned earlier, self-enhancement and self-transcendence contradict each other in some ways and play different roles in B2B contexts. Veloutsou and Taylor (2012) contend that industrial companies do not equally emphasize various attributes of industrial brands, including intangible and tangible attributes. This implies that brand sensitivity may not moderate all effects exerted by different emotional benefits. Self-enhancement represents power, authority, wealth, success, and dominance over people and resources, which are conceptually related to companies' core competencies, such as market position, market power, and market performance. Expectedly, if a company's brand sensitivity is high, it will consider such competencies more important in the relationship-building process. Therefore, we

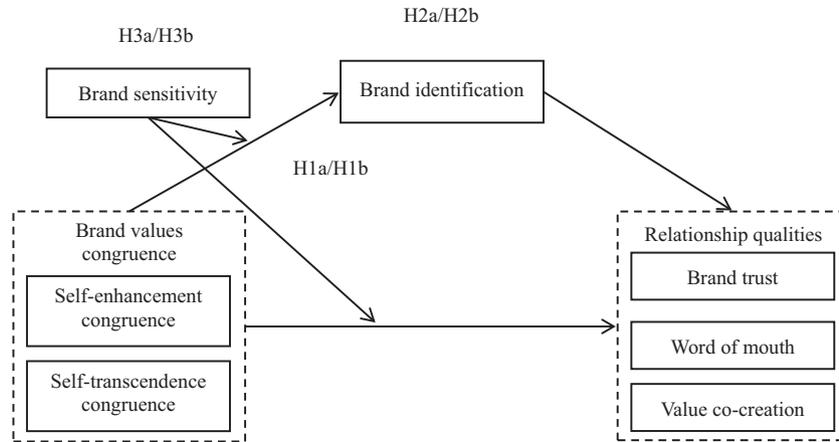


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the influence of BVC on relationship qualities.

postulate that companies with higher brand sensitivity assign greater value to the influence of self-enhancement congruence on constructing brand identification, which in turn, has a larger influence on relationship qualities. In contrast to self-enhancement, self-transcendence, as a widely accepted values worldwide, denotes social responsibility, transcending private interests, and protecting collective interests. Kotler and Keller (2015) suggest that companies across the world have placed social responsibility at an indispensable position; in other words, it has become a basic social requirement and the lowest threshold for companies. Thus, we postulate that the influence of self-transcendence congruence on relationship qualities through brand identification is stable, regardless of high or low brand sensitivity. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H3a.** Brand sensitivity positively moderates the effect of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust (a), word of mouth (b), and value co-creation (c) through brand identification.

**H3b.** Brand sensitivity cannot significantly moderate the effect of self-transcendence congruence on brand trust (a), word of mouth (b), and value co-creation (c) through brand identification.

Fig. 1 summarizes the aforementioned hypotheses and integrates them into a conceptual framework.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data collection and sample

To test the hypotheses above, data were collected from firms involved in B2B markets, and respondents were limited to individuals working for B2B firms that frequently purchase from suppliers. A professional marketing online research platform, SO JUMP, which includes numerous registered B2B firms, was commissioned to administer data collection based on the guidelines given by the authors. We designed two questions to ensure the reliability of the sample. First, at the very beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were required to answer whether or not their firms mainly served B2B markets. Respondents who chose “no” were eliminated from the study. Second, they were required to list a supplier from which their firms have purchased most frequently over the past 12 months. The question was designed to ensure respondents were familiar with the corresponding study objects and enhance the accuracy of perceived brand values. In total, 652 questionnaires were collected.

Three steps were taken to maintain the quality of the questionnaires. First, time spent on filling the questionnaires was recorded. If the time taken was too short, the questionnaire was excluded. Second, given the logic on which the survey options were based, questionnaires

in which the options clearly contradicted each other were excluded. Third, as mentioned, questionnaires of respondents who chose “no” for the qualifying question were considered invalid. These three steps produced 251 valid responses, indicating a valid rate of 38.50%. Among the valid questionnaires, the average length of cooperation was 9.4 years (SD = 8.36). Approximately 6.4% firms had < 50 employees, 32.3% had 51–300, 27.5% had 301–1000, and 33.9% had > 1000 employees. Of the total number of respondents, 54.2% were between 30 and 39 years old, and 61.8% were male. Respondents were well educated with 58.6% holding a university degree, and 39.4% a graduate degree.

#### 3.2. Variable measurement

The key variables in this study include BVC, brand identification, brand sensitivity, brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. All measurement scales were translated into Chinese following a back translation procedure. We provide a list of key measurement items used in this study in Appendix A.

