



Exploring the Antecedents and Brand Avoidance as the Outcome, of Identity Incongruity

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ABSTRACT

One of the leading causes of brand avoidance relates to the incongruence between consumers' self-image and brands' images. While previous researchers made recommendations concerning the antecedents of identity incongruity, their recommendations were based on either speculation or on individual measurement items included in larger (unrelated) constructs. This paper addresses this research gap by establishing the antecedents, and brand avoidance as the outcome, of identity incongruity. The link to the study questionnaire was sent by one of South Africa's leading cellular service providers by means of SMS messages to their customers, inviting them to participate in the study. Results from 276 fully completed questionnaires show, similar to previous studies, a strong relationship between identity incongruity and brand avoidance. Unlike previous research we established that both inauthenticity and brand image predict identity incongruity, but found no relationships between identity incongruity and negative reference groups, deindividuation, and family influence. The study accordingly identified the actual antecedents practitioners should focus on when trying to minimise the negative consequences of brand avoidance due to identity incongruity.

Keywords: Brand Avoidance, Identity Incongruity, Brand Image, Inauthenticity, Negative Reference Groups, Deindividuation, Family Influences
JEL Classifications: M300, M310

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid increase in the availability and popularity of the internet and social media has made it increasingly easy for consumers to share their brand views and experiences (Abro et al., 2020; Curina et al., 2021; Kucuk, 2018; Khan et al., 2019). This trend is important to take note of since not only do consumers consider online and social media content in their decision making (Abro et al., 2020), they are more likely to share negative experiences and views than positive ones (Abro et al., 2020) and will be more likely to take further actions based on negative experiences than would be the case with positive experiences (Pinto and Brandão, 2021). In fact, it has been established that negative online reviews have a bigger effect on reduced sales, than positive reviews have on increased sales (Kucuk, 2018). Negative online and social media word-of-mouth (potentially by only a single person) thus not only hurt brands' reputations, it could also result in current

and potential customers evading the brand, thereby leading to a loss in revenue and profits (Abro et al., 2020; Kähr et al., 2016). Thus, investigating the negative relationships with brands and by forming a greater understanding why consumers avoid brands provides practitioners with insights why customers end brand relationships (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009).

Despite the growing research interest in negative brand relationships (e.g. Abro et al., 2020; Berndt et al., 2019; Hegner et al., 2017; Mostert et al., 2021; Odoom et al., 2019), a broad range of research fields (i.e. anti-brand community; services marketing; and brand relationship) have called for greater insights into negative customer-brand relationships (Zarantonello et al., 2016). This need is imminent as advocated by Kucuk (2018): "it is urgent to understand how consumer negativity influences market value mechanisms as markets are being exposed to increasing amounts of consumer negativity and hate daily".

Considering the three most prominent predictors (i.e. customer-brand experiences, moral incongruity and identity incongruity) of brand avoidance (e.g. Berndt et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2009a; Odoom et al., 2019) and brand hate (e.g. Hashim and Kasana, 2019; Hegner et al., 2017; Pinto and Brandão, 2021; Zarantonello et al., 2018), a number of recent studies (Hashim and Kasana, 2019; Hegner et al., 2017; Islam et al., 2019) suggest that identity incongruity (also called symbolic incongruity) in particular warrants further exploration. This view is supported by the belief that consumers' self-congruity (the extent to which the self-image matches the brand image) influences both their purchase and post-purchase behaviour (Sirgy, 2018). Studying the influence of the self-concept in particular is important since "the greater the match between the brand-user image/personality and consumers' self-concept the greater the chance that consumers will be satisfied with the brand, will feel trust for the company behind the brand, will feel committed to repurchase the same brand, and will promote the brand to others" (Sirgy, 2018:200). Thus, consumers often buy products purely due to the perceived match between the self and brand images, to reflect, or to enhance their self-images (Islam et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2020; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019). The converse is also true: consumers will refrain from buying brands due to the incongruence between the self and brand images (Lin et al., 2020).

