Consumers’ identification with corporate brands: Brand prestige, anthropomorphism and engagement in social media

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to examine relationships between consumer-brand identification (CBI), brand prestige (BP), brand anthropomorphism (BA) and consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on social media in corporate brand settings.
Design/methodology/approach – Data collected with an online survey on a sample randomly drawn from an online panel of consumers were used to test the proposed theoretical model.
Findings – Anthropomorphism and prestige of corporate brands were found to positively influence consumer-brand identification. Also, CBI positively affects consumers’ active engagement and fully mediates the effect of BP and BA on consumers-brand engagement (CBE) with corporate brands.
Research limitations/implications – Further research in other markets and on a broader set of corporate brands would additionally validate results and enable comparisons of impacts among different brand categories. The data were gathered in one country, so further research in other markets would additionally validate results of this study.
Practical implications – Chief executives responsible for corporate brand management are provided with some insights on how appropriate corporate brand identity management can strengthen CBI and stimulate CBE on social media.
Originality/value – This paper provides some novel insights into the research on consumer-brand identification. It is the first study (to the authors’ knowledge) that empirically supports the positive influence of brand anthropomorphism on CBI in corporate brand settings. It also contributes to the clarification of previously inconsistent results of the influence of BP on CBI. By showing that consumers’ identification with a corporate brand plays a vital role in increasing consumers’ active engagement on social media, the study contributes to the relatively sparse body of research on CBE.

Keywords Corporate marketing, Anthropomorphism, Brand identification, Corporate branding, Brand engagement, Brand prestige

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, ever since Balmer (1995) has accentuated the importance of strategic management of corporate brands and their identity, the vital role of corporate brands as organisations’ valuable strategic resources and assets has been demonstrated (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Ind, 1997; Gray and Balmer, 1998; Balmer, 2001a; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Einwiller and Will, 2002; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer, 2012). Corporate brands come to the foreground because the increasingly sensitive and astute public wishes to know more about organisations’ ethical and environmental issues; thus, organisations find it increasingly difficult to hide behind their product brands (Balmer, 1995). The corporate brand defines the organisation that stands behind the offering (Aaker, 2004; Urde, 2013) and is a mean of creating both shareholder and stakeholder value (Balmer, 2012). As Balmer (2001a; 2001b) points out, corporate brand management goes beyond classic product brand management, as, unlike for the product brand where only the middle management is responsible, everyone in the organisation has a responsibility for the corporate brand and its maintenance. Corporate brand management requires the constant attention of the chief executives and involves decisions about the organisational identity that are taken by the senior management and that have to meet the expectations of a whole range of internal and external stakeholders (for detailed comparison of product and corporate brands, see Balmer, 2001b). Corporate brands “are born out of corporate identities, but live in the minds of groups and individuals” (Balmer, 2010, p. 186). As such, corporate brand has become not only the key construct but also the flag bearer of the corporate marketing (Balmer, 2001a; Abratt and Kley, 2012). An important interest of corporate-level marketing is how a company as a brand can maintain ongoing relationships with customers and other...
stakeholder and communities (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). A strong corporate brand functions as a focus of attention, interest and activity of various stakeholders in their relationship with the corporation (Balmer, 2010; Podnar, 2015). Institutions where the corporate brand specifically acts as an entity’s cornerstone for its relations with stakeholders are characterised with corporate brand orientation (Balmer, 2013). For such orientation, the issue of corporate brand identification is highly significant (Balmer, 2013). In the context of relationships that can occur between a corporate brand and its stakeholders, identification of employees (Dutton et al., 1994; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Podnar et al., 2011) and consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005) with a company represents a psychological bond that underlies deep, voluntarily and long-term relationships with the corporate brand. While identification of employees as formal members of organisation received much attention in academic research (for literature review see Podnar, 2011), scholars (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Tildesley and Coote, 2009; Elbedweihy and Jayawardhena, 2014) call for a more detailed consideration of consumers’ identification with corporate and product brands that occurs even without formal membership ties. Specifically, authors address an urge to operationalise consumer-brand identification (CBI) (Tildesley and Coote, 2009) and highlight the importance to further investigate its antecedents and consequences (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Elbedweihy and Jayawardhena, 2014). In addition, Balmer and Liao (2007; Balmer et al., 2010) expose the need to focus the empirical concern on investigating consumers’ identification with corporate brands, as it is an important but neglected area. As corporate brands can help individuals define who they are, an identity category enjoys a prominent place in corporate marketing and can be highly meaningful to stakeholders (Balmer, 2010). To fill these gaps, the paper aims to offer novel insights on the antecedents and consequences of CBI in corporate brand settings.

It has been established that CBI depends on the extent to which a company’s perceived identity is seen as an attractive means of satisfying one or more individual’s self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In line with the aforementioned, corporate brand prestige has already been defined as an antecedent of CBI (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). However, previous empirical studies do not offer a clear-cut answer on whether brand prestige influences CBI. Namely, some of the studies confirmed the positive influence of corporate and product brand prestige on CBI (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Currás-Perez et al., 2009), whereas others did not (Ahearne et al., 2005; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Because of discordant previous findings, this paper attempts to further investigate the relation between brand prestige and consumer-brand identification in corporate brand settings.