##### 3.2.1. Independent variables

Following the steps of Aaker (1997) and Torelli, Monga, et al. (2012) to measure brand values, respondents were asked to think about a corporate brand “as if it were a person” who embodies certain values. Then, items, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”, were adopted from Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) and Lindeman and Verkasalo (2005) to estimate respondents' perception of their suppliers' and own corporate brand values. Self-transcendence and self-enhancement congruence were constructed, respectively, based on Sirgy's (1982) paradigm as follows:

$$\sum_i^n |b_{ij} - s_{ij}|/n$$

where  $b_{ij}$  and  $s_{ij}$  are respondent  $j$ 's ratings for the buyer's and supplier's corporate brand values on the basis of characteristic  $i$ . The equation indicates that the smaller the value, the higher the congruence.

For a better understanding, an appropriate linear transformation is applied to rescale as follows:

$$7 - \sum_i^n |b_{ij} - s_{ij}|/n$$

##### 3.2.2. Mediating and moderating variables

Following Bergami and Bagozzi (2000), a Venn diagram was used to measure brand identification. The visual item included a series of Venn diagrams indicating the extent of overlap between the identity of the

supplier's and buyer's company. Respondents were required to choose the level of overlap that best reflects the relationship between the two sides from an eight-point scale anchored by "far apart" to "complete overlap".

We measured brand sensitivity using three items adopted from [Kapferer and Laurent \(1988\)](#) and [Lachance et al. \(2003\)](#). The items, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree", generally asked respondents to indicate the extent to which their companies considered brand information in purchasing decisions.

### 3.2.3. Dependent variables and control variables

Four items were adopted from [Chaudhuri and Holbrook \(2001\)](#) to measure brand trust. Word of mouth was measured using four items adopted from [Stokburger-Sauer et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Tuškej et al. \(2013\)](#). Both constructs were measured with seven-point scales anchored by "totally disagree" and "totally agree". Value co-creation was estimated using four items adopted from [Claro and Claro \(2010\)](#) and [Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir, and Du \(2015\)](#) and measured on a five-point scale, ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree".

Given that other variables could influence testing results, they were measured and controlled as covariates in the data analysis, including familiarity toward the supplier's company, time of cooperation (four categories from < 11 years to > 30 years), size of the buyer's company (four categories from < 51 employees to > 1000 employees), respondent's age (seven categories from < 18 years to > 55 years), education (six categories from no formal education received to graduate degree), and gender (0 = male, 1 = female). Familiarity was adopted from [Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden \(2003\)](#), and respondents were asked to indicate the degree of their familiarity with suppliers' companies (measured on a seven-point Likert scale).

### 3.3. Validity and reliability of measures

We subjected the key latent variables, including brand sensitivity, brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation, to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 21.0. The results indicated good fit indices, with  $\chi^2 = 219.01$  (84 degrees of freedom), root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.08, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.93, and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.91. [Table 1](#) presents the loadings, composite reliabilities, and Cronbach's alphas. Except for one item (marginally below 0.50), all factor loading estimates were statistically significant and > 0.50. Composite reliabilities were all well over the generally accepted cutoff of 0.70. Cronbach's alphas were also

**Table 1**  
Measures, reliability, and CFA statistics.

Variables	Items	Loading ( $\lambda$ )	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
Brand sensitivity	When my company makes purchases, corporate brand names are considered.	0.74	0.76	0.75
	With purchases, corporate brand names are important to my company.	0.74		
	When recommending suppliers to other companies, my company takes corporate brand names into account.	0.66		
Brand trust	I think my company trusts the corporate brand of this supplier.	0.86	0.85	0.81
	I think my company relies on the corporate brand of this supplier.	0.46		
	To my company, the corporate brand of this supplier is honest.	0.77		
	To my company, the corporate brand of this supplier is safe.	0.91		
Word of mouth	My company likes recommending this supplier to peer companies.	0.82	0.89	0.89
	My company convinces other companies to cooperate with this supplier.	0.85		
	My company transmits experiences with this supplier to peer companies.	0.71		
	My company talks about this supplier because it offers really good products.	0.87		
Value co-creation	My company works with the supplier to deal with problems together that arise in the course of the relationship.	0.73	0.75	0.75
	My company shares responsibility with the supplier to get things done in the course of the relationship.	0.64		
	My company is flexible in response to changes in the relationship with the supplier.	0.55		
	When some unexpected situation arises, my company and the supplier can work out a new deal.	0.70		

Note: Only key latent variables were included in CFA analysis.

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics of key variables.

