

# The Role of Self-Definitional Principles in Consumer Identification with a Socially Responsible Company

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**ABSTRACT.** This research analyses the influence of the perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR image) on consumer–company identification (C–C identification). This analysis involves an examination of the influence of CSR image on brand identity characteristics which provide consumers with an instrument to satisfy their self-definitional needs, thereby perceiving the brand as more attractive. Also, the direct and mediated influences (through their effect on brand attitude), of CSR-based C–C identification on purchase intention are analysed. The results offer empirical evidence that CSR generates more C–C identification because it improves brand prestige and distinctiveness; brand coherence is also a powerful antecedent of brand attractiveness in the context of CSR communication. Finally, CSR-based C–C identification is able to generate directly better attitude towards the brand and greater purchase intention.

**KEY WORDS:** social responsibility, identification, brand attractiveness, brand coherence, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, brand attitude, purchase intention

## Introduction

Brands<sup>1</sup> are a particularly useful medium for satisfying consumers' self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Fournier, 1998), as their symbolic nature (McEnally and de Chernatony, 1999) allows individuals to recognise themselves in the brands, and endow their personal identity with significance or differentiate themselves from their reference social groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). In recent years, marketing and management researchers have become increasingly interested to examine how individuals (employees, investors, managers, consumers) identify with the organisation, and the consequences of this identification on their responses (Bhattacharya and

Sen, 2003; Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Marín and Ruiz, 2007). In consumer research, this interest is justified because identification with the company [hereinafter, consumer–company identification (C–C identification)] involves a type of significant relationship which particularly motivates the consumer to maintain the link with the organisation over time.

Identification research in the context of consumer–company relations is based on Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1990); in particular, the notion of C–C identification developed from SIT and SCT is conceived as a cognitive state of connection and proximity of the consumer to a company, generated through a subjective process of comparison between the individual's own personal identity and that of the organisation (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994).

Nowadays, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is one of the most commonly used arguments for constructing brands with a differentiated personality which satisfy consumers' self-definitional needs (Berger et al., 2006; Du et al., 2007; Fournier, 1998), thereby leading to positive C–C identification. Recent studies empirically demonstrate a positive relationship between corporate CSR image and C–C identification (Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Marín and Ruiz, 2007; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Sen et al., 2006).

Most of these studies propose that CSR image directly generates more C–C identification, without requiring the intervention of mediating variables; according to these proposals, CSR is such a significant attribute of corporate image that it is able to mechanically attract the consumer; due to the

inherent complexity of the construct, however, it is unlikely that CSR image will be taken into account automatically by consumers when making consumption decisions, or deciding which company to strengthen relations with (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; García de los Salmones et al., 2005). This study considers that CSR influence on C–C identification is explained better by including in the analysis the role played by the satisfaction of self-definitional needs by a socially responsible company; the more CSR is able to provide value for the corporate brand, improving certain attributes of its identity (prestige, distinctiveness), the more it becomes an instrument for satisfying personal definition needs and C–C identification takes place.

Thus, the main purpose of this work is to deepen the study of the relationship between CSR and C–C identification, examining the influence of CSR image on corporate brand identity characteristics which provide consumers to satisfy their self-definitional needs (Dutton et al., 1994). The study also analyses the influences of CSR-based C–C identification on purchase intention, by exploring a mechanism by which CSR is able to influence consumer behaviour responses.

So, after a literature review of the concept of C–C identification and the role of CSR as a tool for generating this type of identification, a theoretical model of causal relations is proposed to analyse the indirect effects of CSR image on C–C identification. Further, the methodology used in an empirical study on a sample of consumers of toiletries and cosmetics products is described. Then, the results are presented and discussed. Finally, main conclusions of the study are presented together with managerial implications, limitations and possible further research.

