

## **The Relative Importance of Five Key Dimensions of Brand Identity and their Impact on Brand Commitment**

### **Abstract:**

The highly competitive and dynamic business environment in which brands compete for share of mind, necessitates clarity in terms of what the brand represents and the associations that the brand aspires to maintain in the mind of consumers. The identity of a brand provides the direction, purpose and meaning for the brand, and is central to a brand's strategic vision. Brand identity is described in this paper as the cornerstone of brand strategy and brand building, and is critical to the long-term sustainability of any brand.

Aligning the constructs of brand identity, brand image, and brand commitment and researching their inter-relationship, formed the central tenet of this research, which is based on the premise that the creation of a strong brand identity is a fundamental requirement for building a strong brand. The central focus of the research related to the relative importance of brand identity as a driver of brand commitment. Commitment is defined, according to Hofmeyr and Rice (2000: 21), as being psychological rather than behavioural, and implies a cognitive process involving thoughts and feelings, whereas traditional brand loyalty implies behavioural characteristics and actions.

The brand identity construct presented in the research, was conceptualised as comprising five key dimensions, namely, the reputation of the brand, the relevance of the brand, the relationship with the brand, the performance of the brand, and the personality of the brand. Central to the conceptual understanding of both commitment and the brand identity construct, are the keywords *involvement* and *associations*. The writer postulated that the fundamental starting point for involvement and commitment, and the subsequent relationships that develop, is the identity of the brand. Brand identity is at the centre of the brand's essence, and comprises associations and perceptions of benefits, attributes and emotions

The research study extended across eight industry segments, namely, cosmetics, cellphone service providers, financial services, Internet service providers, haircare providers, business schools, tertiary institutions, and commercial security companies. Data from six of these industry segments, totalling 1927 respondents, was processed through the Conversion Model, the world's leading model for measuring commitment. The quantitative research was supported by additional qualitative research

which comprised seven focus groups, one mini focus group and fifteen depth interviews. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research were then compared and conclusions drawn.

The brand identity model presented by the writer highlighted the relative importance of each of the five dimensions, and the research concluded from the findings of the empirical study, that consumers view brands holistically, and use heuristics when making brand decisions. Brand identity associations comprise a *clustering* of these five key dimensions, and the relative importance of each of these dimensions is likely to influence the level of commitment to the brand, particularly when the consumer faces a purchasing decision.

## **Introduction**

In order to survive, a brand needs a clear vision, giving a well-defined sense of direction (De Chernatony, 1999:166). A clear vision implies a strategic focus on the part of the brand strategist and the organisation as a whole, in creating and developing its brand identity. Brand identity may therefore be further described as a rich and deep construct that is required in order to understand and build brands, in contrast with the more tactical and subjective approaches related to brand positioning and subsequent brand image formulation by consumers.

This paper therefore questions the lack of importance and limited formal research conducted in the field of brand identity, based on the premise that brand identity is the cornerstone of brand building. If this is indeed true, and brand identity is the responsibility of the brand strategist, then it is logical to assume that more emphasis should be placed on brand identity research as the fundamental starting point for brand building and brand management.

## **Review of Brand Literature**

According to Urde (1999:122), the brand in combination with other assets and competencies within the company, can be braided together into a brand identity through a process of value creation and meaning creation. This brand identity is experienced by customers as valuable and unique, and becomes difficult for competitors to imitate. Furthermore, in this way, the brand identity itself can become a competitive advantage and expression of an intention, and the company deliberately and actively strives to manage the processes that give the brand value and meaning (Urde, 1999:122).

Consumer behaviour, according to Biel (1992), is driven by perceptions of a brand, which are described as clusters of attributes and associations that consumers connect with the brand name. These clusters of attributes and associations are referred to as the brand image and are the result of numerous interventions including advertising, word-of-mouth communication, interaction with the company and the brand itself. If the image is therefore allowed to rule, there is an obvious risk that the brand might never acquire its own identity. Hence, the emphasis of this paper is on researching the dimensions of brand identity that will ensure the creation of a favourable brand image in the mind of the consumer, which in turn, will impact positively upon consumer brand commitment.

Webster (2002c:2), states that branding allows a company to differentiate itself from the competition and, in the process, to bond with its customers to create loyalty. Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:2) postulate that the key to successful marketing is knowing what is in the consumer's mind and managing the relationship properly. This is what they describe as *commitment-led marketing*, and, according to their validated research, relates to the fact that customer satisfaction is a poor predictor of behaviour, but that commitment is an excellent predictor. Loyalty is about what consumers do, while commitment is about what consumers think and feel (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:3). Aligning the concepts of brand identity, brand image, and brand commitment, and researching their inter-relationship, forms the central argument of this research, and is based on the premise that the creation of a strong brand identity is a fundamental requirement for a successful brand. Furthermore, the writer postulates that it is the relative importance and strength of the brand identity, and not brand image, that will ultimately result in brand commitment, or lack of commitment.

To date, a number of theoretical frameworks have been suggested by both academics and practitioners in an attempt to assist marketers to understand how consumers think about and respond to brands, therefore enabling them to implement effective consumer-centred marketing activities and gain sustainable differentiation (Kapferer, 1992; De Chernatony *et al.*, 1993; Keller, 1993). Brand identity is at the centre of the brand's essence, surrounded by benefits, attributes and emotions (Martin, 1998:2). Aaker (1996:68) defines brand identity as a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organisation members. Furthermore, according to Aaker (1996:68), brand identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits.

This also implies that the creation of brand awareness is the obvious first step in building a brand. Without brand awareness there is no basis for developing brand knowledge, and according to Keller (1998:87), creating brand awareness involves giving the product an identity by linking brand elements to a product category and associated purchase and consumption or usage situations.