Further, when defining antecedents of CBI, one should also consider the nature of ties that bind consumers to brands (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) have emphasised the important role of brand anthropomorphism, i.e. the capability to perceive a brand as a humanlike entity, in the formation of close relationships between consumers and brands. Although in marketing, brand anthropomorphism has been recognised as one of the key cognitive processes that influences the formation of close consumer-brand relationships, scholars emphasise that the concept remains unsatisfactorily conceptualised (Hart et al., 2013), empirically insufficiently supported (Puzakova et al., 2009; Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012) and as a consequence unsuitably managed phenomenon (Brown, 2010). Our paper thus focuses on adequate conceptualisation and operationalisation of anthropomorphism of corporate brands. Besides, Fournier and Alvarez (2012) call for an empirical examination of effects that anthropomorphic perceptions of brands have on consumers’ relationships with these brands. Thus, our study explores the influence of anthropomorphism of corporate brand on consumers’ identification with a corporate brand that has – to our knowledge – not been empirically investigated yet.

Finally, in the times when the internet and social media (SM) are fundamentally changing the way the world communicates and interacts, research on consumers’ engagement is becoming highly relevant in marketing (Brodie et al., 2011). For companies and their brands, SM presents an advantageous platform for engaging consumers into the brand and for building stronger and more meaningful relations with them (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Labrecque, 2014). Consumer-brand engagement on SM has been found to positively influence consumers’ connection and emotional bond with a brand, as well as their brand loyalty and brand usage intent (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). However, although companies recognise the need to be active on SM, there is not much evidence on under what conditions people voluntarily take an action and engage in brand activities on SM. While the existing body of literature has problematised the relationship between brand community identification and brand community engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Doohwong et al., 2011), scholars have only recently begun to explore the engaging dynamics that can occur between consumers and specific brands (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). Thus, we would like to contribute to this emerging field of research by proposing consumers’ active engagement in corporate brand activities on SM as the consequence of their identification with this brand.

In an attempt to fill the aforementioned gaps and contribute to the body of knowledge of corporate marketing, the present study aims to explore to what extent a consumer’s perception of a corporate brand as prestigious and humanlike affects his/her identification with this brand. Also, this study aims to test the extent to which consumer’s identification with a corporate brand impacts his/her active engagement in brand activities on SM. In addition, consumer-brand identification is often found to mediate the effects between independent and dependent variables (Ahearne et al., 2005; He and Li, 2011; Marin et al., 2009; Mobin et al., 2016), and for that reason the mediating role of CBI is tested as well.

The rest of the paper is detailed as follows: we first review the relevant literature that supports our hypotheses in Section 2. Methodological insights are provided in Section 3 followed by the results of our empirical study in Section 4. The paper concludes with a discussion encompassing theoretical and practical implications of the study, as well as its limitations and implications for future research in Section 5.
2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1 Understanding consumer-brand identification

Most of the definitions of consumer-brand identification draw on the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and its application within organisational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton et al., 1994). Consumer-brand identification is either defined as “the extent to which the consumer sees his or her own self-image as overlapping with the brand’s image” (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006, p. 49; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2005; Carlson et al., 2009) or as “a customer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand” (Lam et al., 2010, p. 129; Donavan et al., 2006; Lam et al., 2012). In line with the conceptualisation of organisational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton et al., 1994; Podnar et al., 2011), we define consumers’ identification with a corporate brand as the perceived feeling of oneness with a corporate brand. However, contrary to many previous definitions transferred from the organisational to consumer-brand context, we argue that consumer-brand identification is an identity-based tie between the consumer and the brand, as reported by authors (Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Consumers link various constructions of corporate brands to their own identity and perceive these objects as a part of their self (Schultz Kleine et al., 1995; Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

The source of symbolic meanings of consumption objects that consumers can use to co-construct their identities is twofold: symbolic meanings have on the one hand social and cultural origins (McCracken, 1986) and on the other, they originate from direct interaction between the consumer and the brand (Belk, 1988). Because of this twofold origin of brand associations serving as the basis for creation of self-brand connection, we have to consider both when proposing a definition of consumer-brand identification. Literature review on CBI shows that one part of the existing research focuses on consumer-brand identification as the perceived sense of oneness with a brand as a commonly shared symbol of a group (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Donavan et al., 2006), while the other part focuses on the understanding of consumer-brand identification as the perceived feeling of oneness formed in a direct interaction between the consumer and the brand as a social entity with its own projected identity (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). The object of identification in both cases is the brand; in the first case, it is perceived as a symbol of the group and in the second as a social unit with its own projected identity. Podnar (2015, p. 185) shows that corporate brands have, similar to service and product brands, two important functions: being an object of personal and social identification. Because of the dual origin of brand associations and the dual role of brands as objects of identification, we understand consumers’ identification with a corporate brand as a perceived feeling of oneness with a corporate brand as a social unit with its own identity and as a symbol of a group.