## Literature review and research hypothesis

### *C–C identification*

Identification research has explored the reasons and motivations which encourage individuals to relate to brands and companies. SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and its conceptual development by SCT (Turner et al., 1990) are the main theoretical basis for identification research in management and marketing

areas. These theories were initially applied in the organisational context to analyse group and individual behaviours of organisational formal members; in different degrees, individuals derive part of their identity from organisations and work groups they formally belong to, or to which they are closely linked (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Scott and Lane, 2000); this occurs through cognitive categorisation, where an individual positions him/herself as a member of an organisation by accentuating similarities with other members and differences with non-members. Awareness of belonging and connection to an organisation is a way for individuals to achieve a positive social identity (Brewer, 1991; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) and as a result of this sense of connection, the organisation is psychologically accepted as part of that personal identity (Scott and Lane, 2000).

Subsequently, SIT and SCT assumptions were applied to contexts and situations where individuals have no formal relationship of belonging to the organisation, as in the case of consumers (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dholakia et al., 2004). The notion of collective identity (Ashmore et al., 2004), or identity based on a sense of community, rather than on a formal belonging, is the most appropriate for understanding consumer–company relationships. Individuals can define themselves, at least in part, according to their role as consumers of companies, and on the basis of the collective identity which they attribute to the corporate brand.

Literature identifies four links which explain the existence of consumer–company relations (Kristof, 1996; Marín and Ruiz, 2007): values, shared personality traits, common objectives and satisfaction of individual needs thanks to the company. The notion of C–C identification conveniently integrates these links between company and consumer. C–C identification is a cognitive state of self-categorisation, connection and proximity of the consumer to a company (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), brought about by a subjective process of comparison between the organisational identity and the consumer's own identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994); in this process, the existence of shared values plays an important role (Hunt et al., 1989; Scott and Lane, 2000); finally,

C–C identification is a mean to satisfy self-definitional needs (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004).

Some researchers consider that C–C identification is not a purely cognitive construct, but also includes affective processes (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). Based on the multidimensional conceptualisation of social identity proposed by Ellemers et al. (1999), Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) propose that organisational identification is the cognitive component of social identity in an organisation and also includes an affective component (affective commitment) and an evaluative component (organisation-based self-esteem). In effect, Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) showed that the three components are “empirically distinct” (p. 556), since cognitive identification with the organisation influences affective commitment with the organisation (emotional component) and organisation-based self-esteem (evaluative component) and through these two variables influences individual behaviour.

Thus, based on this multidimensional notion of social identity, most works consider C–C identification to be a purely cognitive variable, distinguishing it from other affective and evaluative components. This is the approach taken in this work, where C–C identification is understood to be the cognitive state of connection, proximity or similarity between the consumer and the company which, to some extent, implies a perception of overlap or coincidence between organisational and personal identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003); thus, C–C identification is not the direct, mechanical correspondence between the individual’s personal characteristics and organisation’s perceived characteristics, but is derived from a subjective sense of approval between both identities (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002).

#### *CSR and C–C identification*

Nowadays, positioning the company as socially responsible is used to generate C–C identification. Despite significant research efforts in recent years to capture the influence of CSR from the consumer behaviour perspective, there is still no full consensus over the dimensions in the CSR image perceived by

the consumer. Three conceptual proposals have obtained most support from researchers: Carroll’s pyramid (1979, 1991), the Sustainable Development-based model (van Marrewijk, 2003) and Brown and Dacin’s (1997) approach.

Carroll’s model (1979, 1991) conceives CSR as a concept made up of four, successively dependent dimensions, concerning the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary (or philanthropic) expectations which society has of organisations at a given point in time (Carroll, 1991); based on this proposal, García de los Salmones et al. (2005) showed that Spanish consumers of mobile telephony services perceive a company as socially responsible if it complies with its philanthropic and ethical–legal obligations, and Maignan (2001) found a cross-cultural difference by showing that German and French consumers perceive legal, ethical and philanthropic issues as constituting CSR, while Americans also include economic matters.

Secondly, the Sustainable Development model is based on a triple-bottom-line approach, i.e. economic, social and environmental considerations (van Marrewijk, 2003), and so it is possible to understand CSR in the terms presented by the European Commission (2001), i.e. as the “integration by companies of social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (p. 7). It can be seen that this model integrates non-economic CSR matters in two dimensions, social and environmental issues.