Brand image has long been recognised by marketing academics and practitioners as an important concept in marketing. Brand image can be defined as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller, 1998:93). Brand associations according to Keller (1998:93), are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers. The strength, favourability, and uniqueness of brand associations play an important role in determining the response of the consumer to a brand. The essence of the marketing process is building a brand in the minds of consumers (Ries & Ries, 2000b:4). Davis (2000:3) concurs with this view, and states that the strongest brands in the world own a place in the consumer's mind, and when they are mentioned almost everyone thinks of the same things. Therefore, the power of a brand lies in its ability to influence purchasing behaviour, but a brand name on a package is not the same thing as a brand name in a mind (Ries & Ries, 2000b:6). In memory theory, brand awareness is therefore positioned as a vital first step in building the "bundle" of associations attached to the brand in memory, which is reflected in the research findings in this field by Stokes (1985). The more a consumer "experiences" the brand by seeing it, hearing it, or thinking about it, the more likely it is that the brand will become registered in memory. However, mere brand awareness on its own is insufficient, and is not the same thing as an impeccable value proposition (Sandberg, 2001:9). Sandberg states further that awareness of the central value is not the sum total of building the brand, but merely the first step in the process. The writer postulates that a brand represents a "promise fulfilled", and therefore needs to transcend simple awareness and embody a total experience.

The research conducted by Rossiter and Percy (1987), indicated that brand awareness does not necessarily require recall of brand name, and that the consumer may identify a brand by its corporate colours, packaging, logo or location amongst other identifying factors. Brand recognition tends to occur in stimulus-based situations, and brand recall occurs in memory-based situations.

When evaluating potential alternatives, consumers tend to use two types of information according to Schiffman and Kanuk (2003:559):

1. A "list" of brands (or models) from which they plan to make their selection (the evoked set or consideration set).
2. The criteria they will use to evaluate each brand (or model).

It can be therefore be argued, that without brand awareness occurring, brand attitude and brand image cannot be formed. However, equally relevant is the importance of brand identity as a heuristic which can affect inclusion in the consideration set, and in many instances may be sufficient in itself to determine choice from the consideration set. Brand associations based on a strong brand identity can have a positive influence on consumer choice, preferences and intention to purchase, willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, acceptance of brand extensions and recommendation of the brand to others. This is reflected in the research findings of several notable researchers (Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Cobb-Walgren & Ruble, 1995; Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Hutton, 1997; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

### **Brand Identity, Brand Associations and Brand Image**

The focal point of this research, was the analysis and evaluation of brand identity as a driver (or non-driver), of brand commitment. The point of departure therefore, started with an objective analysis of the brand identity construct.

A strong brand is the badge, emblem, and global symbol that can bestow credibility and attract instant attention in a new country, category, or industry, and it is a powerful way to stand out by being relevant to target audiences and different from the competition (Perry & Wisnom, 2002:3). Perry and Wisnom (2002:3) argue that identity and image go hand in hand, but that the two terms are often completely misused and misunderstood and journalists, agencies, and consultants have used these terms to mean just about anything. Part of this dilemma is caused by human nature, as consumers often think of brands as being synonymous with the name of the brand's company. Brands such as Nike, Apple, Microsoft, evoke a series of thoughts, images and perceptions that permeate our conscious thoughts as *collective* impressions. It is therefore difficult to separate a name from its visual identity, or from the experience of the particular brand (Perry & Wisnom, 2002:4). They contend that, simply defined, brand identity is made up of the controllable elements of a company, product or service brand, and include the core essence, positioning, brand name, tag line, logo, messaging and experience (Perry & Wisnom, 2002:5).

Aaker defines brand identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organisation members” (Aaker, 1996:68). Aaker states further that brand identity

should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996:68).

Brand identity is viewed from the perspective of the sender, and the purpose is to specify the brand's meaning, aim and self-image (Kapferer, 1997:95). Image is both the result and interpretation thereof, and in terms of brand management, identity precedes image. Another contemporary view is that these "output model" definitions of brands are now out of date, and the more recent view is that brands are just ideas created in consumers' minds (Joy, 2001). According to Joy (2001), brands are living things created by consumers, not by organisations, and are the sum of individual experiences. Furthermore, in addition to the brand marketing efforts, the brand image will be affected by additional stimuli such as cultural background of the consumer, opinions of friends, and many other variables. Joy (2001) advocates a much more complex communication that creates an overall brand experience and that builds more sensory and effective relationships with consumers.

In summary, the brand identity needs to provide a value proposition to the consumer. This value proposition is a statement of the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provide value to the customer. An effective value proposition should lead to a brand-customer relationship and drive purchase decisions (Aaker, 1996:95).

The identity of a brand is reflected by a *holistic consumer impression*, and the relationship between the target group of consumers and the brand, is seldom based on one characteristic, but rather on a number of characteristics in combination. It is the writer's contention that this emphasises the significance and importance of brand identity as the primary driver of the relationship between the brand and its consumers. The communication of the brand identity and core values creates a relationship with the target group that can be described in terms of loyalty, commitment, partnership and friendship, according to the research conducted by Fournier (1998). An important aspect of the conceptual framework of brand identity as postulated by Urde (1999), is that brand identity is central to a brand-oriented organisation, and therefore provides an understanding of the lasting inner values of the organisation. Research conducted by Reed (2001) concluded that social identification may be salient, self-important and relevant to a product or brand, but may also leave the consumer unable to generate a judgement if that identity does not provide some direction with regard to how that type of person will or should respond.

## **Brand Personality**

The question of whether consumers relate to brands in exactly the same way as they do to people, has been described by many as being both highly debatable, and equally contentious. Bibby (2002) contends that whether researchers care to or not, in the mind of consumers, a brand is a person, just as surely as a person is a brand. Bibby argues that there is a need to assume as the primary starting point in all brand management endeavours, that a brand is a person.

Research on brand personality and the symbolic use of brands more generally, has remained limited, due in part to the lack of consensus regarding what brand personality actually is (Aaker, 1997). Aaker defines brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” and argues that the symbolic use of brands is possible because consumers often imbue brands with human personality traits, termed animism, anthromorphism, personification and imagery.

Consistent with the idea of multiple self-images, each individual has an image of himself or herself as a certain kind of person, with certain traits, skills, habits, relationships, and ways of behaving (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2003:143). They contend that brands have symbolic value for individuals who evaluate them on the basis of their congruency with their personal images of themselves. Therefore, consumers attempt to preserve or enhance their self-images by selecting brands with “images” or “personalities” that they believe are congruent with their own self-images and avoiding brands that are not. Given this relationship between brand preference and consumers’ self-images, it is natural that consumers use brands to help them in their task of defining themselves.