2.2 Corporate brand prestige

The relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand prestige originates from the social identity theory, according to which people aspire to maintain a positive self-image and thus strive to link their identities with social categories enabling them the satisfaction of this need (Abrams and Hogg, 2004). Corporate brand prestige is an integral part of studying corporate associations (Brown and Dacin, 1997) and relates to the evaluation of corporate brand’s position as superior to others (Perrow, 1961; Prince and Davies, 2009; Baek, et al., 2010). When speaking of perceptions of prestige of the company by internal stakeholders, authors usually refer to the concept of perceived external prestige defined as “members’ beliefs about outsiders’ perceptions of the organisation” (Dutton et al., 1994, p. 248). Consumers as external stakeholders do not evaluate the prestige of the company only on the basis of what others think about the company but also on the basis of the perceived competitive quality and performance of the corporate brand and its products. Perrow (1961) defines corporate prestige in the eyes of external stakeholders as the combined evaluation of the quality of company’s products and services and of the symbolic value that the company establishes through its communication and interaction with the society. This is in line with recent definitions of brand prestige as a positive evaluative judgement about the high status of a brand (Czellar, 2001) accompanied by feelings of esteem and admiration as a result of internalisation of the objective and symbolic realities of the brand (Prince and Davies, 2009; Baek et al., 2010). In line with the aforementioned, we define corporate brand prestige as a set of corporate associations established on the basis of an individual’s overall evaluation of the competitive market and social positions of the corporate brand as superior to other brands. More precisely, corporate brand prestige refers to individual’s evaluation of corporate brand position reflecting the extent to which market and social positions of the corporate brand are perceived as esteemed, respected, appreciated and superior to others.

Because of the tendency to maintain and enhance their positive self-esteem, people in general are inclined more to link their identities with entities that they perceive as more prestigious, reputable and generally better, more attractive, admired and respected than others (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton et al., 1994). This relationship between prestige and identification is well established in the organisational behaviour literature (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Fuller et al., 2006; Podnar, 2011). In a similar way as employees, customers can also use corporate brand prestige to express specific aspects of their self. In consumer research, prestige brands are often regarded as a symbolic means through which consumers can evaluate and express their social status and enhance their identity (Eastman et al., 1999). Previous empirical studies have already confirmed that higher perceived corporate prestige affects stronger identification between museum members and the museum (Bhattacharya et al., 1995), participants of a sponsored event and the event (Cornwell and Coote, 2005), passengers of a luxury boat trip and the cruise trip (Hwang and Han, 2014), sports team fans and the team (Donavan et al., 2006; Carlson et al., 2009) and students and their university (Balmer and Liao, 2007). All the aforementioned studies confirm the positive influence of corporate brand prestige on consumers’ identification among consumers who take a role as members of the organisation or an event. Yet, higher brand prestige affects stronger identification
also when no previous membership ties exist between the consumer and an organisation, like in the case of profit companies and consumers of their products (Wu and Tsai, 2007; Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008). Thus:

**H1.** Corporate brand prestige positively influences consumers’ identification with a corporate brand.

### 2.3 Corporate brand anthropomorphism

The term anthropomorphism derives from Greek words ἀνθρώπος (human) and μορφή (form) and is defined as a cognitive process of “attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things or events” (Guthrie, 1993, p. 3). Individuals tend to anthropomorphise various non-human entities, such as deities and other supernatural beings (Guthrie, 1993; Niemyska and Drat-Ruszczak, 2013), pets (Epley et al., 2008), natural phenomena (Waytz et al., 2010a), computers, robots and other technical objects (Gong, 2008; Eyssel and Kuchenbrandt, 2012), as well as companies (Podnar and Melewar, 2010; Stinnett et al., 2013) and consumption objects (Delbaere et al., 2011).

The fact that consumers have no difficulties to attribute humanlike traits to companies and products has been noted quite early (Newman, 1953; Gardner and Levy, 1955). It has been established that consumers easily attribute personality, lifestyle and personal traits to consumption objects represented by a brand (Plummer, 1984). As such, Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) used the concept of brand anthropomorphism as a basis for the transfer of findings from interpersonal psychological processes to the processes that can occur between consumers and brands. Even though there has recently been a growing interest for anthropomorphism in marketing literature with various foci – characters that appear in marketing communications (Hosany et al., 2013), products (Delbaere et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2013) and corporate and product brands (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Stinnett et al., 2013) – scholars warn that this phenomenon in the marketing context is insufficiently defined (Hosany et al., 2013). Our study draws on the psychological theory of anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010b) to define corporate brand anthropomorphism as a variant cognitive process that represents consumers’ tendency to attribute humanlike characteristics to corporate brands based on their overall actions and perceive them as entities with their own motivations, intentions and emotions.

It has been found that an exposure to an anthropomorphised objects triggers similar cognitive responses than exposure to another human being (Chartrand et al., 2008). This applies even if individuals know that the object does not actually possess humanlike traits (Epley et al., 2007). Research on anthropomorphism of technical objects shows that people perceive the relationship with an anthropomorphised object as stronger, more positive and more personal (Luczak et al., 2003; Kiesler et al., 2008; Eyssel and Kuchenbrandt, 2012). According to Vidal (2007), anthropomorphism represents an effective and spontaneous way of building stronger and more personal relationships with technical objects. Recent research on anthropomorphism in marketing also shows that brand anthropomorphism increases the extent to which consumers are inclined to cooperate with brands (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Stinnett et al., 2013). Close and personally relevant interactions of consumers with brands have already been proposed to influence identity-based relationships with brands (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012). Additionally, previous studies confirmed that consumer-brand identification is stronger when consumers have a better knowledge of brand identity (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008) and when the brand is perceived as warm (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Drawing on the above research, we hypothesise that brand anthropomorphism is a driver of CBI.