Whereas previous studies considered identity incongruity as one of the predictors of brand avoidance (e.g. Curina et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2017; Odoom et al., 2019), they did not consider the antecedents leading to identity incongruity. Instead these studies simply included some of the conceptual antecedents suggested by Lee et al. (2009a) and Lee et al. (2009b) without establishing whether these hypothesised antecedents do in fact lead to identity incongruity. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by expanding our understanding of identity incongruity by firstly determining the relationship between identity incongruity and brand avoidance, and secondly to determine the antecedents leading to identity incongruity.

The paper contributes by being the first to explore the antecedents leading to identity incongruity by also establishing the relationship of identity incongruity (as a single predictor) of brand avoidance. Secondly, we add to the limited research on the management of negative brand relationships (Kähr et al., 2016). Finally, since developing economies are characterised by their differences in markets, buying patterns and economic forces compared to developed countries (Khan et al., 2019; Khan and Lee, 2014; Odoom et al., 2019), our study contributes by exploring the antecedents of identity incongruity as well as brand avoidance from a developing country perspective (i.e. South Africa).

We structure the paper as follows: first we position the research within current literature insights. Next the hypotheses are formulated, the research methodology is discussed and the results are reported. The paper concludes with a discussion and theoretical implications, managerial implications, listing the study's limitations, and recommending future research opportunities.

2. RESEARCH GAP AND POSITIONING

While a number of research studies considered identity incongruity as one of the dimensions of brand avoidance (e.g. Curina et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2017; Odoom et al., 2019), they did not consider the specific *antecedents* of identity incongruity. The concern with published research on brand avoidance thus lies therein that researchers include Lee et al.'s (2009a; 2009b) conceptual suggestions (based on qualitative research) of the *antecedents* influencing the predictors of brand avoidance as well as brand hate (i.e. experiential, identity, moral, deficit-value, and advertising incongruity) as fact, without questioning whether the conceptual antecedents do in fact form the basis for these predictors. This leads to a significant research gap for two reasons. First, by not establishing the antecedents of identity incongruity, marketers will not be able to pinpoint where changes in strategies are needed to address brand avoidance due to identity incongruity. Secondly, some researchers made claims as to how identity incongruity should be addressed by offering recommendations regarding the antecedents of identity incongruity without specifically empirically establishing that the proposed antecedents in fact predict identity incongruity.

For example, Knittel et al. (2016) discusses negative reference groups, inauthenticity and deindividuation as contributing antecedents when conceptualising identity incongruity, yet does not consider these (potential) contributing antecedents in their research design, but rather consider identity incongruity as a "holistic" concept. By following this approach, marketers are robbed of insights that could pinpoint exactly where resources and strategies should be focused to address the negative effects of identity incongruity. Similarly, Hegner et al. (2017, p. 17) suggest that identity incongruence occurs because the brand "incorporates negative symbolic meaning (lack of authenticity, representation of an undesired self, loss of individuality)" or due to the brand being associated with negative reference groups. The authors (Hegner et al., 2017, p. 18) then proceed to make recommendations that marketers should "closely monitor target groups' needs and wants, as well as negative associations with the brand to avoid symbolic incongruity" and furthermore that "integrating positive reference groups or being an authentic brand could help establishing identity congruence with consumers" without (measuring and) establishing whether these *antecedents* predict symbolic incongruity.

Furthermore, in the measure (using five items) of their identity incongruity construct, Odoom et al. (2019, p. 590) included three items that are arguably rather the *antecedents* of identity incongruity (i.e. "The brand has a connection with a negative reference group"; "The authenticity of the brand cannot be identified"; and "The brand is too common on the market" – inauthenticity) than measuring identity incongruity itself. These authors (Odoom et al., 2019, p. 594) then proceed to make specific managerial recommendations based on the antecedents of identity incongruity (i.e. "relating to authenticity ... and reference groups"), which were mere items (as opposed to constructs) included in the identity incongruity measure, and thus did not measure these as standalone antecedents of identity incongruity. Similarly, in their conceptualisation (and measure) of identity incongruity, Curina et al. (2021, p. 225) also

included items that are arguably rather the *antecedents* of identity incongruity (i.e. “The brand is linked to groups I cannot identify with” and “The typical user is perceived as being inauthentic”) than measuring identity incongruity itself. These authors then proceed to make recommendations based on these individual scale items, instead of the construct (identity incongruity) they were measuring (Curina et al., 2021. p. 230).