Brand affinity, according to the views of Herman (2003), merely constitutes what Herman refers to as, a *meeting of interests*, that may be personally essential for the consumer, and therefore emotionally involving. However, according to Herman, this meeting of interests is always rather limited in scope, and will never constitute a mutual commitment, a partnership in a true interpersonal sense. Enjoyment is not love, and repeated enjoyment is not a relationship. Herman (2003:4) contends that consumers become enthusiastic about brands that “hit a sweet spot”, that offer and deliver a vital unique benefit, tangible or intangible, and that consumers want brands solely because they expect to benefit, and only if they indeed experience such anticipation, which must also be continually gratified. Furthermore, preference for a brand endures only as long as the anticipation of benefit is greater or more certain than the anticipation of benefit evoked by competing brands.

## **Brand Loyalty**

Brand loyalty is at the heart of any brand's value, and the concept behind brand loyalty is to strengthen the size and intensity of each loyalty segment (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:17). According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:263), building associations, the heart of brand building, is driven by the brand identity, but the goal is not only strong associations but also a differentiated brand, and brand loyalty needs to be based on unique characteristics. The rationale is that consumers are unlikely to develop an attachment to a brand that is not distinct or different, and therefore will not develop a deep relationship with the brand.

Brand loyalty, is described by Schiffman and Kanuk (2003:241), as the ultimate desired outcome of consumer learning; however, there is no single definition of this concept. They contend that brand loyalty consists of both attitudes and actual behaviour towards a brand. Attitudinal measures are concerned with consumers' overall feelings (i.e., evaluation) about the brand and their purchase intentions, while behavioural measures are based on observable responses to promotional stimuli, which relate to repeat purchase behaviour rather than attitude towards the brand.

However, Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:3) clearly distinguish between loyalty and commitment. Loyalty is about what consumers do, while commitment is about what consumers feel. Loyalty is therefore behavioural, while commitment is psychological. Purchasing a brand repeatedly but without attachment is behavioural but not attitudinal loyalty, while a consumer who purchases a brand regularly and repeatedly and with attachment is both behaviourally and attitudinally loyal (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:87). McConnell and Huba (2002) concur that repeat consumers are not necessarily loyal consumers. Their "customer evangelism manifesto" suggests a higher order form of brand loyal consumers who act as consumer evangelists, and who actively and passionately promote brands within their sphere of influence. Customer evangelism spreads by word of mouth and includes e-mail and the Internet, and the cyclical phenomenon is known as "buzz".

A shift from a share-based loyalty framework to a *meaning-based relationship* perspective grants the richness, sensitivity, and consumer-relevance that has been lacking in brand loyalty analyses from previous years (Fournier & Yao, 1997:468).

Barnard and Ehrenberg (1997) also recognise that for frequently bought goods, many or most consumers are "multi-brand" buyers, and for durables they similarly have "consideration sets" of several brands which they might purchase.

## Brand Commitment

There are different ways of measuring commitment, but the various definitions all agree on one thing – commitment is *psychological* rather than *behavioural* (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000: 21). Conversely, loyalty is about what consumers do, whereas commitment is about what consumers feel and think. Commitment is a state of mind (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:3). Keller (2003b:474) defines commitment as a dedication to continued brand association and betterment of the relationship. Past research has typically explained the origins of brand commitment as an outcome of product involvement. Theory suggests that involvement precedes commitment, and that commitment results when involvement is linked to a particular choice alternative (Coulter *et al.*, 2003). However, research suggests that involvement may or may not be related to brand commitment (Warrington & Shim, 2000). Ratchford (2001) suggests that even consumers who are happy with their current brand may continue to search for and try other brands as an investment in future consumption choices.

One of the most important requirements in obtaining commitment from a consumer is that brand choice has to matter (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:7). If brand choice does not matter to a consumer, it is almost impossible to achieve commitment from that consumer. These consumers (referred to by Hofmeyr and Rice as *uninvolved*), are likely to switch brands despite being satisfied with the brand they are using. In addition to brand choice being important to consumers, they must also be convinced that the brand to which they are committed is superior to other brands in the marketplace, and hence, commitment is very much a function of competitive offerings.

Though involvement and behaviour are undoubtedly linked, Laurent and Kapferer (1985:52) suggest that involvement does not systematically lead to the expected difference in behaviour because, in part, each facet influences specific behaviours differently. The research of Park (1996) and Kim *et al.* (1997) provides additional evidence that involvement is closely related to intentions and behaviours.

Research has suggested and/or found that involvement plays a formative or antecedent role in developing psychological commitment to a brand (Buchanan, 1985; Beatty, Kahle & Homer., 1988; Block, Black & Lichtenstein, 1989). Psychological commitment is defined by Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) in the context of cognitive consistency theories and interpreted from a multidimensional perspective.

A second facet of commitment is the degree of informational complexity of a person's cognitive structure. Pritchard *et al.* (1997:7) argue that the more complex the informational schema that gird a person's commitment, the more difficult to change the mind, as conflicting information would require even greater change. This suggests that for the highly committed, such costs are greater than those

incurred when change is contemplated in the simple structure of the less committed. Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:23) concur with the view that the higher the commitment, the higher the level of dissatisfaction that will be tolerated before defection. Commitment correlates with future behaviour, thereby enabling marketers to identify consumers most likely to defect, and those most likely to be retained. The assessment of the commitment of consumers to the brand, as well as the availability of those who are not using the brand, enables the formulation of the appropriate marketing strategy (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:15). The significance of commitment relates directly to its ability to serve as a measure of the predictability of future behaviour.

### **Brand Relationships**

Fournier (1998:343) argues that empirical research concerning relationships formed at the level of the brand has been especially scant, and as a result, the basic questions of whether, why, and in what forms consumers seek and value ongoing relationships with brands remain largely unanswered. Existing research, according to Fournier (1998:344), stops short of developing a grounded and fully articulated relationship-based framework for the study of consumer-brand interactions. The interpersonal relationship literature capable of informing this task has been scarcely used in the consumer behaviour field of research, and none has started with basic relationship principles that build an integrative framework to explain and explore the form and dynamics of those interactions in everyday life.