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Brand sensitivity	<b>0.71</b>						
2. Brand trust	0.48**	<b>0.77</b>					
3. Word of mouth	0.56**	0.58**	<b>0.82</b>				
4. Value co-creation	0.46**	0.54**	0.47**	<b>0.66</b>			
5. Self-enhancement congruence	0.06	0.21**	0.18**	0.01	<b>CSI</b>		
6. Self-transcendence congruence	0.07	0.23**	0.20**	0.11	0.21**	<b>CSI</b>	
7. Brand identification	0.32**	0.41**	0.35**	0.35**	0.21**	0.28**	<b>SI</b>
M	5.59	5.62	5.32	4.12	6.29	6.30	5.01
SD	0.90	0.84	1.15	0.58	0.74	0.74	1.38

Note: CSI = composite single-item, SI = single-item, S.D. = standard deviation, M = mean. Square roots of AVEs are shown in bold on matrix diagonal.

\*\* p < 0.01.

above the recommended value of 0.70. These results evidenced convergent validity. In addition, correlations were compared with the square root of AVEs; since all correlations were smaller than the respective square root of AVEs, discriminant validity was supported. [Table 2](#) presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables, including the square root of AVEs, means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients.

### 3.4. Common method variance

Following [Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff's \(2003\)](#) guidelines, we adopted various procedural remedies to minimize common method bias. First, the survey introduction emphasized that there was no right or wrong answers, and respondents were promised anonymity. Second, different scale formats were used to measure the key variables. For instance, brand identification was measured using a Venn diagram, brand trust was estimated on a seven-point Likert scale, and value co-creation was assessed on a five-point Likert scale. Third, following [Podsakoff et al.'s \(2003\)](#) suggestion, a theoretically unrelated marker variable about life satisfaction adopted from [Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin \(1985\)](#) was incorporated in the questionnaire to parcel out the effect of CMV. We assessed common method bias by estimating the interconstruct correlations between the independent and dependent variables with and without partialling out the effect of the unrelated marker variable. The results showed that the correlations were stable across two cases, indicating the absence of common method

bias. Finally, Harman's one-factor test was performed on the study items including self-enhancement congruence, self-transcendence congruence, brand identification, brand sensitivity, brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. The first factor explained only 39.18% of the total variance, which was < 50%. Thus, the analysis above suggests that CMV does not pose a threat to this study.

#### 4. Analysis and results

##### 4.1. The mediation effect of brand identification

###### 4.1.1. Tests of mediation effect for self-enhancement congruence

Following Zhao, Lynch, and Chen's (2010) suggestions (2010) to test for the significance of mediation effect, we employed Preacher and Hayes's (2008) method of calculating standard errors and 95% confidence intervals of the effect of self-enhancement congruence on outcome variables through brand identification. This method uses 1000 bootstrapped samples to estimate the bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals, which is more robust. We also reported the traditional Sobel test to reconfirm mediation significance. Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) was used to conduct the analysis. Particularly, we need to examine whether self-enhancement congruence can exert influence through brand identification when the dependent variables are brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Thus, we ran the model once a time according to the dependent variables with the aforementioned control variables as covariates. Table 3 presents the data analysis.

As shown in Table 3, self-enhancement congruence positively influences brand trust through brand identification, with an effect size of 0.05 and a confidence interval of [0.023, 0.106] (0 is not included in this interval). Similarly, when the dependent variables are word of mouth (mediated effect = 0.07, 95% CI = [0.028, 0.160], 0 is not included in this interval) and value co-creation (mediated effect = 0.04, 95% CI = [0.019, 0.086], 0 is not included in this interval), brand identification also can significantly mediate the influence of self-enhancement congruence on the two dependent variables.

In addition, the results in Table 3 also demonstrate Baron and Kenny's (1986) models 2 and 3 in the mediation analysis procedure. According to the results, self-enhancement congruence significantly influences the mediating variable (brand identification), with an effect size of 0.37 (p < 0.05) (model 2). When the independent and

mediating variables are incorporated into a regression (model 3), brand identification still significantly influences the corresponding dependent variables ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for brand trust;  $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for word of mouth;  $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for value co-creation). The traditional Sobel test reveals that brand identification is a robust mediating variable (Sobel  $z = 2.62$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for brand trust; Sobel  $z = 2.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for word of mouth; Sobel  $z = 2.64$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for value co-creation), which further confirms mediation significance. These results provide full support for H1a and H2a.

###### 4.1.2. Tests of mediation effect for self-transcendence congruence

The same method was used to test whether brand identification mediates the influence of self-transcendence congruence upon the outcome variables, including brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Table 4 presents the analysis results.