As a final example, in the recent study by Lin et al. (2020), two of the antecedents of identity incongruity (i.e. negative reference groups and dindividualisation) were considered as separate predictors of brand avoidance, in addition to identity incongruity (as a standalone construct). The results from their study, indicating negative reference groups and dindividualisation were not related to brand avoidance, whereas identify incongruity was, is probably then not too surprising when consider that negative reference groups and dindividualisation have been established as antecedents of identity incongruity (e.g. Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b), and not brand avoidance.

This study accordingly sets out to address this gap by exploring whether conceptual suggestions of the antecedents of identity incongruity (Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b) are truly predictors thereof.

3. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

3.1. Self-congruity

The self-concept refers to individuals’ thoughts and feelings (in essence, their attitudes and perceptions) towards themselves (Hawkins et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; Solomon, 2019) and comprises a number of distinct self-image dimensions, namely the actual, ideal, social and ideal social self-images (Hawkins et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; Sirgy, 2018). The actual self-image signifies how people view themselves (“who I am now”), whereas the ideal self-image represents how they would like to view themselves – or their aspirations in terms of “who I would like to be” (Hawkins et al., 2019; Sirgy, 2018). The social self refers to how people think they are viewed by others (“how I am seen by others”), and the ideal social-self representing how they would want to be seen by others (Hawkins et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; Sirgy, 2018). A special form of the ideal social self has recently emerged, namely the “social media self” or “digital self”, referring to how people want others to see them through the lives they create and portray online and via social media (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; Solomon, 2019).

Products and services have also been linked to the self-concept through Belk’s extended self theory, defined as “the self plus possessions”, inferring that consumers “define themselves in part by their possessions” (Hawkins et al., 2019. p. 435). This implies that products and services may not merely form part of consumers’ self-concepts, they form fundamental parts of their self-identity (Hawkins et al., 2019).

According to self-congruity theory, consumers compare their brand image perceptions with their own self-concepts (Sirgy, 2018),

and purchase those products that matches some aspects of the self (Solomon, 2019). High self-congruity (also called cognitive matching) occurs when the comparison between the consumer’s self-concept and the brand-user image corresponds, whereas a discrepancy between the two is regarded as representing low self-congruity (Sirgy, 2018; Solomon, 2019). Stated differently: buying products that match the self, make consumers feel good (Solomon, 2019). According to Sirgy (2018:200), “actual self-congruity is motivated by the need for self-consistency, ideal self-congruity is motivated by the need for self-esteem, social self-congruity by the need for social consistency, and ideal social self-congruity by the need for social approval”.

The significance of consumer self-image, form a marketing point of view, is underscored when considering that product and service buying decisions are influenced by the self-image dimensions (Sirgy, 2018). In fact, these dimensions “serve as a standard of comparison or referent point in evaluating the relative attractiveness of a brand-user image or brand personality” (Sirgy, 2018:199). The comparison between the self-images and the brand images, accordingly, leads to corresponding congruities that reflect the fit between the different self-image dimensions and the personality the brand portrays (or brand-user image) (Sirgy, 2018). High self-congruity occurs when the comparison between the brand-user image and the consumer’s self-concept corresponds, whereas a discrepancy between the two is regarded as representing low self-congruity (Sirgy, 2018). Thus, consumers would not even consider a brand that does not speak to at least one of the self-images. This is rooted in what Solomon (2019) refers to as the “avoidance self”, referring to consumers’ desire to distance themselves from products that do not reflect them, and for which they “go out of [their] way not to buy products” they do not associate with. From the discussion it is clear that incongruity between the self and a brand can, and probably will, result in consumers avoiding the brand.

3.2. Brand Avoidance

It has been postulated that consumers will not buy brands because they cannot afford it, due to the unavailability thereof (called non-choice) or due to the deliberate decision not to buy the brand (called anti-choice) (Hogg, 1998). Although consumers can choose to react favourably to salient brands based on perceived psychological benefits (Boshoff and Berndt, 2018), they can also decide to, deliberately, avoid these brands due to a host of reasons, including negative symbolic, experiential and functional associations with the brand (Keller, 1993). Brand avoidance can accordingly be defined as the conscious choice made by customers to actively reject a brand (Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b) in an effort to escape undesired consequences (Abro et al., 2020). Emerging research into brand avoidance proposed a number of predictors of brand avoidance, namely experiential incongruity, deficit-value incongruity, identity incongruity and moral incongruity (Lee, 2008; Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b; Mostert et al., 2021; Odoom et al., 2019) and more recently advertising incongruity (Knittel et al., 2016). This study is devoted to gaining a deeper understanding regarding the influence of identity incongruity and its antecedence on brand avoidance.