**H2.** Corporate brand anthropomorphism positively influences consumers’ identification with a corporate brand.

### 2.4 Consumers’ active engagement in corporate brand activities on social media

Because of changes in recent years that affect the way we consume (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010), companies realise more than ever that products, services, brands and communications can no longer be developed autonomously and detached from consumers. Rather, their value needs to be co-created in interaction with them (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 11) write that companies have to change their view of consumers who should no longer be seen as an operand resource (“target”) but should rather become an operand resource (“coproducer”). Brodie et al. (2011) define the role of interactive customer experience and value co-creation as the underlying conceptual foundation of consumer-brand engagement (CBE) concept. Specifically, CBE is suggested to extend beyond the more traditional concept of consumer involvement, which is defined as a personal relevance of the product to the needs and values of the consumer ( Zaichkowsky, 1985). Unlike involvement, consumers’ engagement occurs by virtue of interactive, co- creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships under a specific set of context-dependent conditions (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 60). Such understanding is also the basis for Vivek et al.’s (2012, p. 133) definition of CBE as “the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organisation’s offerings or organisational activities, which either the customer or the organisation initiates”. In line with the aforementioned, our paper understands CBE as a general process that describes the strength and intensity of the interactive experience between the consumer and the corporate brand. In the current study, our interest is on the specific aspect of CBE that has received much attention in recent years – consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on SM (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). SM describes platforms of digital communication that underline participation and collaboration in digital environment (Vernuccio, 2014). These new media, developed in an era described by the term “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005), offer companies multifarious ways to reach customers and communicate, collaborate and connect with them (Hennig-Thurauf et al., 2010). Consequently, communication scholars and practitioners are increasingly acknowledging the fundamental role of corporate brands in co-creating their identity and values through active participation with their consumers in SM environments (Keller, 2009; Vernuccio, 2014). According to Gummerus et al. (2012), the behavioural
manifestation of consumers’ engagement is directly related to the emergence of new media and to the new ways in which consumers can interact with companies. In line with the above, we define consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on SM as consumer behaviour that goes beyond purchase behaviour (van Doorn et al., 2010) and manifests in the extent to which individuals actively and consciously participate in brand’s activities on SM (Brodie et al., 2013). Although we recognise that consumer-brand engagement has three dimensions – cognitive, affective and behavioural (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011) – this study focuses only on the behavioural dimension of CBE.

Support for the relationship between consumers’ identification with a corporate brand and his/her active engagement in brand activities on SM can be found in the social identity theory positing that people are generally more inclined to support those categories that contribute more to the construction of important aspects of their identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). A review of marketing literature shows that consumers who identify stronger with a brand, significantly contribute to company’s success because their desire to satisfy their identity needs by using a company’s brands results in their participation in various behaviours that are beneficial for the company. Consumers who identify stronger with the brand are, among other, more loyal to the brand (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), more inclined to share positive information about the brand and its products (Ahearne et al., 2005; Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008) and more willing to help the company in obtaining new customers (Wu and Tsai, 2007). Lam et al. (2012) show that stronger CBI also increases consumers’ tendency for online brand identity-promoting behaviour that is manifested in voluntary and active participation in brand’s online activities. Further, Algesheimer et al. (2005; Doohwang et al., 2011) have found that consumer–community identification increases active consumer engagement in brand community. Further, studies that focus on CBE have revealed that CBI and CBE are related concepts (Brodie et al., 2011; 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Although some previous papers define CBE as an antecedent of CBI, they also highlight that CBE can be either an antecedent or a consequence of emotional and identity bonds between consumers and particular brands. The study by Hollebeek et al. (2014) investigating the influence of CBE on CBI showed that out of the three dimensions of CBE, only the affective engagement strongly influences CBI, while cognitive and even more so active (behavioural) engagement have only a weak influence on CBI. Because our study examines the relationship between CBI and the active behavioural CBE, we draw on the aforementioned research showing that when studying active engagement, CBI should be considered as an antecedent of consumers’ behavioural engagement. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H3. Consumers’ identification with a corporate brand positively influences consumers’ active engagement in corporate brand activities on social media.

Previous findings show that perceiving brands as more prestigious (Baek et al., 2010; Hwang and Han, 2014) and humanlike (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Stinnett et al., 2013) also affects consumer behaviour. Therefore, both antecedents of consumers’ identification with a brand could be treated as antecedents of consumers’ active engagement. In addition, previous research shows that consumer-brand identification often mediates the effects between its antecedents and consequences. Consumers’ identification with a corporate brand was found to mediate the effect of corporate social responsibility on loyalty (Marin et al., 2009) and consumer satisfaction (He and Li, 2011) and of perceived salesperson and company characteristics on costumer product use (Ahearne et al., 2005). Thus, consistent with the literature, we additionally propose:

H3a. Consumers’ identification with a corporate brand mediates the positive effect of corporate brand prestige on consumers’ active engagement in corporate brand activities on social media.

H3b. Consumers’ identification with a corporate brand mediates the positive effect of corporate brand anthropomorphism on consumers’ active engagement in corporate brand activities on social media.