The results in Table 4 show that self-transcendence congruence positively influences brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification, with effect sizes of 0.07, 0.09, and 0.05 and confidence intervals of [0.022, 0.127], [0.030, 0.202], and [0.017, 0.103], respectively (0 is not included in these intervals). In addition, Baron and Kenny's (1986) model 2 indicates that self-transcendence congruence significantly influences brand identification ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Model 3 reveals that brand identification still significantly influences the corresponding dependent variables ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for brand trust;  $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for word of mouth;  $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for value co-creation). Here as well, the traditional Sobel test indicates that brand identification is a robust mediating variable (Sobel  $z = 2.91$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for brand trust; Sobel  $z = 2.73$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for word of mouth; Sobel  $z = 2.87$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for value co-creation), which further confirms mediation significance. Therefore, H1b and H2b are supported.

##### 4.2. The moderation effect of brand sensitivity

###### 4.2.1. Tests of moderation effect for self-enhancement congruence

Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt's (2005) proposed method was used to test whether brand sensitivity can moderate the influence of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. Following Muller et al.'s (2005) recommendations for testing mediated moderation, three regression equations were constructed.

**Table 3**  
Results of mediating role of brand identification for self-enhancement congruence.

	Brand trust	Word of mouth	Value co-creation
	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)
Independent variable → mediating variable			
Self-enhancement congruence → brand identification	0.37 (0.001)	0.37 (0.001)	0.37 (0.001)
Independent variable, mediating variable → outcome variable			
Brand identification → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.15 (0.000)	0.20 (0.000)	0.12 (0.000)
Self-enhancement congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.16 (0.009)	0.18 (0.051)	-0.05 (0.312)
Direct effect and indirect effect			
	Effect size (confidence interval)	Effect size (confidence interval)	Effect size (confidence interval)
Direct effect (controlling for mediating variable)			
Self-enhancement congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.16 ([0.039, 0.272])	0.18 ([-0.001, 0.362])	-0.05 ([-0.137, 0.044])
Indirect effect			
Self-enhancement congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.05 ([0.023, 0.106])	0.07 ([0.028, 0.160])	0.04 ([0.019, 0.086])
Sobel test	2.62 (0.009)	2.46 (0.014)	2.64 (0.008)

Note: The table only reports critical influence paths and omits control variables.

**Table 4**  
Results of mediating role of brand identification for self-transcendence congruence.

	Brand trust	Word of mouth	Value co-creation
	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)
Independent variable → mediating variable			
Self-transcendence congruence → brand identification	0.46 (0.000)	0.46 (0.000)	0.46 (0.000)
Independent variable, mediating variable → outcome variable			
Brand identification → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.14 (0.000)	0.20 (0.000)	0.11 (0.000)
Self-transcendence congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.18 (0.003)	0.18 (0.057)	0.04 (0.447)
Direct effect and indirect effect			
	Effect size (confidence interval)	Effect size (confidence interval)	Effect size (confidence interval)
Direct effect (controlling for mediating variable)			
Self-transcendence congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.18 ([0.061, 0.299])	0.18 ([−0.005, 0.367])	0.04 ([−0.057, 0.128])
Indirect effect			
Self-transcendence congruence → brand trust/word of mouth/value co-creation	0.07 ([0.022, 0.127])	0.09 ([0.030, 0.202])	0.05 ([0.017, 0.103])
Sobel test	2.91 (0.004)	2.73 (0.006)	2.87 (0.004)

Note: The table only reports critical influence paths and omits control variables.

$$Y = b_{10} + b_{11}X + b_{12}Mo + b_{13}(X \times Mo) + \beta_{11}Control_i + \epsilon_1 \quad (1)$$

The first regression predicts dependent variable *Y* on the basis of independent variable *X*, moderating variable *Mo*, and their interaction  $X \times Mo$ . This model aims to test whether the overall effect of *X* on *Y* can be moderated. The coefficient for  $X \times Mo$  should be significant. The control variables include familiarity toward the supplier's company, time of cooperation, size of the buyer's company, respondent's age, education, and gender.

$$Me = b_{20} + b_{21}X + b_{22}Mo + b_{23}(X \times Mo) + \beta_{21}Control_i + \epsilon_2 \quad (2)$$

The second regression predicts the mediator *Me* using the same three key variables. This model aims to test whether the overall effect of *X* on *Me* can be moderated. The coefficient for  $X \times Mo$  should be significant.

$$Y = b_{30} + b_{31}X + b_{32}Mo + b_{33}(X \times Mo) + b_{34}Me + b_{35}(Me \times Mo) + \beta_{31}Control_i + \epsilon_3 \quad (3)$$

The third regression predicts *Y* from the three previous key variables, plus *Me*, and the interaction between *Me* and *Mo*. This model aims to test whether *Me* can have a significant impact on *Y* when the interaction  $X \times Mo$  is controlled. The coefficient for *Me* should be significant.