3.3. Identity Incongruity

Identity incongruity, also called symbolic incongruity (Hashim and Kasana, 2019; Lee et al., 2009b) or identity avoidance (Curina et al., 2021; Knittle et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2009a) occurs when brands fail to meet consumers' symbolic identity requirements or when the consumer's self-image does not match the brand's image, thereby resulting in them avoiding such brands in an attempt to maintain their desired self-image (Berndt et al., 2019; Hogg and Banister, 2001; Khan and Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2009a; van Delzen, 2014; Zarantonello et al., 2018). The notion of identity incongruity is rooted in the belief that consumers use brands to express their own self-identity, often in an attempt to associate (or distance) themselves from others through the brands they use. In fact, it has been established that consumers not only define themselves by the brands they use (Belk, 1988), but also that they use brands to enhance their self-image (Odoom et al., 2019) or to create ideal social, personal and cultural identities (Hogg and Banister, 2001). Research furthermore shows that brands have the ability to cognitively foster shared symbolic meaning during the social communication process (Dittmar, 1992) that is used by individuals during the purchase experience to establish and preserve their sense of self (Hogg et al., 2009). Thus, by using brands as a meaningful expression of identity, consumers seek to conserve their self-concept by consuming brands that are congruent with the desired self (Sirgy, 1982). Conversely, consumers avoid brands that are perceived as having contradictory values or that evoke feelings of disassociation with the self-concept (Islam et al., 2019). It is thus not surprising that a number of previous studies (e.g. Berndt et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2009a; Lin et al., 2020; Odoom et al., 2019; Pinto and Brandão, 2021) support the notion that identity incongruity leads to brand avoidance. It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H₁: Identity incongruity positively relates to brand avoidance.

Brand avoidance researchers identified five antecedents of identity incongruity, namely, negative reference groups, inauthenticity, deindividualisation, brand image and family influences (Knittle et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b; Mostert et al., 2021; Odoom et al., 2019).

3.4. Negative Reference Groups

From the earlier discussion on the self-concept it was clear that consumers also have a social identity. More formally defined, social identity refers to "that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel, 1982:24). It has accordingly been postulated that people choose to associate, endorse or reject certain brands by considering particular predisposed reference groups (Escalas and Bettmann, 2003; Hogg et al., 2009) simply because they are highly susceptible to peer acceptance and group belonging (Hammerl et al., 2016). Such influences even spill into consumer behaviour research where it is generally accepted that reference groups directly influence consumer actions and their decision-making (Hammerl et al., 2016; Hawkins et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; White and Dahl, 2006; Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė, 2015). Consumers may thus, contrary to their normal behaviour, behave in a certain way to conform to a group's expectations (Hawkins et al., 2019;

Khan et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019). The power of a group over an individual can accordingly act as a significant antecedent in behavioural matching and conformity to social norms during the purchasing process (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Khan et al., 2019). It is thus not surprising that consumers associate with positive reference groups to maximise positive feedback and project a socially acceptable self-image (Levy, 1959). The opposite is also true, with Keller (1993) and Khan et al. (2019) establishing that consumers' assessments of brands in relation to fixed beliefs about members of a different reference group, labelled negative stereotyping, equally motivates individuals' classification of their ideal self. Consequently, consumers will explicitly avoid those brands associated with negative or dissociative reference groups for the purpose of self-concept preservation (Berger and Heath, 2007; Khan et al., 2019; White and Dahl, 2006). It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H₂: Negative reference groups positively relates to identity incongruity.