Based on our review of the literature, we propose a model to capture relationships identified amongst the relevant variables of the current research as shown in Figure 1.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants and data collection procedure

Quantitative research was conducted to test the hypothesised model. The data were gathered through an online survey in February 2016 using one of the largest online panels of Slovenian consumers, which is actively managed by the Slovenian Institute for Market and Media Research, Mediana, and complies with the Esomar guidelines for online samples (Esomar, 2012). The sample of consumers aged from 18 to 64 years (n = 1,973) was randomly drawn from the panel with a
systematic sampling procedure. The sampling frame was stratified by region and is representative for Slovenian population according to gender, age and statistical region. Panellists were invited to participate in an online survey via an email containing a personalised invitation and a unique URL of the website with a survey that allowed for an anonymous participation. Three days after the initial invitation, a follow-up email was sent to stimulate more responses. A total of 1,943 respondents received an invitation (23 rejected and 7 out of office emails were returned), resulting in 554 completed surveys and 28.5 per cent response rate, which is adequate for online surveys (Callegaro et al., 2015).

Most of the survey questions demanded that the respondents had a specific brand in mind when answering the questions. The respondents were asked already in the beginning of the survey to choose a brand that they (a) knew well and (b) was somehow close to them. We used these two criteria of brand selection to get sufficient variance of consumer-brand identification, which presumes some awareness of and relationship with a brand. We provided respondents with a pre-set list of 26 brands that included corporate and product brands to ensure a valid brand choice that does not include consumption products or other brands (retailer or service brands, celebrities, etc.) that were not a subject of this research. The list contained brands from five product categories – cars, cosmetics, mobile phones, fashion and food and beverage. To not limit the respondents, they could also select a brand of their choice. To minimise response bias, the sequence of brands for the initial “brand choice” and the sequence of the following brand-related questions was random. The software automatically inserted the name of the chosen brand into each brand-related question.

For the purpose of this study, product brands were excluded from the final sample. Furthermore, unengaged cases, outliers, cases that got through the survey too quick and cases that replied illogically to control questions were also excluded from the final sample, resulting in a sample size of 249. The participants of the final sample had an average age of 43 years; more than half of them were males (61 per cent) and slightly more than half (53 per cent) live in an urban area. The list of corporate brands divided into two groups according to the type of the corporate brand is presented in Table I.

### Table I List of corporate brands according to corporate brand type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of brand</th>
<th>Monolithic brand</th>
<th>Endorsed brand</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local brand</td>
<td>Afrodit</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Union beer</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global brand</td>
<td>Renault</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>VW</td>
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<td></td>
<td>H&amp;M</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Citroën</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BMW</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coca-Cola</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audi</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Desigual</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-chosen</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>136</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2 Measures development
To ensure face validity, all concepts were operationalised on the basis of thorough previous definitions of each construct. If applicable, we used items from existing measures and adapted them to fit the definition of the concept and the context of our survey. To additionally assure that the measures reflect the concept in question, two experts from the field went through the questionnaire to check whether the proposed measures reflect the concepts concerned and few items were corrected according to their suggestions. To ensure that questions are understood by respondents and do not adversely affect survey cooperation, the questionnaire was pretested with qualitative and quantitative methods in two phases. First, the questionnaire was evaluated with six one-on-one in-depth interviews. In the second phase, the questionnaire was additionally tested online with four marketing experts (two from Academy and two from Praxis) and a small sample of respondents (N = 26) using an open source online survey application EnKilk. Based on the feedback, some changes were made for the purposes of better clarity and suitable wording. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” with the “no-opinion” option to reduce the pressure to give substantive responses. Details on specific measures are discussed below:

- **Consumer-brand identification measure.** In line with the proposed definition of CBI, our instrument includes items that measure consumer-brand identification as a perception and as a feeling of oneness with a brand as a unique social unit with its own identity and as a symbol of a group. Items were developed based on previous measures of consumer-brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012; Tuškej et al., 2013) and on instruments measuring the strength of self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Park et al., 2013). The resulting six-item scale showed a good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.90).

- **Corporate brand prestige measure.** To operationalise corporate brand prestige, items were adapted from previously used brand prestige scales (Prince and Davies, 2009; Baek et al., 2010; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). We took special care to include indicators that measure the extent to which an individual perceives the corporate brand as prestigious on the basis of its public image and of its competitive position. The resulting three-item scale showed good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.85).

- **Corporate brand anthropomorphism measure.** Uniquely humanlike characteristics were selected based on the individual differences in anthropomorphism questionnaire (IDAQ), developed to measure anthropomorphism of various non-human entities by Waytz et al. (2010a). Waytz et al. (2010a) measured anthropomorphism with a set of human characteristics and with additional functional, non-anthropomorphic traits “to dissociate anthropomorphism from dispositional attribution more generally and to ensure that differences in anthropomorphism did not merely reflect differences in scale use” (Waytz et al., 2010a, p. 229). The selection of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic corporate brand traits that are in line with IDAQ is based mostly on the study by Podnar and Melewar (2010) and on several other studies (Delbaere et al., 2011; Zlotowski et al., 2011).
Identification with corporate brands

Urika Tuštej and Klement Podnar

2014). The result is a set of five uniquely human (anthropomorphic) and five functional, non-anthropomorphic traits. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to test if anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic brand traits form two distinct factors. The results presented in Table II show that in accordance with the findings of Waytz et al. (2010a), brand anthropomorphism can be dissociated from dispositional attribution of more general brand traits. Thus, the proposed five-item scale was proved to be a good measure for brand anthropomorphism and it showed good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91).