In this study, we need to test whether the interactive effect between self-enhancement congruence and brand sensitivity can exert influence through brand identification when the dependent variables are brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Thus, we ran the models above three times according to the dependent variables. Table 5 presents the analysis results.

As predicted, the interaction between self-enhancement congruence and brand sensitivity exerts a significant positive impact on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.05$ ), word of mouth ( $\beta = 0.24, p < 0.05$ ), and value co-creation ( $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.05$ ), which indicates that the overall influence of self-enhancement congruence on the aforementioned variables is moderated by brand sensitivity (Eq. (1)). The more companies emphasize brand information in purchasing decisions, the stronger the effect of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Similarly, the interaction between self-enhancement congruence and brand sensitivity exerts a significant positive impact on brand identification ( $\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$ ) (Eq. (2)). Companies with high sensitivity tend to place greater emphases on the

influence of self-enhancement congruence on constructing brand identification than those with low brand sensitivity. Notably, when the interaction between the independent and moderating variables is controlled, brand identification still significantly influences brand trust ( $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.05$ ), word of mouth ( $\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$ ), and value co-creation ( $\beta = 0.08, p < 0.05$ ) (Eq. (3)). These results indicate that brand sensitivity positively moderates the influence of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. Therefore, H3a is supported.

#### 4.2.2. Tests of moderation effect for self-transcendence congruence

We adopted the same method proposed by Muller et al. (2005) to test whether brand sensitivity can moderate the influence of self-transcendence congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. Table 6 presents the analysis results.

As predicted, unlike the results for self-enhancement congruence, the interaction between self-transcendence congruence and brand sensitivity does not significantly affect brand trust ( $\beta = -0.12, p > 0.05$ ), word of mouth ( $\beta = -0.03, p > 0.05$ ), and value co-creation ( $\beta = -0.05, p > 0.05$ ), which indicates that the influence of self-transcendence congruence on the aforementioned variables cannot be moderated by brand sensitivity. Whether or not companies rely on brand information for purchasing decisions does not strengthen or weaken the influence of self-transcendence congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. Similarly, the interaction between self-transcendence congruence and brand sensitivity cannot significantly affect brand identification ( $\beta = 0.06, p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, brand sensitivity is unable to moderate the influence of self-transcendence congruence on outcome variables through brand identification. These results provide full support for H3b.

## 5. Discussion

The main objective of this study is to explore how emotional benefits influence relationship qualities from a new alternative perspective of brand values. We concentrate on two types of distinct but relevant brand values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence in B2B contexts. The empirical results reveal that BVC can strengthen relationship qualities. More specifically, self-enhancement congruence and self-transcendence congruence positively influence brand trust, word of

**Table 5**  
Results of moderating role of brand sensitivity for self-enhancement congruence.

Equations	Independent variable	Moderating variable	Independent variable × moderating variable	Mediating variable	Mediating variable × moderating variable
	For brand trust				
Eq. (1)/brand trust	0.18 (0.002)	0.30 (0.000)	0.19 (0.004)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.32 (0.003)	0.35 (0.000)	0.26 (0.041)	–	–
Eq. (3)/brand trust	0.14 (0.012)	0.26 (0.000)	0.16 (0.012)	0.11 (0.002)	–0.00 (0.979)
	For word of mouth				
Eq. (1)/word of mouth	0.20 (0.014)	0.69 (0.000)	0.24 (0.009)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.32 (0.003)	0.35 (0.000)	0.26 (0.041)	–	–
Eq. (3)/word of mouth	0.17 (0.031)	0.63 (0.000)	0.22 (0.019)	0.10 (0.035)	–0.06 (0.192)
	For value co-creation				
Eq. (1)/value co-creation	–0.03 (0.560)	0.25 (0.000)	0.11 (0.039)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.32 (0.003)	0.35 (0.000)	0.26 (0.041)	–	–
Eq. (3)/value co-creation	–0.06 (0.212)	0.22 (0.000)	0.08 (0.098)	0.08 (0.001)	0.01 (0.614)

Note: The table only reports critical influence paths and omits control variables.

mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. Furthermore, our study highlights the need to distinguish “within” emotional benefits in the process of relationship development. In the case of self-enhancement congruence, brand sensitivity positively moderates the influence of such emotional benefits on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. However, for self-transcendence congruence, the mediated moderation effect disappears.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study contributes to the B2B branding literature in several ways. First, we propose a new alternative perspective of abstract brand concepts based on human values to explore how emotional benefits take effect in B2B contexts. Emphasizing the roles of emotional benefits by deeming brands as human represents an emerging research stream in the B2B branding literature (Gupta et al., 2010; Herbst & Merz, 2011; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). Scholars generally adopt Aaker’s (1997) brand personality framework as a theoretical basis in exploring such stream. This framework, however, is limited by its weak generalizability in cross-cultural settings, as shown in previous studies (Aaker et al., 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012). So far, within the B2B domain, no research has based brand concepts on human values and incorporated these values into corporate brands,

which have shared meanings in global contexts. Our study combines brand values and self-congruity theory, proposes the concept of BVC, and verifies their roles in B2B contexts. Therefore, on one hand, in addition to brand personality, our study adds a new robust framework to analyze emotional benefits in the B2B branding literature. On the other hand, it extends brand values in the B2C domain (Shepherd et al., 2015; Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012; Torelli, Özsomer, Carvalho, Tat Keh, and Maehle, 2012) to the B2B domain, which further expands the research scope for this framework.

Second, existing studies on RM mostly focus on the influence of interpersonal-level similarity on building, developing, and maintaining relationships (Crosby et al., 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006). However, due to the staff turnover rate, the effectiveness of interpersonal-level similarity between individual boundary spanners may be limited, which emphasizes short-term orientations. For instance, the resignation of key employees renders the influence of interpersonal-level similarity less important. Instead, we focus on interfirm-level similarity, which is more stable and long-term orientated. To further explore how interfirm-level similarity exerts influence, we introduce the construct of brand identification from the B2C domain, and the empirical results show that self-enhancement congruence (confidence intervals: [0.023, 0.106] for brand trust; [0.028, 0.160] for word of mouth; and [0.019, 0.086] for value co-creation) and self-transcendence congruence (confidence intervals:

**Table 6**  
Results of moderating role of brand sensitivity for self-transcendence congruence.

Equations	Independent variable	Moderating variable	Independent variable × moderating variable	Mediating variable	Mediating variable × moderating variable
	For brand trust				
Eq. (1)/brand trust	0.22 (0.000)	0.28 (0.000)	–0.12 (0.084)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.44 (0.000)	0.32 (0.001)	0.06 (0.672)	–	–
Eq. (3)/brand trust	0.17 (0.004)	0.25 (0.000)	–0.14 (0.050)	0.11 (0.001)	0.02 (0.495)
	For word of mouth				
Eq. (1)/word of mouth	0.23 (0.006)	0.67 (0.000)	–0.03 (0.800)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.44 (0.000)	0.32 (0.001)	0.06 (0.672)	–	–
Eq. (3)/word of mouth	0.18 (0.034)	0.61 (0.000)	–0.01 (0.940)	0.11 (0.020)	–0.05 (0.308)
	For value co-creation				
Eq. (1)/value co-creation	0.07 (0.139)	0.23 (0.000)	–0.05 (0.340)	–	–
Eq. (2)/brand identification	0.44 (0.000)	0.32 (0.001)	0.06 (0.672)	–	–
Eq. (3)/value co-creation	0.03 (0.520)	0.21 (0.000)	–0.07 (0.237)	0.08 (0.002)	0.02 (0.500)

Note: The table only reports critical influence paths and omits control variables.

[0.022, 0.127] for brand trust; [0.030, 0.202] for word of mouth; and [0.017, 0.103] for value co-creation) significantly influence relationship qualities through brand identification. Therefore, in addition to similarity between interpersonal staff in previous studies, we provide a new lens to understand interfirm BVC for relationship management.

Third, our study provides insights on the differentiated roles “within” emotional benefits in B2B contexts. Notably, existing studies of B2B branding largely concentrate on distinguishing different roles “between” emotional benefits and rational benefits (e.g. Candi & Kahn, 2016; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Persson, 2010). For example, in a recent study on clarifying benefits for B2B services, Candi and Kahn (2016) make clear distinctions between the nature of functional, emotional, and social benefits and elaborate on their distinct roles in maintaining satisfaction. Likewise, Leek and Christodoulides (2012) suggest that functional values emerge as the primary factors considered by buyers in the decision-making process, while emotional values provide reassurance and trust. On the basis of these studies, we further the discussion on the differentiated roles within emotional benefits in terms of the moderating effect exerted by brand sensitivity. Specifically, the relationship between self-enhancement congruence and relationship qualities varies by brand sensitivity. By contrast, the relationship between self-transcendence congruence and relationship qualities is stable, regardless of high or low brand sensitivity. The former brand values serves as a means to display companies' core competencies, while the latter represents a basic social requirement and the lowest threshold.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