Fournier (1998: 343) argues that:

- Brands can and do serve as viable relationship partners.
- Consumer-brand relationships are valid at the level of lived experiences.
- Consumer-brand relationships can be specified in many ways using a rich conceptual vocabulary that is both theoretically and managerially useful.

A critical insight, which emerged from Fournier's (1998) research, concerns the *holistic* character of consumer-brand relationship phenomena and, by extension, the perspective that is required for their study. Deep knowledge of the consumer-brand relationship is obtained only through consideration of the larger whole in which that relationship is embedded (Fournier, 1998:366).

### **Brand Reputation**

There is a growing body of literature on reputation building, particularly from a corporate branding perspective, but Chaudhuri (2002) questions the relationship between a brand's reputation among its

consumers and the brand equity outcomes (relative price, market share), from the point of view of the firm. Chaudhuri (2002) proposes that brand reputation is a *separate construct* from brand attitudes and that it plays a crucial intervening role in the relationship of advertising to brand equity outcomes such as market share and price. It is the writer's contention that brand reputation is also a critical dimension of the brand identity construct, which impacts directly upon brand image and brand commitment. Chaudhuri (2002) defines reputation as the overall value, esteem and character of a brand as seen or judged by people in general. Therefore, reputation, or the overall value of the brand, leads to greater company profitability, and this suggests the link from reputation to brand equity.

Consumers tend to use brand names (and hence brand identity) as *signals of quality and value* and consumers often gravitate to products with brand names they have come to associate with quality and value; therefore brand names are often repositories for an organisation or brand's reputation. Herbig and Milewicz (1995) contend that the primary purpose of brands and brand names is to provide a symbolic meaning which assists the consumer in the recognition and decision-making process. This frequently results in the development of a brand personality, and brand personality leads to reputation. The power of brand reputation is strongest when the competitive products are similar or cannot be seen, such as commodities, or services.

### **Brand Relevance**

The ability to differentiate corporate, product, or service brands from competitors, while remaining relevant to consumers, is critical for overall brand success (Perry & Wisnom, 2003:8). They postulate that the strategy behind brand positioning, name and visual identity is the key ingredient to managing the customer's perception of the brand. The place to start in creating and ultimately building a strong brand identity is by being relevant first and foremost (Perry & Wisnom, 2003: 9). Kotler (2003:378) refers to relevance in the context of *relative advantage*, which refers to the degree to which the innovation appears superior to existing products. The greater the perceived relative advantage, the more rapidly the product will be adopted in terms of the adoption process.

Keller (2003b:555) states that the principle of relevance is based on the advantages of efficiency and economy. The psychological attachment that a consumer has or develops towards a brand will be a function of how relevant the psychological attachment is to that consumer. The reinforcement of a key point of difference for a brand that is relevant is therefore the key differentiator and motivational driver for the consumer. Brand relevance may therefore be described as how well the brand "speaks" to

individual audiences, and the articulation of a brand should be relevant to those audiences' needs and desires, not merely differentiated (Perry & Wisnom, 2003:9). Dowling (2001:214) postulates that an organisation must have some relevance for a person before he or she will form a relationship-based image or reputation of the organisation. This implies that the organisation (or the brand) has a specific meaning for the consumer, and that the value proposition and perceived benefits are directly appropriate to the needs of the consumer.

### **Brand Performance**

Customers experience the brand values delivered by an organisation through the performance of its products and services during their product cycle (Schultz *et al.*, 2000:142). Performance, quality and reputation are interlinked, and from the consumer's perspective, a good reputation reduces the perceived risk of buying a company's products and services, because the reputation is posted as a performance bond by the company (Dowling, 2001:23). According to Dowling (2001:23) this will be more important in situations where:

- The consumer is buying the product for the first time.
- The product is difficult to evaluate after it is consumed and the consumer wants psychological assurance that a good job has been performed.
- The consumer "buys" the company as well as the product because they have to trust that the company is offering a reliable product or service.

Performance and relevance are interrelated, but it is the writers' contention that performance is a far richer construct than the pure intrinsic ability relative to actual product performance. This implies that performance contains an element of *perceived ability* on the part of the product or brand. Performance is therefore directly related to the levels at which consumers *perceive* that the primary and actual characteristics of the product will operate. Brand attitudes may not necessarily be based only on product performance or perceived product performance, but may also depend on more abstract product and brand imagery, such as the symbolism or personality reflected in the brand as discussed previously.

In the final analysis, five critical dimensions of the brand identity construct that emerged from the review of brand literature were: *reputation* of the brand, *relevance* of the brand, *relationships* with the brand, *performance* of the brand and *personality* of the brand. These five dimensions formed the basis for the brand identity research model.

## **Research Methodology**

The research focused specifically on the interrelationship between brand identity, brand image and the impact on brand commitment from the perspective of the consumer.

The research study focused on companies from different market and industry segments within the greater area of Cape Town. However, all of these organisations have an extensive national database of customers, and therefore are representative of the population within each individual industry sector included in this study. Furthermore, all major competitors were also included for each industry sector, together with developing competitor brands, which were determined by the participating organisations in the study. One company was selected from each of the following targeted product category segments:

- Financial services
- Internet service providers
- Cellphone companies
- Business schools
- Tertiary institutions
- Haircare suppliers
- Security companies
- Retail cosmetics.

## **Sampling Method and Data Collection Techniques**

Simple random sampling and stratified random sampling was used for this research project.

Sample size was targeted at achieving a 95% level of certainty with a 5% margin of error. Data was collected through online surveys using structured questionnaires, telephonic surveys, and personal interviews. Depth interviews and focus groups were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires to probe for additional information regarding the psychological and emotional factors that influence brand commitment

## **Research Hypotheses**

The primary objective of this research was to test the importance of the brand identity construct as a driver of brand commitment. In order to accomplish these objectives it was necessary to test the

*relative importance* of each of the five dimensions that form part of the brand identity construct. The hypotheses were therefore stated as follows:

H1: The reputation of the brand is not significantly important as a driver of brand commitment.