Finally, Brown and Dacin (1997) propose distinguishing two types of associations perceived by consumers with regard to the company (Corporate Associations). CA associations, related to the corporation’s expertise in producing and delivering products and services, which are mainly technical and economic in nature, and CSR associations which “reflect the organization’s status and activities related to its perceived societal obligations” (p. 68), and which associates non-economic matters unidimensionally. In this regard, most studies which have analysed the influence of CSR image on various consumer behaviour variables and included CSR image in wider conceptual models (Berens et al., 2005; Du et al., 2007; Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), have preferred to adopt the unidimensional approach to non-economic CSR

issues suggested by Brown and Dacin (1997). This is the approach adopted here.

Two main arguments can be highlighted which justify why researchers have focused on the potential link between CSR image and C–C identification. Firstly, CSR is a privileged channel for expressing corporate personality, as it combines the three elements of corporate identity mix: behaviour, symbolism and communication (Balmer, 2001). Social commitment involves certain behaviours from an organisation (e.g. linking itself to a social cause by making donations), while also using the link to the CSR domain as a way of symbolising or representing the aspiration to, or possession, of one or more prosocial values. Moreover, what the company wants to transmit by communicating its CSR initiatives, an organisation which assumes, represents or aspires to a prosocial value (Du et al., 2007; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004), is a particularly useful material for triggering processes of approach or connection to individuals (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), so they will be more inclined to identify with the organisation.

Thus, since the general aim of this study is to examine in depth the mechanism by which CSR image influences C–C identification, Figure 1 shows the theoretical model proposed to analyse this effect. The study also examines the influence of CSR-based C–C identification on consumer attitude towards brand and purchase intention.

#### *Brand attractiveness*

For generating social identification, neither SIT nor SCT considers it necessary for individuals to make a positive evaluation of the group they are relating to, as it has been found that the simple random assignment of individuals to different artificial groups causes cognitive identification with the in-group and increases distance with the out-group (Turner et al., 1990). However, in real consumption situations, positive evaluation of corporate brand identity has proved to be a key antecedent of C–C identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Marín and Ruiz, 2007).

Brand attractiveness is the positive evaluation of its identity, examined and assessed in relation to how it helps consumers satisfy their self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Only to the extent that

individuals perceive a brand to be sufficiently attractive as it can satisfy certain self-definitional needs, will they feel the necessary motivational impulse to begin a cognitive approach to the brand. Thus, we hypothesise:

*H1: Brand attractiveness has a direct, positive influence on C–C identification.*

*Brand identity characteristics which satisfy self-definitional principles: brand coherence, distinctiveness and prestige*

Brewer (1991) proposed that assimilation and differentiation are the two most basic social needs for humans. Assimilation refers to the individual's desire to feel included (integration, affiliation) within broad collectives, whereas differentiation refers to the desire to distinguish oneself from other people within the social context. Similarly, Dutton et al. (1994), based on SIT, indicate three self-definitional principles, self-continuity, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement, which correspond to the individual's basic self-definitional needs.

The first self-definitional need is the continuity in self-concept. In their efforts to understand themselves and the world around them, individuals are motivated to maintain a certain stability and consistency in their self, over time and in different situations (Dutton et al., 1994). Organisational research into company–employee fit, has shown that the search for continuity in self-concept underlies people's preference for working in organisations they perceive as similar to themselves on important issues (O'Reilly et al., 1991). Similarly, consumers are attracted to relating to a brand whose identity helps them maintain a certain self-continuity or stability (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

Coherence is a brand identity characteristic which helps individuals maintain a stable, continuous and consistent sense of who they are. Brand coherence is defined as an individual's perception of how constituent brand identity traits relate to another, if they are well integrated, and in sum, if they project an internally consistent brand identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Firstly, coherence enhances brand attractiveness because it allows individuals to capture, process, interpret and remember brand