3.5. Inauthenticity

Consumers use brands to craft an authentic self by attributing authenticity to goods and services during the consumption process (Napoli et al., 2014). This implies that consumers may use brands solely to add desired meaning to the individual self-concept (Wolter et al., 2016). Consumers are inclined to judge brands as being less authentic when there is one or more irregularities in a brand's narrative (Johnson et al., 2015), usually occurring when there is an overt discrepancy between the brand's image and the brand identity firms intend to portray, resulting in consumers perceiving the brand to be incapable of communicating or delivering desired symbolic values or meanings (Lee, 2008) and as a consequence, elicit avoidance behaviour. Brands may furthermore be perceived as inauthentic or "ordinary" when imitating competitor offerings (Vann, 2006). Therefore, a lack of distinctive characteristics and qualities through mass market adoption and generalisation of typical users contribute to conveying a message of fake brand promise (Liu et al., 2015). This, in turn, inevitably leads to consumer disidentification as a result of symbolic incongruities (Lee et al., 2009a). By avoiding the brands evaluated as being inauthentic, individuals are able to separate themselves from their undesired self and maintain their individual identity (Lee et al., 2009a; Sirgy, 1982). It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H₃: Inauthenticity positively relates to identity incongruity.

3.6. Deindividualisation

Loss of identity can also manifest in the individual self-concept when deindividualisation occurs through the routine consumption of mainstream brands (Lee et al., 2009a), implying consumers will refrain from buying a brand that will make them too similar to others, thereby losing their individuality (Lin et al., 2020). The inherent process of deindividualisation, which represents a psychological state of self-definition, gives way to the wilful exclusion or separation from the self-concept in contrast to a cognitive inclusion with one's desired-self (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002). Individuals consciously view a brand as being misrepresentative when the consumption of the goods or services impedes with their sense of self-identity (Josiassen, 2011) or makes

the consumer feel unimportant (Kähr et al., 2016). Therefore, individuals interpret the prospect of consuming mainstream brands to be a representation of an unappealing brand promise as the value of developing a unique self-identity becomes ever more pertinent (Lee, 2008). As brands increase in popularity, their ability to create a unique self-identity and provide a meaningful contribution to the individual self-concept, inevitably decrease (Wolter et al., 2016). To combat this perceived loss of individuality, consumers choose not to conform to socially acceptable consumption patterns (Cherrier, 2009), ultimately leading to the avoidance of conventional brands in order to prevent the undermining effect on self-identity (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Lin et al., 2020). It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H₄: Deindividualisation positively relates to identity incongruity.

3.7. Brand Image

In conventional literature it is generally agreed that the cornerstone of building brands is achieved through telling a story or having a brand narrative, thereby establishing an identity that can solicit either approach or avoidance behaviours from consumers (Berry, 2000). As a result of their subjective perceptions, consumers create an image about brands based on functional (Keller, 1993), symbolic (Adjei et al., 2009; Kähr et al., 2016) and rational (Aaker, 1997) associations. Also, services use branding to overcome the characteristic of intangibility by creating a strong brand image (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). Despite the positive association aimed for, consumers will exhibit avoidance behaviour towards a brand when there is a negative congruence between the brand image and the consumer's self-image (Kähr et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2020; Sirgy, 1982). Thus, in order to protect and enhance the sense of self, consumers avoid self-degradation by rejecting brands with negative imagery (Sirgy, 1982). Stated differently, consumers will not purchase a brand if the brand's image (or the brand's personality) does not match their own identity (Islam et al., 2019; Sirgy, 2018). It is therefore hypothesised in line with Lee et al.'s (2009b) view that:

H₅: Brand image positively relates to identity incongruity.

3.8. Family Influences

Research has recognised the family as a cultural institution that fosters more significant influence on individual family members compared with other reference groups during the socialisation process (Levy and Lee, 2004; Boshoff and Berndt, 2018). It is therefore not surprising that the influence of the family on consumer decision-making has been extensively researched (Boshoff and Berndt, 2018; Wang et al., 2004). As a result of the influence of the family cohort, individual family members establish their level of association with brands by depending on the other family members as a trusted source of information (Berndt et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2004). Family members thus, by acting as an initiator or influencer, have a direct or indirect influence on behavioural patterns relating to the avoidance of certain brands (Boshoff and Berndt, 2018). The family accordingly cultivates a foundation for evaluations or learned predispositions for purchase decisions that should be in accordance with the individual's desired sense of self (Levy and Lee 2004; Coulter et al., 2003). It can therefore be hypothesised that:

H₆: Family influence positively relates to identity incongruity.