- Consumers’ active brand engagement measure: To measure consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on SM, an own measurement scale was developed, as consumer engagement is a rather new concept (Brodie et al., 2011) and measurement instruments for the concept are scarce (for exceptions see: Vivek, 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014). The consumer-brand engagement measurement scale bases on findings of qualitative studies conducted by Hollebeek (2011; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014) and Brodie et al. (2011; 2013) in combination with items used for measuring engagement in online and SM brand activities (Doohwang et al., 2011; Gummerus et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2012). The result was a three-item measurement scale that showed good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.85).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics and assessment of validity and reliability of measures

The hypothesised four-factor measurement model composed of corporate brand prestige, corporate brand anthropomorphism, consumer-brand identification and consumers’ active engagement in brand’s SM activities was tested with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities of four studied latent constructs are presented in Table III. The results support the prediction that studied constructs are positively related to one another (correlation coefficients are shown below the diagonal) and indicate good internal consistency with Cronbach’s alphas ranging from 0.84 to 0.91.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) software Amos 21.0 was used to perform CFA. Before conducting CFA, missing data were replaced with a model-based strategy expectation-maximisation (EM) estimation, which is one of the commonly used methods for data imputation in SEM (Hair et al., 2006). Missing data in our study are less than 5 per cent and are missing completely at random, as Little’s MCAR test is not significant (p = 0.139). Therefore, non-biased estimations of missing values using the EM algorithm (Hair et al., 2006) are expected. Data also do not violate the assumption of normal multivariate distribution.

Maximum likelihood method was used to estimate the hypothesised model. The results indicate that the hypothesised measurement model fits the observed data well. First, different goodness-of-fit indices show a good fit between the proposed model and the data (CMIN/df = 1.504, CFI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.012, RMSEA = 0.045). Although the chi-square statistic is significant (which is usual with sample size of 250 and models with more than 30 parameters), overall fit statistics suggest that the estimated model reproduces the sample covariance matrix very well.

Second, the results show evidence of construct validity of the proposed measurement model. Based on the parameters displayed in Table IV and following Hair et al. (2006) guidelines, we can support convergent, as well as discriminant and nomological, validities of our measures. First, all standardised factor loadings are statistically significant and range from 0.673 to 0.884. Most of the estimates – except for one linking consumer engagement to item 3 in the CBE measure – fall above the more conservative 0.7 cut-off for convergent validity confirmation. Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) range from 61 per cent for CBI to 67 per cent for BA and exceeds the 50 per cent threshold with all constructs. Finally, composite reliabilities (CRs) for all constructs range from 0.851 for brand prestige to 0.910 for brand anthropomorphism and exceeds the 0.7 standard that suggests adequate construct reliability. To test discriminant validity, we compared the AVE estimates for each construct with the inter-construct squared correlations. As all AVE estimates are greater than the corresponding inter-construct squared correlation estimates in Table II (above the diagonal), discriminant validity for all measured constructs can be confirmed. Finally, nomological validity of the proposed measurement model can be supported because all constructs – as predicted – are positively related to one another.

Because all constructs were measured using only one method (self-reports obtained through an online survey), we also tested the model for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We used a common latent factor to capture the common variance among all observed variables in the model. We compared the unconstrained common latent factor model with a fully zero constrained common latent factor model. The chi-square difference between these two models came to be insignificant, indicating that common method variance did not bias the results.

4.2 Testing main effects among concepts

As the proposed measurement model was consistent with the data, we could use it to estimate the hypothesised model shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand trait</th>
<th>Anthropomorphic brand trait</th>
<th>Nonanthropomorphic brand trait</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-conscious</td>
<td>0.749</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociable</td>
<td>0.918</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>0.765</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has good intentions</td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>0.624</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durable</td>
<td>0.691</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good quality-price ratio</td>
<td>0.523</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>0.534</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient</td>
<td>0.661</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The hypothesised theoretical model includes three exogenous latent variables (corporate brand prestige, corporate brand anthropomorphism, and consumer-brand identification) and one endogenous variable (consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on SM). Consumer-brand identification is explained through corporate brand prestige and corporate brand anthropomorphism, while consumers’ active engagement in brand activities on SM is explained through all three exogenous variables. The proposed model was tested with SEM using Amos 21.0. Maximum likelihood method was used to estimate the proposed model. First, the overall fit to the proposed model was evaluated. The results show that the hypothesised model fits the data well. Different goodness-of-fit indices show a good fit between the proposed model and the data (CMIN/df = 1.504, CFI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.012, RMSEA = 0.045) and suggest that the estimated model reproduces the sample covariance matrix very well.

Second, the interpretation of parameter estimates reveals specific effects among concepts in the model. Results presented in Figure 2 show that all main influences proposed in H1–H3 are statistically significant. As predicted in H1, BP positively influences CBI, and the influence can be defined as moderately strong (γ = 0.34, p < 0.001). As predicted in H2, the BA also leads to higher CBI, and its influence is even stronger (γ = 0.49, p < 0.001). Both predictors jointly explain more than a half (55 per cent) of variance of CBI. These results are also in line with H3 showing that CBI positively and strongly affects CBE on SM (γ = 0.54, p < 0.001). BP, BA and CBI explain more than a third (35 per cent) of variance of CBE on SM.