H1a: The reputation of the brand is significantly important as a driver of brand commitment

H2: The relationship with the brand is not significantly important as a driver of brand commitment.

H2a: The relationship with the brand is significantly important as driver of brand commitment.

H3: The relevance of the brand is not significantly important as a driver of brand commitment.

H3a: The relevance of the brand is significantly important as driver of brand commitment.

H4: The performance of the brand is not significantly important as driver of commitment.

H4a: The performance of the brand is significantly important as driver of brand commitment.

H5: The personality of the brand is not significantly important as driver of brand commitment.

H5a: The personality of the brand is significantly important as driver of brand commitment.

### **Sample Frame**

The justification for the sample frame was based on a purposive sample of companies embracing both service and product-related brands. The rationale for selecting both service and product-related brands, was to test whether there was any significant difference between such categories of brands in terms of level of importance of the key dimensions of brand identity.  
above.

### **Quantitative Data Sample Size**

- 1083 respondents for ISPs
- 461 respondents for cosmetics
- 326 respondents for tertiary institutions
- 134 respondents for cellphone service providers
- 106 respondents for financial services
- 87 respondents for business schools
- 56 respondents for haircare service providers
- 19 respondents for security business providers.

**Total respondents: 2272**

## Qualitative Data

1. Cosmetics: Five focus groups and 15 depth interviews were conducted with users of cosmetics.
2. Tertiary institutions: Two focus groups comprising part-time students were conducted.
3. Business schools: One mini focus group using the brand of interest was conducted.

## Quality Control

The questionnaire was piloted to an initial sample of 50 on a random basis, using *banks* as the brand category. Modifications were then made to the questionnaire based on the responses received.

## Results of the Research

Table 1 presents an integrated summary of the ranking of importance of the five dimensions of the brand identity construct for all the business sectors researched, together with the Top Five Box attribute rankings (and corresponding dimensions) for the ideal point (Ji), and in terms of usage (Ju).

**Table 1: Conversion Model Summary Ranking Analysis of Committed Respondents**

Ranking Dimensions Cosmetics	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju - Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Performance	1.2	1. Will use for long time	Relationship	1. A brand I can trust	Reputation
2. Reputation	2.2	2. Reflect my personality	Personality	2. Has a strong heritage	Reputation
3. Relevance	2.7	3. Are exciting	Personality	3. A clear brand identity	Reputation
4. Relationship	2.9	4. In touch with my needs	Relevance	4. Will use for long time	Relationship
5. Personality	3.2	5. Brand has real meaning	Relevance	5. Keep up with times	Relevance

Ranking Dimensions Business Schools	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju – Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Relevance	1.7	1. Enjoy this brand	Relationship	1. Enjoy this brand	Relationship
2. Reputation	1.9	2. In touch with my needs	Relevance	2. In touch with my needs	Relevance
3. Relationship	2.0	3. Knowing matters	Reputation	3. Reflects my personality	Personality
4. Personality	2.3	4. Reflects my personality	Personality	4. Knowing matters	Reputation
5. Performance	2.7	5. Real meaning	Relevance	5. Use for long time	Relationship

Ranking Dimensions Internet Service Providers	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju – Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Performance	1.4	1. Are innovators	Relevance	1. Use for long time	Relationship

2. Relationship	2.0	2. A clear brand identity	Reputation	2. Honest	Reputation
3. Reputation	2.3	3. Can depend on quality	Reputation	3. Value for money	Performance
4. Personality	2.6	4. Becoming popular	Relevance	4. Enjoy this brand	Relationship
5. Relevance	2.7	5. Sophisticated	Personality	5. A brand I can trust	Reputation

Ranking Dimensions Financial Services	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju – Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Reputation	1.6	1. Use for long time	Relationship	1. Clear brand identity	Reputation
2. Performance	1.6	2. Clear brand identity	Reputation	2. Depend on quality	Reputation
3. Relationship	1.8	3. Sophisticated	Personality	3. Will use long time	Relationship
4. Personality	1.8	4. Deliver on promises	Performance	4. Trust	Reputation
5. Relevance	1.8	5. Becoming popular	Relevance	5. Clear communication	Reputation

Ranking Dimensions Cellphone Providers	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju – Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Performance	1.4	1. Use for long time	Relationship	1. Use for long time	Relationship
2. Reputation	2.3	2. Enjoy this brand	Relationship	2. Depend on quality	Reputation
3. Relationship	2.5	3. Depend on quality	Reputation	3. Enjoy this brand	Relationship
4. Personality	2.9	4. Strong heritage	Reputation	4. Trust	Reputation
5. Relevance	3.0	5. Real meaning for me	Relevance	5. Strong heritage	Reputation

Ranking Dimensions Haircare Providers	Means	Top Five Box Attributes: Ji – Ideal Point	Corresponding Dimensions	Top Five Box Attributes: Ju – Usage	Corresponding Dimensions
1. Performance	1.0	1. Brand I can trust	Reputation	1. Depend on for quality	Reputation
2. Relationship	1.1	2. Supports my creativity	Relationship	2. Brand I can trust	Reputation
3. Personality	1.3	3. Use for a long time	Relationship	3. Honest in dealings	Reputation
4. Reputation	1.5	4. Offer tangible benefits	Performance	4. Use for a long time	Relationship
5. Relevance	1.5	5. Honest in dealings	Reputation	5. Credible advertising	Reputation

The key findings from the research reflect the holistic nature of the brand identity construct, and are evaluated for each business sector as follows:

### Cosmetics Industry Sector Key Findings

- Although there is a significant difference in ranking by committed respondents between the first two dimensions (performance and reputation), performance as a dimension does not appear in the Top Five Box dimensions ranking when linked to corresponding attributes of importance, as derived from the Conversion Model rankings. This implies that *performance* is an *expected* or

*given*, based on the significant difference in average means scores as ranked by the Conversion Model.