4. METHODOLOGY

Primary cross-sectional data were collected from South African cell phone users over a four-week period through electronic self-administered questionnaires hosted on Qualtrics. A hyperlink to the questionnaire was sent by a leading South African cell phone service provider to some of their customers via short message service (SMS) message. Two follow-up text message requests were sent on a bi-weekly basis inviting potential respondents to complete the questionnaire. A total of 276 questionnaires were fully completed and used for subsequent statistical analyses.

Items used to measure each construct were sourced, and adapted for the study context, from the following published research: brand avoidance (van Delzen, 2014); identity incongruity (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; van Delzen, 2014); negative reference group, inauthenticity, deindividualisation, brand image and family influence (Knittel et al., 2016; Lee, 2008; Lee et al., 2009b). Five-point Likert-type scales were used for all items (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). Two screening questions were asked to ensure that respondents personally (and not the firm they work for, nor a family member) selected their cell phone service provider, and that they have used another service provider in the past (which they will not use again in the future). Small linguistic changes were made to the questionnaire following pretesting with 30 respondents from the study population prior to conducting the main survey (Table 1 for item and construct details).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Sample Profile

More female (58.7%) than male (41.3%) respondents participated in the study. While similar percentages of respondents were either contract or non-contract (51.4% and 48.6% respectively) customers, the average monthly cell phone expenses for the two groups differed considerably, with contract customers spending on average R 612 (US \$40) per month, and non-contract customers on average R 336 (US \$22) per month. Most respondents used their cell phone service provider for more than three years, but less than five years (42.3%) or between five and 10 years (35.2%).

5.2. Validity and Reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed in SPSS AMOS (version 27) for the study's seven latent constructs. Results showed acceptable model fit (Hair et al., 2018) with $\chi^2 = 345.69$; $df = 168$; $p = 0.00$; $\chi^2/df = 2.06$; CFI = 0.97; IFI = 0.97; NFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.96; and RMSEA = 0.06. Convergent validity and reliability were assessed by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) as well as the Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and the composite reliability (CR) for each construct. All average variance extracted values, ranging between 0.54 and 0.89, exceeded the recommended ≥ 0.5 value (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), whereas all the Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability values were greater than the specified 0.7 value (Hair et al., 2018), with the Cronbach's Alpha values extending between 0.80 and 0.96, and the composite reliability values between 0.78 and 0.96. To evaluate the discriminant validity, the square root of the average variance extracted per construct was measured against the correlation

coefficients (Malhotra et al., 2017). Table 1 details the factor loading for each item together with the mean, standard deviation, AVE, CA and CR for each construct, while Table 2 indicates that the measure shows acceptable discriminate validity (Malhotra et al., 2017).

Next, we performed a structural equation model to assess the hypothesised relationships between the study constructs. Our structural model showed acceptable fit (Hair et al., 2018) with $\chi^2 = 367.52$; $df = 173$; $p = 0.00$; $\chi^2/df = 2.12$; $CFI = 0.96$; $IFI = 0.97$;

$NFI = 0.94$; $TLI = 0.96$; and $RMSEA = 0.06$. We accordingly assessed the relationships between the constructs. Table 3 details the results by showing the statistical significance (p-value), standardized regression weights (β), standard error (SE) and the hypotheses results.

From Table 3 it can be seen that identity incongruity had a strong positive relationship with brand avoidance ($P < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.750$), thereby supporting hypothesis 1. Positive relationships were also found between inauthenticity and identity incongruity ($P < 0.05$;