Our study also provides important practical implications for B2B companies on developing effective branding strategies in several ways. First, we propose a new motivation-based framework—brand values—for B2B companies to strategically position their brands relative to competitors. Such positioning framework is particularly important given the increasing homogenization of products and brands in B2B markets. Our study shows that BVC effectively strengthens relationship qualities between companies. Thus, B2B companies should build not only brand values but also, and more crucially, the right type of brand values. They need to consider the following two questions. First, how can the brand values framework be used to establish a long-term differentiated brand positioning strategy relative to their main competitors? One way is to determine the elements missing in the competitors' positioning appeals in terms of brand values. Second, what are the key brand values that a main cooperative partner desires? This implies that B2B companies must regularly track the type of brand values most wanted by the main cooperative partner and determine the type of brand associations that need to be prioritized. In addition, the relationship built on the basis of interpersonal-level similarity is short termed; thus marketing managers should emphasize BVC at interfirm-level. This can be done through a series of trainings to reach a common understanding of corporate brand values among staff.

Second, our study highlights that brand identification is key for BVC to positively influence brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. This suggests that B2B companies must invest resources for identification management, which is often ignored by B2B marketers. To harness the power of brand identification, B2B companies should monitor its dynamic changes with main collaborators that have occurred over time. To do so, a thoughtfully designed, cross-time brand audit plan is necessary. B2B marketers need to constantly determine the following: the initial and recent levels of brand identification with main collaborators, changes in trajectory of brand identification over time, and factors causing brand identification to increase or decline. Moreover, in addition to BVC discussed in our study, we argue that other factors that may affect brand identification should be identified. For instance, companies can manage brand identification more easily with homogeneous target suppliers than those with heterogeneous

ones, whose brand values tend to be diverse. Thus, the former need to take advantage of the power of brand identification when competing with the latter. In sum, this study highlights that the importance of brand identification should be re-recognized, and companies can derive competitive advantages by improving brand identification among cooperative companies.

Third, marketing managers need to pay attention to basic differences between self-enhancement and self-transcendence and identify their differentiated roles as well as determine how these can be combined into a brand positioning strategy. Our study reveals that different types of values play different roles in B2B contexts. Self-transcendence is a widely accepted values; it is the lowest threshold and basic requirement for companies to survive. Therefore, marketing managers need to incorporate brand associations, such as caring for nature and society, protecting the environment, and promoting social welfare, as the basic elements of corporate brand values, which constitute the point of parity in a brand positioning strategy. In contrast, self-enhancement denotes companies' desire for authority, power, and success, representing their pursuit of market position, market power, and market performance. It is an abstract representation of companies' core competitiveness. Therefore, B2B marketing managers should incorporate self-enhancement associations as the core elements of corporate brand values, which constitute the point of difference in a brand positioning strategy.

### 5.3. Research limitations and further research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations that serve as avenues for further research. First, we set our study object to B2B corporate brands without considering industry characteristics. According to B2C-based studies, different brands embody different values. For example, *Louis Vuitton* and *Gucci* reflect self-enhancement (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012), while *Disney* and *Coca-Cola* reflect self-transcendence (Shepherd et al., 2015). This raises an interesting question of whether a connection exists between industries and certain types of brand values in B2B contexts. Further, B2C-based studies argue that brand values can determine the effectiveness of marketing mix strategies. According to Torelli, Özsumer, et al. (2012), if managers highlight social responsibility for brands that reflect self-enhancement, consumers would lower their evaluation of these brands. Applying the aforementioned insights to B2B contexts, the question we need to explore is how industry characteristics moderate the influence of BVC on relationship qualities. Besides, conservation and openness to change are also included in the values system proposed by Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004), while this study only focuses on self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Future studies should thus, allow for such values to widen the understanding of brand values in B2B contexts.

Second, this study is limited to a Chinese sample without accounting for cultural values priorities of different countries. Studies suggest that cultural orientations shape brand associations prioritized by individuals from different countries (Gomez & Torelli, 2015; Steenkamp & Jong, 2010). Steenkamp and Jong (2010), for example, suggest that individuals from traditional countries prefer brands that embody localness, while those from secular-rational countries prefer brands that exhibit global traits. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that certain types of brand values are accordingly preferred by certain countries with particular cultural values. In line with this argument, the influence of BVC on relationship qualities may vary across countries. Future studies should explore the following questions: How do the cultural values priorities of different countries affect the influence brought by BVC? In which countries do certain types of BVC exert larger or smaller effects on relationship qualities? More insights can be obtained in addressing such issues.