### 4.3 Testing mediating effects among concepts

To fully support H3, we tested if CBI mediates the effect of BP and BA on CBE in a three-step test. First, a structural model without the mediating variable (CBI) was tested for
4.4 Testing alternative models

The results show that the proposed theoretical model fits the data well and that the relations among concepts are in line with the proposed theoretical findings. We nonetheless created two alternative models with a different configuration of hypothesised relations and tested if the data fits them better or equally well. In line with Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), in the first alternative model (Alternative Model 1), the roles of the antecedent variables and the focal dependent variable (CBI) were reversed. In the second alternative model (Alternative Model 2), we additionally reversed the role of CBE on SM so that CBI and CBE were treated as predictors and BA and BP were treated as consequences. If our theory holds, the data fit of these two alternative models should be worse compared to our hypothesised model. Following this logic, we tested two alternative models with SEM. The results presented in Table VI show that the overall data fit of the alternative models was worse compared to the fit of our hypothesised models. The comparison of chi-square statistics confirmed that the hypothesised model fits the data significantly better compared to each of the alternative models.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study provides relevant insights into the growing body of research on consumer-brand identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Thomson et al., 2005). By focussing on consumers’ relationships with a corporate brand, the study adds to the broader field of corporate-level branding and marketing (Balmer, 1995; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer, 2011; Podnar, 2015).

The main contribution of this research can be found in proposing and empirically testing the theoretical model of consumers’ identification with a corporate brand. This study supports the notion that strong and favourable corporate brands are companies’ vital assets in maintaining ongoing relationships with various stakeholder groups and networks (Balmer, 1995; 2001a; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer, 2011).

Table V Mediation effects test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Direct effect (without mediator)</th>
<th>Indirect effect (with mediator)</th>
<th>Mediation effect</th>
<th>Sobel test (t-statistics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BP → CBI → CBE</td>
<td>0.32 (3.719)**</td>
<td>0.06 (0.657)</td>
<td>Full mediation</td>
<td>3,444**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA → CBI → CBE</td>
<td>0.20 (2.285)*</td>
<td>0.03 (0.180)</td>
<td>Full mediation</td>
<td>3,948**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Statistically significant at p < 0.05; and **Statistically significant at p < 0.001

Table VI Comparison of proposed hypothesized model with alternative models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$(df)</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized model</td>
<td>169.958 (113)</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Model 1</td>
<td>182.330 (116)</td>
<td>0.949</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>12.372 (1), p = 0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Model 2</td>
<td>181.992 (114)</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>12.034 (1), p = 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It has been shown that corporate brands have a vital role in building not only strong relations with their employees but also strong and close identity-based relationships with their external stakeholders, namely, consumers. Specifically, the study shows that consumers’ identification with a corporate brand is stronger when consumers perceive the corporate brand as more prestigious and more humanlike. The study also establishes the positive effect of consumers’ identification with a corporate brand on higher active CBE on SM. Some key contributions of this study can be summed up as follows.

First, our study complements previously inconsistent findings about the relationship between brand prestige and consumer-brand identification. The results support previous findings that confirmed the positive influence of higher brand prestige on consumers’ identification with the brand (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Currás-Pérez et al., 2009) and oppose findings that did not support this influence (Ahearne et al., 2005; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). This finding supports that not only employees (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Fuller et al., 2006; Podnar, 2011) but also consumers identify with a corporate brand stronger when they perceive its identity as more prestigious. The established positive influence of corporate brand prestige on consumers’ identification is in line with the social identity theory (Abrams and Hogg, 2004), proposing that individuals are keener to identify with the categories that help them maintain and enhance positive self-esteem. Our study thus confirms that because of their symbolic value, prestigious corporate brands can be used for self-expressive purposes. Moreover, when consumers perceive a specific corporate brand as more prestigious than others, the propensity that they will perceive and feel this brand as a part of their self, becomes higher. Thus, it is vital for a company to invest an effort in the exceptional quality of its products and in their self, becomes higher. Thus, it is vital for a company to invest an effort in the exceptional quality of its products and in the maintenance of a superior public image of the corporate brand to entice consumers’ identification with this brand.

Second, this research empirically examines the relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand anthropomorphism. The finding that corporate brand anthropomorphism positively influences consumer-brand identification corresponds with Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) who proposed that when defining antecedents of CBI, one should also consider the ties that bind consumers to brands. Brand anthropomorphism was already suggested to play a vital role in establishing close, humanlike relationships between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998; Puzakova et al., 2009; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012). The results of our study demonstrate that corporate brand anthropomorphism has a vital role in building close and identity-based relationships between consumers and anthropomorphised corporate brands. By establishing that even weak forms of anthropomorphism influence consumers’ cognitions, emotions and behaviours, our study adds to the growing research on anthropomorphism in cognitive psychology (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010b). Therefore, this study adds to the concept of not only consumer-brand identification but also brand anthropomorphism, which is until now regarded as being insufficiently explored (Puzakova et al., 2009; Brown, 2010; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Hart et al., 2013). Of a special importance is also the valid and reliable measure of corporate brand anthropomorphism. It was confirmed that corporate brand anthropomorphism can be measured in the same way as anthropomorphism of other non-human entities, such as animals, natural phenomena and technological devices (Waytz et al., 2010a).

Finally, our study supports the notion that consumers’ identification can derive from brand’s role as a commonly shared cultural symbol (McCracken, 1986; Escalas and Bettman, 2003) and from direct interactions between consumers and brands (Belk, 1988; Park et al., 2013). We confirm this notion by using our own unique measuring instrument that measures the extent to which a consumer perceives and/or feels the oneness with a specific corporate brand as a unique social unit and as a social symbol that is commonly shared among a group of individuals. The results confirm the validity and reliability of the proposed instrument that measures the specific nature of CBI in the context of
relationships that can occur between the consumer and the brand. Thus, our study provides empirical support for previous proposals (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Podnar, 2015) that corporate brands have two important identity functions: they can be objects of personal and social identification.