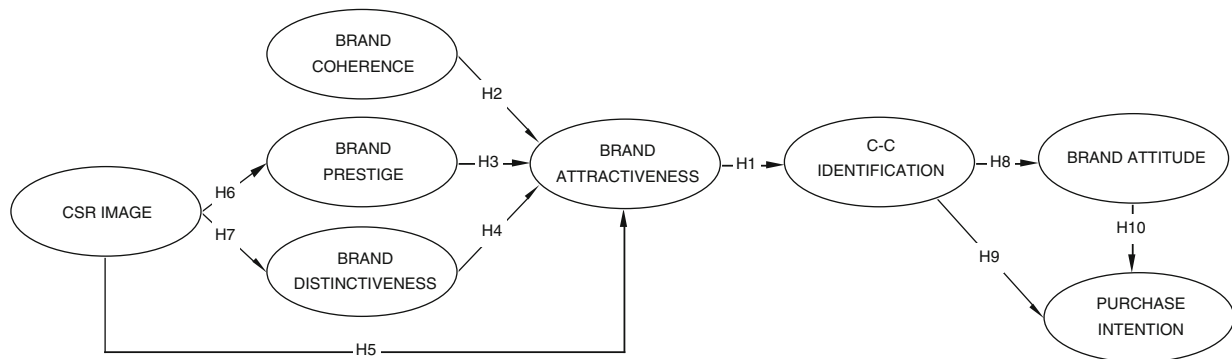


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

information more easily in different situations and contexts (Dutton et al., 1994; Scott and Lane, 2000); secondly, a coherent brand is more attractive because it allows individuals to express more fully and genuinely the sense of who they are, their character, characteristics and values (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). In short, an incoherent, fragmented or divided brand, which shows different facets of its identity, values and attributes, will not allow individuals to maintain self-concept integrity through their relationship with it. Thus, we hypothesise:

*H2:* Perceived brand coherence has a direct, positive influence on brand attractiveness.

Linked to Brewer's (1991) need for differentiation, the second self-definitional need for individuals is distinctiveness (Dutton et al., 1994). Alongside the need for continuity, individuals need to emphasise their interpersonal differences with other individuals as a way of guaranteeing the integrity of their self (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Corporate brand distinctiveness necessarily requires comparison of one brand's identity with other, generally competing brands (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). When brand identity is perceived as more distinctive than that of the competition, its attractiveness for consumers will increase, because the relationship with that brand will allow individuals to increase the psychological difference with consumers of other competing brands (Kim et al., 2001). Thus, we hypothesise:

*H3:* Perceived brand distinctiveness has a direct, positive influence on brand attractiveness.

One of the main premises of SIT is the self-esteem hypothesis (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) which states that

individuals feel motivated to evaluate themselves positively, and because they define themselves as belonging to a group to some degree, they will be motivated to assess that group positively. Self-esteem hypothesis is closely linked to the definitional principle of self-enhancement (Dutton et al., 1994); individuals seek to improve their self-esteem by identifying with positively perceived groups; a social group which is perceived in a positive way by individuals outside it, favours the positive self-perception of group members (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001).

In a similar way to corporate reputation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990), brand prestige refers to the positive image which a consumer believes other individuals have of the brand. Identification with a prestigious brand improves the consumer's self because this association allows individuals to perceive themselves as having the positive qualities of the brand which makes it prestigious for its publics (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Dutton et al., 1994). Thus, if a consumer perceives that others have a positive perception of a brand, this will provide the necessary material to also perceive him/herself positively, thereby improving his or her self-concept (Yoon et al., 2006); thus, we hypothesise:

*H4:* Perceived brand prestige has a direct, positive influence on brand attractiveness.

#### *Influence of CSR on the satisfaction of self-definitional needs*

Several studies have shown that CSR image has a positive and direct influence (without the action of intermediate variables) on brand attractiveness (Marín and Ruiz, 2007; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001).