Finally, this study explored only one mediating variable, namely brand identification. However, the empirical results suggest that brand

identification only partly mediates the influence of BVC on brand trust. For instance, after controlling for the mediating variable, self-enhancement congruence (the confidence interval for direct effect is [0.039, 0.272], see Table 3) and self-transcendence congruence (the confidence interval for direct effect is [0.061, 0.299], see Table 4) directly influence brand trust, respectively. Such results lead us to think further, that is, whether or not other variables that explain how BVC exerts influence exist. Notably, we conceptualized brand trust as unidimensional as Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) did and treated it as a dependent variable. However, trust can be further divided into competence trust and goodwill trust (Liu, Li, Tao, & Wang, 2008). If the two types of trusts are included as two mediators, it can be argued that different types of BVC may influence relationship qualities through

different mediators, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer.<sup>3</sup> Competence trust may mediate the influence of self-enhancement congruence, while goodwill trust likely mediates that of self-transcendence congruence. Testing such hypotheses could yield fruitful insights for the B2B literature and marketers.

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**Appendix A. Measurement items of key variables**

Self-enhancement of suppliers'/buyers' corporate brands (1 = "totally disagree" and 7 = "totally agree")

1. I feel the supplier's corporate brand/my corporate brand is like a person who pursues power (pursuing power means wishing to display authority and chasing after social power and wealth).
2. I feel the supplier's corporate brand/ my corporate brand is like a person who pursues achievement (pursuing achievement means pursuing success, capability, ambition, and influencing on people and events).

Self-transcendence of suppliers'/buyers' corporate brands (1 = "totally disagree" and 7 = "totally agree")

1. I feel the supplier's corporate brand/my corporate brand is like a person who cares for society (caring for society means caring for social justice, wisdom, world peace and equality and being broad-mindedness).
2. I feel the supplier's corporate brand/my corporate brand is like a person who concerns with nature (concerning with nature means protecting the environment and being devoted to creating a beautiful world).
3. I feel the supplier's corporate brand/my corporate brand is like a person who is benevolent (being benevolent means helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty and responsible).

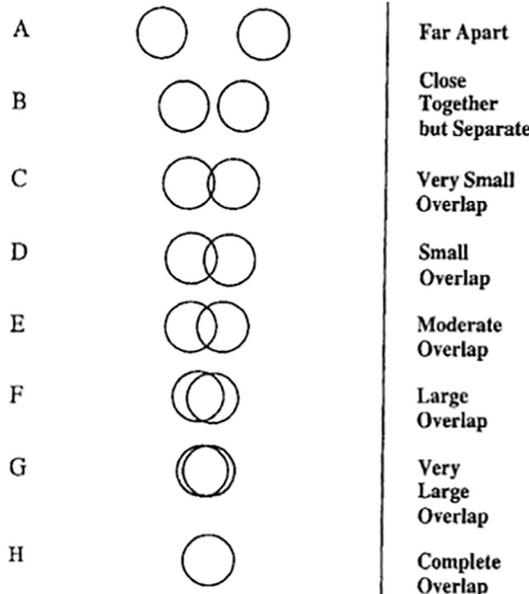
Self-transcendence and self-enhancement congruence were constructed, respectively, based on Sirgy's (1982) paradigm as follows:

$$\sum_i^n |b_{ij} - s_{ij}|/n$$

Brand identification (1 = "far apart" and 8 = "complete overlap")

Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the level of overlap between your company's identity and the supplier's identity.

my company      supplier's company



<sup>3</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer for this valuable insight.

Brand sensitivity (1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”)

1. When my company makes purchases, corporate brand names are considered.
2. With purchases, corporate brand names are important to my company.
3. When recommending suppliers to other companies, my company takes corporate brand names into account.

Brand trust (1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”)

1. I think my company trusts the corporate brand of this supplier.
2. I think my company relies on the corporate brand of this supplier.
3. To my company, the corporate brand of this supplier is honest.
4. To my company, the corporate brand of this supplier is safe.

Word of mouth (1 = “totally disagree” and 7 = “totally agree”)

1. My company likes recommending this supplier to peer companies.
2. My company convinces other companies to cooperate with this supplier.
3. My company transmits experiences with this supplier to peer companies.
4. My company talks about this supplier because it offers really good products.

Value co-creation (1 = “totally disagree” and 5 = “totally agree”)

1. My company works with the supplier to deal with problems together that arise in the course of the relationship.
2. My company shares responsibility with the supplier to get things done in the course of the relationship.
3. My company is flexible in response to changes in the relationship with the supplier.
4. When some unexpected situation arises, my company and the supplier can work out a new deal.

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