- In terms of actual *usage* (Ju), for committed respondents, the reputation dimension is dominant, and the *brand identity cluster* of reputation, relationship and relevance, is reflected by the attributes: “a brand I can trust”, which has a “strong heritage”, a “clear brand identity”, that “keeps up with the times”, which encourages the committed respondents to commit to “using this brand for a long time”.
- In terms of the *ideal point* or affinity (Ji), the emotional associative component of brand identity is clearly evident, as the relationship dimension is ranked first, which implied that committed cosmetics respondents aspire to using a brand that reflects their personality, is “exciting”, and is “in touch with their needs”, and which also has “real psychological and emotional meaning” for the committed respondents.

The key findings from the qualitative research conducted also revealed that *performance* ranked number one, with 12 of the 15 respondents (80%) ranking performance as the single most important dimension. It must be noted, however, that these respondents are not committed users of cosmetics, and the performance dimension ranking (and indeed the ranking of all the dimensions), must be evaluated subjectively. This is based on the premise that what consumers say they will do, and actually do, may be in sharp contrast to each other. However, the qualitative ranking of dimensions from the depth interviews serves as a measure of the relative importance of performance from an *expected* or *given* perspective.

When the *performance* dimension is removed from the overall rankings, *relevance*, *relationship*, and *reputation* dominate the brand identity construct, which supports the writer’s contention of a brand identity *clustering effect*.

### **Business Schools Key Findings**

- The total respondents ranking as contained earlier in Table 1, reflected a close association between reputation (41.4%) and relevance (36.8%), while this order was reversed for committed respondents. This is understandable, given the nature of the brand of interest, where the learning methodology was the key driver for users of the brand of interest.
- There is also a far closer clustering effect within the committed respondents data, where relationship rated far higher by committed respondents when compared to the total respondents rating. This is once again ascribed to the nature of the learning methodology used by the brand of

interest, which requires a high level of interaction between the MBA students, the students organisation, and the provider of the MBA programme.

- Table 1 ranking of dimensions for business schools reflected a close correlation between relevance, reputation and relationship, with the average means scores ranging from 1.7 – 2.0. This close correlation is similarly depicted in the Top Five Box dimensions when linked to attribute associations.
- In terms of actual *usage* (Ju) for committed respondents, the relationship dimension is evident and supported by the attributes “enjoy this brand” and “will use for a long time”. However, the clustering effect link between dimensions and supporting attributes is equally discernable.
- In terms of *ideal point* (Ji) for committed respondents, the relationship dimension is equally similar in terms of derived importance as in the usage (Ju) ranking; however, relevance in the form of the attributes “keep in touch with my needs”, and “this brand has real meaning for me ”, indicated a more aspirational emphasis in terms of importance.

This is furthermore confirmed by the findings from the qualitative research conducted by the writer, which also reflected that the two critical factors that motivated the students to enrol with the business school were:

- The learning methodology (relevance) of the particular MBA programme.
- The application of this MBA methodology within their own work environment (relevance).

The relationship construct and emotional importance are also clearly evident from the qualitative research conducted, which is depicted by keywords such as “belonging”, “growing”, “sense of pride”, and “extended family”. There is also a strong correlation between reputation and relationship among committed respondents, which may be attributed to the personal interactive nature of the delivery of the MBA programme. This is also reflected in the brand personality dimension through keywords such as “caring”, “warm” and “exciting”.

The low ranking of the performance dimension should not be misinterpreted, but rather analysed in the context of the other dimensions, which clearly reflect the emotional and psychological attachments that the respondents have established with their brand.

### **Internet Service Providers Key Findings**

- The performance dimension was clearly the most significantly important dimension for both total respondents and committed respondents, which is once again understandable given the nature of this industry. Performance is a given, and without effective performance any brand

would not survive in this industry sector despite the *hassle factor* attributed to switching providers. Once the performance dimension is removed, committed respondents clearly rank relationship as the second most important dimension, signifying once again the importance of the emotional associations respondents attached to the brand identity construct.

- Top Five Box scores for *usage* (Ju) for committed respondents, depicted a strong correlation in terms of derived importance between relationship and reputation, as indicated by the attributes “will use this brand for a long time”, and “enjoy this brand”. This is followed by the performance dimension, which is expressed by the attribute “value for money”.
- In terms of the “ideal” point (Ji) for committed respondents, there was a slightly stronger emphasis on relevance, which was expressed by the attributes “are innovators” and “are becoming more popular”, which when linked to the personality dimension expressed by the attribute “sophisticated”, provides the aspirational context of the brand identity construct for this industry segment.

### **Financial Services Key Findings**

- Total financial services respondents’ data contained in Table 1, predictably ranked performance first (47%), with reputation second (26%), followed by relationship (14%), with relevance and personality insignificant in the rankings. Committed respondents data findings presented a classical “clustering effect”, with reputation and performance scoring equally, followed by an equal means score ranking for relationship, personality and relevance.
- The overall means score for all five dimensions ranged between 1.6 and 1.8, indicating the extremely close nature of the clustering effect.
- The Top Five Box scores for *usage* (Ju) for committed respondents presented an interesting picture, with reputation clearly the dominant dimension, which is reflected by the attributes “a clear brand identity”, “can depend on for quality”, “a brand I can trust”, and “presents a clear communication message”. This when blended with the relationship dimension is depicted by the attribute “will use this brand for a long time”.
- The Top Five Box Scores in terms of *ideal* point (Ji) depicted a more even clustering effect, and represented all five dimensions. This indicated that in terms of the derived importance ideal point, committed respondents are looking for a brand that “they will use for a long time” (relationship), that has “a clear brand identity” (reputation), “is sophisticated” (personality), will “deliver on its promises” (performance), and that is “becoming more popular” (relevance).

The personal nature of the interactions between the brand (organisation) and its clients within the financial services industry sector, highlights the need to ensure that any brand strategy approach is developed from a holistic perspective, and is not merely focused on specific functional product-related attributes.