According to these considerations, when a company behaves in a socially responsible manner, it is more likely that consumers will feel attracted to it as it has certain desirable characteristics (prosocial values) which are in line with the way they are or with how they would like to be (Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Marín and Ruiz, 2007). CSR has an important symbolic load which reinforces the company's legitimacy in society (Handelman and Arnold, 1999) by embodying personality attributes (i.e. civil-minded, altruist, committed, Samaritan) which the different stakeholders, including consumers value positively; in this sense, we can posit that CSR conforms a set of fundamental and relatively enduring pro-social associations around the brand (Brown and Dacin, 1997) which mechanically generates greater brand attractiveness for the consumer, without the need for intermediate evaluations of its identity. It could be considered therefore that:

*H5:* CSR image has a direct, positive influence on brand attractiveness.

This research seeks to analyse the influence of CSR on brand attractiveness in greater depth, through its effects on the intermediate variables which help to fulfil the self-definitional principles (Dutton et al., 1994). In this sense, it is possible to propose that CSR image has a positive influence on brand prestige (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999) and brand distinctiveness (Brammer and Millington, 2006; Dean, 2003; Du et al., 2007), and through these variables, on brand attractiveness.

Company's CSR initiatives favour the prestige of its corporate brand. Social responsibility is a type of institutional signal used by publics to construct the company's reputation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990); several studies have shown that consumers value positively the perception of a brand's desire for social commitment (Brammer and Millington, 2005; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999), thereby influencing brand prestige and reputation. Thus, we hypothesise:

*H6:* CSR image has a direct, positive influence on brand prestige.

Consumers evaluate companies' general behaviour from the logic of seeking own benefit (Forehand and Grier, 2003), mainly prompted by private or egoistic

motives (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Now, when a company communicates its social responsibility initiatives, it projects a brand characterised, at least in part, by a desire for social commitment (Du et al., 2007; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). In specific market and sociocultural contexts, is likely that this contrast between expected egoism and perceived altruism (Dean, 2003) increases the differentiation in relation to competing brands; in the Spanish context, where the model is estimated, the relative novelty of putting CSR initiatives and actions into practice due to the scanty tradition of social commitment from Spanish companies (de la Cuesta and Valor, 2003), and the continuing lack of awareness of CSR principles in the Spanish public (Fundación Empresa y Sociedad, 2005) can be considered to favour this contrast effect in Spanish consumers' minds, which must have a positive effect on the visibility and notoriety of organisations perceived as socially responsible (Brammer and Millington, 2006; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Therefore, we can posit:

*H7:* CSR image has a direct, positive influence on brand distinctiveness.

#### *The influence of CSR-based C–C identification on consumer responses*

Literature has noted widely the positive results for the organisation of identification. In the area of management, it has been shown that a high degree of employee identification with the organisation favours support to the organisation (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Mael and Ashforth, 1992), intraorganisational cooperation (Dutton et al., 1994; Rosenberg and Treviño, 2003), affective commitment to the organisation (Meyer et al., 2006) and organisation-based self-esteem (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Ellemers et al., 1999).

In the case of C–C relations, the positive consequences of C–C identification have also been identified, in that it causes the consumer's behaviour to align with the organisation's interests and objectives. However, there is no agreement over the sequence or hierarchy of effects following C–C identification. Some authors have considered that C–C identification influences under a 'think-do' model, so that identification (a cognitive variable) is such a powerful psychological link with the

company that it directly influences the consumer's behaviour without requiring affective responses (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Cornwell and Coote, 2005). This sequence of effects finds theoretical justification in SCT (Turner et al., 1990), which propose that simple cognitive self-categorisation in a group is sufficient to explain behaviour which favours the in-group, without having to resort to affective processes. This hypothesis was tested experimentally by Tajfel and Turner (1986).