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Items	Mean	SD	Loading*	AVE	CA	CR
Brand avoidance	3.12	1.29		0.89	0.96	0.96
I prefer not to use Brand X in future			0.948			
I avoid using Brand X's service			0.950			
If I can help it, I will not use Brand X again			0.936			
Identity incongruity	3.18	0.99		0.76	0.91	0.91
Brand X does not reflect who I am			0.880			
The service of Brand X does not reflect who I am			0.883			
The Brand X brand does not represent who I am			0.856			
Family influence	2.63	0.99		0.85	0.94	0.95
My family cannot relate to Brand X's brand image			0.945			
My family cannot identify with Brand X's image			0.952			
Brand X does not represent my family's beliefs			0.872			
Brand image	2.75	0.98		0.85	0.94	0.95
I cannot relate to Brand X's brand image			0.880			
Brand X's brand image does not match my image			0.939			
I cannot identify with Brand X's brand image			0.948			
Negative reference groups	2.30	0.95		0.81	0.93	0.93
People who use Brand X are different compared to me			0.923			
I am not like other people who use Brand X			0.911			
I do not want others to associate me with Brand X's users			0.862			
Deindividuation	2.18	0.98		0.86	0.95	0.95
I lose some of my self-identity when using Brand X services			0.934			
My self-identity is weakened by being associated with using Brand X			0.948			
Using Brand X results in me losing my personal identity			0.900			
Inauthenticity	2.67	0.92		0.54	0.80	0.78
Brand X lacks uniqueness from its competitors			0.813			
Brand X copies its competitors			0.822			
Brand X's offers are the same as their competitors			0.543			

*Standardised factor loading

Table 2: Discriminant validity results

Factor	SQRT of the AVE ^A	Inter-construct correlation						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Brand avoidance	0.94	1						
Identity incongruity	0.87	0.68*	1					
Negative reference group	0.90	0.48*	0.48*	1				
Inauthenticity	0.74	0.40*	0.47*	0.37*	1			
Deindividualisation	0.93	0.43*	0.49*	0.72*	0.38*	1		
Brand image	0.92	0.59*	0.68*	0.62*	0.48*	0.62*	1	
Family influence	0.92	0.47*	0.61*	0.56*	0.43*	0.60*	0.77*	1

^ASQRT of AVE=Squared root of the average variance extracted; *P<0.01

Table 3: Path analysis

Constructs	β	SE	P-value	Finding
Identity incongruity → brand avoidance	0.750	0.073	<0.001	H ₁ : Supported
Negative reference group → identity incongruity	0.081	0.078	0.273	H ₂ : Not supported
Inauthenticity → identity incongruity	0.390	0.113	<0.001	H ₃ : Supported
Deindividualisation → identity incongruity	-0.034	0.071	0.646	H ₄ : Not supported
Brand image → identity incongruity	0.420	0.085	<0.001	H ₅ : Supported
Family influence → identity incongruity	0.073	0.079	0.350	H ₆ : Not supported

$\beta = 0.390$) and brand image and identity incongruity ($P < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.420$), thereby supporting hypotheses 3 and 5. However, the relationships between negative reference group and identity incongruity (H_2), deindividualisation and identity incongruity (H_4) and family influence and identity incongruity (H_6) were not supported ($P > 0.05$).

6. DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although many previous research studies into negative consumer-brand relationships established customer experience with the brand, moral incongruity and identity incongruity as predictors of brand avoidance (e.g. Berndt et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2009a; 2009b; Odoom et al., 2019), very few studies explored the antecedents of each dimension. A gap identified in literature stems from noting that researchers make recommendation regarding how identity incongruity should be reduced by offering tactics regarding the antecedents of identity incongruity without including (and measuring) the antecedents in their studies, nor establishing whether these antecedents do in fact predict identity incongruity (e.g. Curina et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2017; Knittle et al., 2016; Odoom et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to fill this gap by expanding our understanding of identity incongruity by firstly determining the relationship between identity incongruity and brand avoidance, and secondly to determine the antecedents of identity incongruity. The research insights provide marketers with very specific insights into the antecedents that do, and do not, lead to identity incongruity.

Our findings showed, similar to previous studies (Lee et al., 2009a; Lin et al., 2020; Mostert et al., 2021; Odoom et al., 2019; Pinto and Brandão, 2021), that identity incongruity is a positively related to brand avoidance. It was furthermore established that inauthenticity positively predicts identity incongruity, thereby supporting the notion that consumers will avoid brands that are viewed as being inauthentic in an effort to maintain their individual identity (Lee et al., 2009a; Sirgy, 1982). Our finding that brand image positively predict identity incongruity offers support for literature suggesting that consumers will not purchase a brand if its image is incongruent with their own identity (Islam et al., 2019; Sirgy, 2018).