### **Cellphone Service Providers Key Findings**

- ❑ Total respondents and committed respondents research data ranked performance significantly higher than any other dimension, and also reflected a direct correlation with the committed respondents' ranking of dimensions.
- ❑ The importance of the performance dimension is indicative of this highly competitive industry sector, where continuous innovation and new product development is the norm. Cellphone service providers must, of necessity, provide maximum effective performance to merely maintain existing customers, let alone increase their customer base.
- ❑ Table 1 indicated that committed respondents ranked reputation and relationship fairly closely, while personality and relevance were also closely grouped at the other end of the ranking scale. The exclusion of performance from the committed respondents ranking once again reflected a similar clustering effect to other business sectors that formed part of this study.
- ❑ The Top Five Box scores for *usage* (Ju), confirmed the importance of the reputation and relationship dimensions, depicted by the attributes “will use this brand for a long time”, “can depend on for quality”, “a brand I can trust” with a “strong heritage”, and a brand that respondents “enjoyed”.
- ❑ The Top Five Box scores in terms of *ideal* point (Ji), presented similar findings, but included the relevance dimension depicted by the attribute “this brand has real meaning for me”.
- ❑ Overall, committed consumers within this industry sector are characterised by consumers who “expect” performance as an absolute prerequisite from their cellphone provider, and who form relationships with their providers that are based on trust and time. They rank the reputation of their provider as being extremely important, based on quality, trust and the heritage of the provider.

### **Haircare Providers Key Findings**

- ❑ The significance of the performance dimension ranking by total respondents was understandable and acceptable given the nature of this industry sector, where haircare product performance is a critical and integral component of the total service offering.

- ❑ Closer evaluation of committed respondents once again reflected the classical clustering effect, and although performance ranked highest, there was a close correlation between the other dimensions. Furthermore, the ranking means score differential between performance and relationship was somewhat marginal (1.0 – 1.1), while the means score range between personality and reputation and relevance was also closely correlated (1.3 - 1.5).
- ❑ Brand and product performance is a given, particularly in this industry sector, and acceptance of this fact is crucial to understanding the dynamics of the interrelationship between haircare suppliers and the owners of salons.
- ❑ The Top Five Box scores for *usage* (Ju), indicated the further significance of the importance of the reputation dimension, depicted by the attributes “can depend on for quality”, “a brand I can trust”, “honesty in dealing with me”, and that has “credible advertising”. This dimension was linked in terms of importance to the relationship dimension, which was depicted by the relationship attribute, “will use for a long time”.
- ❑ The Top Five Box scores for *ideal* point, indicated a more creative relationship between haircare suppliers and salon owners, that “supports the creativity” of the committed user, and as such, the committed user will “use for a long time”. Reputation is the most important dimension, depicted by the attributes of “trust” and “honesty in dealing with me”, and these are blended together with the performance dimension, depicted by the attribute “offer tangible benefits”.

### **Security Companies Key Findings**

The security companies’ data was not processed through the Conversion Model, and the sample size was relatively small. However, the data is fairly representative of large security companies, and the ranking of dimensions once again depicted the classical clustering effect, as indicated by the total combined ranking scores, which ranked performance first with 18 responses, and relevance and personality ranked equally at the other end of the ranking scale with 14 responses.

### **Tertiary Institutions Key Findings**

- ❑ The quantitative data for tertiary institutions was also not processed through the Conversion Model, but the data collected was useful for comparative analysis and evaluation of the brand identity clustering effect highlighted in this study. The data reflected a strong clustering effect between performance (81.6% of respondents), reputation (75.4% of respondents) and relevance

(67.0% of respondents), with personality (58.2% of respondents) and relationship (51.5% of respondents) fairly closely grouped together at the other end of the ranking scale.

- The qualitative data collected through the focus group research was biased from the perspective that all students who participated in the focus groups were studying towards a marketing qualification. However, the objective of the focus groups was to obtain comparative insight into the relative importance of the five dimensions of the brand identity construct, and furthermore to attempt to verify the findings from the quantitative research data.
  
- The key findings from this data set are inconclusive, but there was a strong correlation between the quantitative data and the qualitative data rankings, which clearly clustered performance, relevance and reputation as the key dimensions of importance of the brand identity construct.

### **The Reputation Dimension Hypothesis**

In summary, it is evident from the research results based on derived importance, that reputation is a significantly important dimension of the brand identity construct for committed respondents. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted.

### **The Relationship Dimension Hypothesis**

It is also evident from the research results based on derived importance, that relationship is a significantly important dimension of the brand identity construct for committed respondents. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted.

### **The Relevance Dimension Hypothesis**

The relevance dimension is of particular importance for business schools committed respondents, who rated this dimension first overall and second in terms of both the ideal brand and brand of usage. Relevance also rated fairly high at third position overall for committed users of cosmetics, who also rated relevance fourth and fifth for the ideal brand and fifth for the brand of usage. Relevance rated first and fourth for Internet service providers in terms of the ideal brand, but rated fifth overall for Internet service providers, cellphone service providers and haircare providers.

Relevance was important for financial services committed respondents, as indicated in the extremely close overall rankings and clustering effect of dimensions as reflected in Table 1. The qualitative research findings from Focus Group Number Five (where focus group participants were asked to rank the dimensions), and the summary of the rankings of dimensions obtained from the fifteen depth interviews for the cosmetics industry, also support the importance of the relevance dimension.

In summary, it is evident from the research results, and the qualitative results obtained from the depth interviews in particular, that relevance is an important dimension of the brand identity construct, for both committed and non-committed respondents. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted.

### **The Performance Dimension Hypothesis**

In summary, based on the quantitative research results and the qualitative findings from the depth interviews, the performance dimension is clearly the most important dimension of the brand identity construct for both committed and non-committed respondents. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

### **The Personality Dimension Hypothesis**

The research results based on derived importance, indicated that personality as a dimension is somewhat less important than the other five dimensions. The writer suggests that the reason for this lesser importance ranking possibly resides in the interpretive nature of brand personality on the part of consumers. The personification of brands is still a hotly debated topic amongst both brand academics and practitioners as discussed previously.

The qualitative research undertaken for the cosmetics sector indicated that focus group and depth interview respondents were clearly able to provide personality descriptors for all the major competing brands within the scope of this research. This tends to support the concept of brand personality and its relative importance from the perspective of the writer's proposed brand identity construct. However, the *relative importance* of brand personality as a dimension that is likely to lead to or influence commitment, is less important than the other dimensions that comprise the writer's brand identity construct. This does not result in the brand personality dimension being unimportant, but rather that the research results are inconclusive, and therefore the null hypothesis is accepted.