However, other research stream posit that, in natural social contexts, cognitive categorisation in a group may not be sufficient to provoke in-group favouritism, and a behaviour aligned with group objectives (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Ellemers et al., 1999). On that basis, Tajfel and Turner's findings (1986) may be the result of using artificial groups designed for laboratory work, where unique indicator of individuals for their social behaviour is the cognitive categorisation in a given group. According to Ellemers et al. (1999), in a natural social context, individuals use more indicators to decide their behaviour than simple cognitive categorisation, such as their own attitudes towards the group, or their affective commitment to it. In this regard, different works (Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Madrigal, 2001) have proposed models where C–C identification influences under a 'think-feel-do' model, in which identification directly influences individuals' affective responses to a brand (e.g. attitude towards the brand) thereby influencing behavioural variables (e.g. purchase intention).

Attempting to explore the mechanism by which C–C identification influences consumer behaviour, this work simultaneously analyses the potential direct link between C–C identification and a behavioural response (purchase intent) and the mediating role of one affective response (attitude towards the brand) in the influence of C–C identification on behaviour.

Following these two main streams, it is possible to theoretically justify two potential mechanisms through which C–C identification influences consumer behaviour. Firstly, the main behaviour individuals can exercise in their role as consumer is product purchase; so, brand commitment based on C–C identification must be expressed by this behaviour (Ahearne et al., 2005). Buying brand products is the best way for consumers to show their

alignment with the organisation, and favouritism towards it (Cornwell and Coote, 2005). According to the Theory of Extended Self (Belk, 1988), product purchase becomes an act of expressing and projecting self, necessary for personal definition. Thus, once identified with the company, consumers use consumption of its products as a way of expressing their own identity (Yoon et al., 2006). Thus, we hypothesise:

*H8: C–C identification has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention.*

Secondly, C–C identification must have a direct, positive influence on consumer attitudes towards the brand; according to SIT, the individual feels motivated to evaluate the in-group positively as a means of improving his or her self-concept, which is partly defined in terms of the group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Having categorised and defined him/herself as a member of a social group, the individual internalises the group's stereotypical norms as positive attitudes towards the group (Terry et al., 2000); and thus, by identifying with the company, the individual experiences a state of emotional connection that will positively predispose him/her towards it (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000).

Moreover, this positive attitude towards the brand must also influence behaviour intentions towards it; this is because attitudes formed as a result of a social identification process are more accessible in the memory of individuals (Terry et al., 2000), and this greater accessibility increases the likelihood of attitude influencing the individual's behaviour (Fazio et al., 1989). Therefore:

*H9: C–C identification has a direct, positive influence on attitude towards the brand.*

*H10: Attitude towards the brand has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention.*

## Methodology

### *Research design*

The focus of the empirical study is causal, and it is focused on the analysis of the influence of CSR image on C–C identification, and on the impacts of C–C identification on brand attitude and purchase intention. These relations have been determined

through Structural Equations Models (SEM) with EQS 6.1.

A focus group carried out among university students suggested the selection of toiletries and cosmetics as a good research area, because it is possible to recognise various types of CSR initiatives developed by several brands (Du et al., 2007), and because this industry includes self-expression products which are particularly relevant in building individuals' personal identities (Belk, 1988; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). A quantitative study was designed in the form of a personal questionnaire based on presenting interviewees with a stimulus in the form of a newly created, printed ad linking a real brand to a social cause in a simulated Cause-Brand Alliance (CBA) strategy. The Dove brand, a very well-known global brand that commonly engages in social alliances, was used in the stimulus (e.g. Dove launched the "Campaign for real beauty" in 2005, [www.campaignforrealbeauty.com](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com)); this characteristic eliminates *a priori* adverse effects of delegitimation as the result of a bad social reputation (Dean, 2003).

We decided to use a CBA message to elicit a CSR perceived identity for two main reasons. Firstly, CBA is currently one of the most commonly used tools for communicating company CSR initiatives and projecting a CSR-related corporate identity (Barone et al., 2007; Kotler and Lee, 2005), so these initiatives are familiar to the segment of consumers studied (Spanish consumers) (García et al., 2003). Secondly, the fact that a CBA message makes explicit use of the company's association to a specific social cause, could help the interviewee to hold a more vivid and natural perception of CSR-based identity.