Despite researchers (e.g. Curina et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2017; Odoom et al., 2019) making recommendations to practitioners concerning the influence of reference groups on brand avoidance and hate (without specifically measuring this construct in their studies), our results established that reference groups do not predict brand avoidance. Similarly, we established that deindividuation did not predict brand avoidance, therefore contradicting existing research (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Lin et al., 2020).

These finding contributes to our limited insight of the negative consumer-brand relationships (Kähr et al., 2016), in particular within a developing economy context (Khan et al., 2019; Khan and Lee, 2014; Odoom et al., 2019). It also contributes by being the first study to consider the antecedents of identity incongruity, and

by showing that some recommendations made in previous research were baseless. This research showed that only inauthenticity and brand image should be considered as antecedents of brand avoidance, and not reference groups, deindividuation, or family influence.

6.1. Managerial Implications

Considering the ease with which consumers can spread negative word-of-mouth via the internet and social media, it is imperative that brands monitor such platforms for negative sentiments (Khan et al., 2019), and also to ensure that the brand always portrays a positive image on their own digital platforms. It is also important to have a dedicated team to deal with negative social media sentiment (Hashim and Kasana, 2019), and that contingency plans are in place to ensure negative word-of-mouth is addressed as soon as possible, before it could potentially gain traction on social media. This team can also gain valuable consumer insights by monitoring social media (Hashim and Kasana, 2019), which could be shared with strategists within the firm to direct and adapt brand portrayal. Firms should take note that if negative sentiments are not adequately – and quickly – addressed, brand avoiders could become brand haters (Hashim and Kasana, 2019).

While these are general recommendations to assist marketers with dealing with brand avoidance, such strategies will probably not identify the underlying reasons for the mismatch between consumers' self-images and brand images. It is therefore recommended that brands perform research to establish their current (and potential) customers' self-concepts and to develop and position a brand image that matches those of the target market (Islam et al., 2019), thereby reducing image incongruence and accordingly brand avoidance due to identity incongruity.

Since inauthenticity predicts identity incongruity, it is imperative that service brand managers understand that consumers often use brands to add to the self-concept (Wolter et al., 2016). It is thus important to establish how the brand enhances current and potential customers' self-concepts, and to adapt current positioning strategies to be closer aligned. It is furthermore recommended that brands ensure that they always portray the same positioning across all media and platforms, since customers will view them as being inauthentic if there are irregularities in the brand's narrative (Johnson et al., 2015). By doing so, brands will also ensure that their positioning is unique and, more importantly, different from that of competitors, thereby reducing the risk of being perceived as inauthentic (Vann, 2006). In line with the above, it is essential that firms ensure that in addition to media and digital platforms, the brand is always portrayed in a positive image by all stakeholders, including employees and channel partners, since customers will reject brands with negative imagery (Sirgy, 1982). Brand managers should accordingly engage with internal and external stakeholders by means of internal marketing to explain the brand's positioning as well as to convey the importance of always ensuring the brand is portrayed in a positive light. Finally, brand managers should ensure that they are always ready to immediately respond to negative messages and sentiment in the media by means of positive public relations actions, especially through digital channels.

6.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations from our study include the use of convenience sampling. Although we had permission of a leading South African cellular service providers to collect data among their customers, the service provider was unwilling to share their customer details with us, thus preventing us from conducting a probability sampling study. Distributing SMS invitations to participate in the study to only one country further limited the generalisability of the results. Again, despite our requests that the service provider also distribute the invitation to other African countries in which they operate, they were not willing to do so. Related to the above, the composition of the respondents was skewed towards contract customers since most of the country's cell phone users are non-contract customers.

Since this was the first study to explore the antecedents of identity incongruity, future studies could consider replicating the study in more developing countries (as well as developed countries) to establish the generalisability of the results. Future research could expand our research by also considering alternative outcomes of identify incongruity, such as brand hate, brand retaliation, negative word-of-mouth, non-repurchase intent and brand switching (Curina et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2019; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Finally, future research could consider the influence of different dimensions of consumers' self-image, namely the actual, ideal, social and ideal social self-images (Hawkins et al., 2019; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019; Sirgy, 2018) on their identity incongruity behaviour and the outcomes thereof.

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