**Figure 1: Brand Identity Conceptual Model**

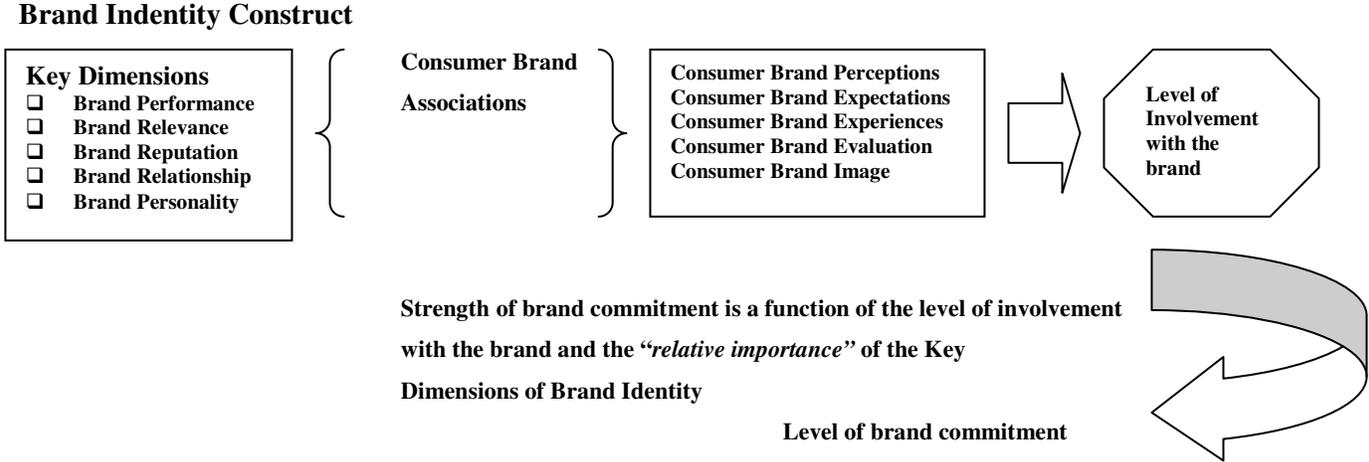


Figure 1 above, depicts the conceptual model of the brand identity construct as postulated by the writer, and upon which this research paper was based. The brand identity construct comprised five key dimensions, and the research has demonstrated the relative importance of each of these dimensions in terms of their relative importance as significant drivers of brand commitment within the respective industry sectors.

**Contributions of the Research**

Brand identity was described in this paper as the cornerstone of brand strategy and brand building, and critical to the long-term sustainability of any brand. The focus of this research was the analysis and evaluation of the writer’s proposed brand identity construct, and its impact as a driver of brand commitment. The writer presented a simplified, yet robust conceptual model of brand identity, based on five key dimensions that can be applied as the basis for building an effective and strong brand identity for both new and existing brands. The starting premise, upon which the brand identity construct was formulated, postulated that consumers view brands holistically, and that consumers use heuristics to simplify brand decision-making.

The writer postulated further, that building a strong brand identity, from a holistic perspective, is a prerequisite for building a strong brand, and that building a strong brand identity requires more than a mere visual component, and is based on psychological and emotional perceptions and associations of the brand, both direct and indirect. The research results clearly identified the *relative importance* of

each of the five dimensions and corresponding attributes across six industry segments, which included the cosmetics industry, business schools, Internet service providers, financial services, cellphone service providers and haircare providers. Similarities and differences in the relative importance of the five dimensions were identified and discussed for each of the six industry sectors.

The research results provided confirmation of the holistic nature by which consumers view brands, by demonstrating a clearly defined *clustering effect* or grouping tendency of the dimensions, by committed respondents. The *relative importance* factor for each of the dimensions of the brand identity construct provided insight into the *meaning* that committed respondents attached to each dimension and its corresponding attributes. The writer therefore contends, that as a direct result of this research, dimensions and attributes should be linked as part of the brand research process in order to gain a more effective holistic understanding of consumer cognitive and emotional processes during brand decision-making. This implies that the five dimensions therefore become the collective, holistic basis by which consumers continually evaluate and ultimately become committed towards brands.

The final contribution of this research resides in the concept of *relative importance* as a psychological and emotional evaluative process that consumers apply during the brand decision-making and relational process. The five dimensions are totally integrated in the context of meaning as described previously. However, the relative importance of a specific dimension may dominate the consumer's psychological or emotional mindset dependent upon the desired satisfaction of a specific need at a given time, or within a specific situation, relative to a defined product category. For example, the *relative importance* of the reputation and performance dimensions dominated the other dimensions for committed respondents in the financial services industry sector, whereas performance as a dimension clearly dominated the cellphone provider industry sector for committed respondents. The research results indicated that performance is a given within this industry segment, and therefore the relationship and reputation dimensions dominate in terms of relative importance. This knowledge will enable the brand strategist or brand custodian to enhance or modify the brand strategy accordingly, and in so doing, maintain the level of committed consumers.

### **Limitations of the Research**

Marketing, and branding in particular, is a complex field of study, which has been compounded by the distinct lack of agreement by contributing researchers, academics and practitioners, on many of the core concepts, definitions and issues relating to branding. This research is no different, and may be objectively criticised by many of these researchers, academics and practitioners. Limitations of the research may include the following:

- The breadth and scope of the five dimensions of the writer's brand identity construct.
- The definitive and interpretive nature of the five key dimensions by respondents.
- The variety of attributes that could have been included under each dimension.
- The limitations of fixed-response questions as a methodology for gaining insight into consumers' most important unconscious thoughts and feelings.
- The limitations of focus groups as a methodology, and the surface level questioning process for gathering qualitative data within focus groups.
- The potential bias that may arise on the part of the interviewer during depth interviews.

However, it is the writer's contention that this research will provide a platform for further research that will enable a deeper understanding of the mind of the consumer, and stimulate research in the field of brand identity and its impact on brand commitment.

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