The CBA stimulus consisted of two versions, one with high cause-brand fit and another with low cause-brand fit. Several studies have shown the influence of this variable on consumer responses to CBA; cause-brand fit can influence brand evaluations (Rifon et al., 2004), the consistency of brand positioning (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006) and attitude towards the brand (Ellen et al., 2000; Lafferty, 2007) in a CBA. Therefore, it was decided to use two versions of the stimulus to average the brand-cause fit value in the set of final data and control its potential effect on the influence of CSR image on C-C identification, and of this latter on consumer behaviour.

A pretest served to identify the cause-brand combination that would provide the desired manipulation;

in the pretest, a  $3 \times 3$  design combined three Dove products (natural cream soap, anti-cellulite gel cream and anti-ageing hand gel) and three real social causes (Ecologistas en Acción, a Spanish environmental group; Asociación de Familiares de Enfermos de Alzheimer, help for Alzheimer sufferers; and Fundación Mujeres, to defend abused women). A total of 373 university students reported their perceptions of cause-brand fit in one of the nine scenarios (average sample size per scenario = 41), using the six-item, five-point scale proposed by Gwinner and Eaton (1999). The data analysis recommended the natural soap  $\times$  Ecologistas en Acción combination as the CBA with highest cause-brand fit ( $\bar{x} = 4.3$ ). The anti-cellulite gel cream  $\times$  Asociación de Familiares de Enfermos de Alzheimer earned the lowest cause-brand fit ( $\bar{x} = 2.7$ ). The *t*-test for independent samples confirmed the significant difference of the means (high = 4.3; low = 2.5;  $t = 5.35$  ( $p < 0.01$ )). Finally, each respondent completed the final questionnaire in reference to a single stimulus. The target stimuli showed a colour picture of the actual Dove product, along with the logo for the Nonprofit Organisation. To mitigate the possibility of confounds due to variations in the contextual cues, each ad remains virtually identical, with the exception of changes to the name of the cause.

The study population were Spanish consumers of toiletries and cosmetics products over the age of 18; the samples were chosen by random route probabilistic sampling, with five sampling points throughout Spain. Definitive sample size was 299, with a sample error of  $\pm 5.67\%$ , and a desired confidence level of 95% in the most unfavourable case of  $p = q = 0.5$ . While 50.2% of the sample were men, 49.8% were women. Average interviewee age was 37 years, with 38.5% of the total aged between 25 and 40 years and 35.1% between 40 and 65. Of the subjects interviewed, 26.4% had a university qualification and 58.8% were in paid employment. While 78.6% stated they had bought products from the brand in the stimulus at some time, 43.4% said they did so at least once in a month.

#### *Measurement instrument*

The questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 20 consumers, and the results from



the pilot study were used to slightly modify the initial order of the questions and improve the drafting of some of the scale items.

Given that this study does not attempt an in-depth examination of each of the constructs but rather than interrelation, global, unidimensional measurements of the concepts involved were sought rather than multidimensional approaches. CSR image was measured on a four-item, seven-point Likert scale with items selected from studies by Dean (2002), Lichtenstein et al. (2004) and Menon and Kahn (2003). C–C identification was measured by adapting Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) two-item scale for company–employee relations; this scale has already used in C–C contexts (Ahearne et al., 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001); Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) scale was supplemented with three specific items aimed to reflect the degree of perceived similarity between personal and organisational identities (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Marín and Ruiz, 2007). Brand attractiveness was measured on a three-item, seven-point Likert scale based on verbal protocols proposed by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003).

With regard to the antecedents to brand attractiveness, brand prestige was measured using a reduced three-item version of the scale proposed by Mael and Ashforth (1992), widely used in consumer behaviour studies (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Cornwell and Coote, 2005). Brand coherence and distinctiveness were measured using three-item, seven-point Likert scales created following Bhattacharya and Sen's (2003) proposals. Finally, brand attitude was measured using an adaptation of MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) four-item scale, and purchase intention was measured on Putrevu and Lord's (1994) three-item scale. All scale items are shown in the Appendix.