5.2 Limitations and directions for future research
Although this study offers relevant new insights on the understanding of the process of consumers’ identification with corporate brands, it is not without limitations. The first refers to the context of the study. The initial data for the study were gathered for different types of brands including corporate and product brands. The exclusion of responses for product brands resulted in a smaller sample (n = 249), which brings some deficiencies for further comparisons among brand types and brand categories. The data were gathered in one country only. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to replicate the study on an even broader set of exclusively corporate brands. A bigger sample of corporate brands including companies offering products and services in different brand categories would enable further comparisons of the established influences. Specifically, a bigger sample would enable testing for further moderating effects of different types of corporate brands, namely, monolithic and endorsed brands. Further, a comparison of influences on consumer-brand identification between a corporate brand and company’s product brands would make a beneficial contribution to an even deeper understanding of relationships consumers can form with particular brands. Further research in other markets would additionally validate the results of this study.

Second, although the study confirmed that corporate brand prestige positively influences consumer-brand identification, we should consider the results of previous studies (Ahearne et al., 2005; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) that did not find support for this influence. Therefore, it would be beneficial to make further investigation into potential moderating variables that cause differences in the influence of brand prestige on consumer-brand identification.

Third, our study found that corporate brand anthropomorphism positively influences consumer-brand identification. Since As the research on brand anthropomorphism is still in its infancy (Puzakova et al., 2009; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012), a measure for the concept had to be developed anew. Although the measure of corporate brand anthropomorphism was found to be reliable and valid, further research is needed to additionally validate this measuring instrument. Further research should additionally test the role of brand anthropomorphism in the context of other close relationships between consumers and brands and make additional support for the finding that brand anthropomorphism is an antecedent of consumer-brand anthropomorphism and not of other consequences of CBI.

Fourth, our study confirmed that consumer-brand identification influences consumers’ active CBE on SM. However, the relation between consumer-brand identification and consumer engagement should be attentively explored in further research. Our study focussed only on one special form of consumer engagement. However, further research should consider that consumer-brand engagement was established to be a multidimensional construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek, 2009) and that it can under different sets of circumstances take a part as an antecedent and a consequence of close, identity-based relationships consumers form with brands (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Therefore, further research should test which forms and/or dimensions of consumer-brand engagement influence consumer-brand identification and which can be defined as its consequences.

5.3 Managerial implications
Meaningful and long-term relationships that consumers voluntarily build with brands represent a significant competitive advantage for the company. According to Brodie et al. (2011; 2013), consumer-brand engagement should be the focus of corporate strategies and brand management directives in current interactive and dynamic environments. Our study shows that one way of getting consumers to engage actively into activities of corporations on SM could be by strengthening consumer-brand identification. Consumers who perceive and feel a corporate brand as a part of their self, are more likely to follow this brand on various SM, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, they are more willing to share the information published by the corporate brand, and are more inclined to check SM platforms to see what others think about this brand. Therefore, the segment of identified consumers is a worthwhile target that adds much to the positive brand image co-construction in digital environments. As highlighted by de Chernatony (2001), a brand is a brand regardless of its environment, but what is different in digital environments is the way the brand essence is executed. Because of the possibility of an active participation of consumers in co-creating corporate brand identity in SM settings, it is vital to know with whom to collaborate and participate. The consumers, who perceive a brand as a part of their self, are a valuable target, as they will voluntarily engage more actively in brand activities on SM and will consequently help co-create an image of a brand on this participative channel. From the corporate brand identity management perspective, it is worthwhile that engaging communication with the most identified consumers takes place online so that also newcomers and lurkers see that the fans of the company on SM take an active part in its activities. On the basis of this study, it could be suggested that by managing SM communication channels, chief executives, brand managers and other communication strategists should take a special care for the segment of consumers who identify with a brand. They should react on their activities consistently and attentively, they should inform them first about the novelities and specialities, as well as about potential changes or delicate information. If starting with SM communications anew, it would be advisable to target most identified consumers first and then spread the target group on those who are less inclined to the brand.

As consumer-brand identification influences various desired consumer behaviours and their positive attitude towards the corporate brand and other company’s brands, CBI has become a desired strategic direction. Therefore, it has become crucial for corporate brands to act as symbols that consumers can perceive and/or feel as a part of their identity. Although consumer-brand identification should be treated as a relationship that cannot be unilaterally imposed by companies (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), some corporate brands are more likely to be perceived as entities with which consumer can and do identify. The findings of this
study show that consumer’s identification with a corporate brand is stronger when the brand is perceived as more prestigious and humanlike. From the corporate brand identity management point of view, this finding implies that first, corporate brands should show their human character. Corporate brands should clearly show what they stand for, who they are and who stands behind them, they should strive for active, responsive and humanlike interactions with consumers and should not be afraid to express their feelings and mistakes, which makes them even more authentic and humanlike. Second, corporate brand management should take special effort also in retaining the exceptional quality of its products and maintaining superior public image of a corporate brand to stimulate stronger consumers’ identification.

References


Further reading


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