## Results and discussion

The analysis followed Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-stage procedure. First, the goodness of the measurement instrument's psychometric properties were analysed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and second, the structural relations among the theoretically proposed latent variables were analysed through SEM. Both the measurement

model and the causal relations model were estimated using the Maximum Likelihood Method with robust estimators ( $ML_{Robust}$ ), which uses the Satorra–Bentler scaled statistic ( $S-B \chi^2$ ) (Satorra and Bentler, 1994) for the model fit.

### *Psychometric properties of the measurement instrument*

The instrument's psychometric properties were assessed by CFA. Table I shows the indicators calculated to verify said properties and the main goodness-of-fit indexes.

During the fit process through CFA an observed variable (*cbi5*) was eliminated. The goodness-of-fit indicators for the measurement instrument (BBNFI = 0.922, BBNNFI = 0.973, CFI = 0.977, IFI = 0.978, RMSEA = 0.035), easily exceed the commonly accepted critical values in this discipline. Table I shows that measurement instrument reliability can be confirmed as Cronbach's alpha exceeds the critical value of 0.8 (Cronbach, 1951) in all cases, and Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted indexes also exceed their critical value of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition to the goodness-of-fit indicators and the Lagrange multipliers test, two criteria were used to verify convergent validity: all standardised factor loads for the observed variables were significant, and that the average for said loads were above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2005).

Finally, the measurement model was checked to ensure discriminant validity. Firstly, it was found that inter-factor correlations were significantly below 1, through calculation of the corresponding confidence intervals ( $\Phi$ -value  $\pm 2$  standard errors, see Table II) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988); secondly, for each pair of factors, it was verified that the difference of  $\chi^2$  between the proposed measurement model and a restricted model where the correlation between said factors was set at 1 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) was significant. Finally, the Variance Extracted test (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) was carried out which showed that AVE for each factor was higher than the square of the correlation coefficients with each of the other factors (this condition was fulfilled except for BCO–BDI, BCO–ATR and ATR–BPR, see Table II). Thus, while it is recommendable to globally evaluate the results of the three tests, it is

TABLE I  
Confirmatory factor analysis

Factor	Item	Convergent validity		Reliability		
		Factor loading (robust <i>t</i> -value)	Loading average	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
CSR image (CSR)	csr1	0.867 (19.91)	0.829	0.897	0.898	0.688
	csr2	0.866 (17.56)				
	csr3	0.805 (16.21)				
	csr4	0.777 (14.70)				
Brand coherence (BCO)	bco1	0.745 (14.72)	0.767	0.811	0.811	0.589
	bco2	0.762 (13.53)				
	bco3	0.795 (15.60)				
Brand prestige (BPR)	bpr1	0.796 (14.94)	0.812	0.852	0.728	0.573
	bpr2	0.858 (15.80)				
	bpr3	0.781 (13.12)				
Brand distinctiveness (BDI)	bdi1	0.832 (17.04)	0.841	0.879	0.760	0.612
	bdi2	0.832 (16.85)				
	bdi3	0.860 (17.94)				
Brand attractiveness (ATR)	atr1	0.842 (16.76)	0.804	0.845	0.717	0.559
	atr2	0.797 (14.94)				
	atr3	0.773 (16.93)				
C–C identification (CCI)	cci1	0.836 (16.86)	0.864	0.921	0.922	0.746
	cci2	0.882 (18.38)				
	cci3	0.874 (17.71)				
	cci4	0.863 (17.90)				
	cci5	Eliminated				
Brand attitude (BAT)	bat1	0.853 (14.93)	0.883	0.933	0.934	0.780
	bat2	0.892 (18.29)				
	bat3	0.876 (18.17)				
	bat4	0.910 (19.03)				
Purchase intention (PIN)	pin1	0.879 (18.76)	0.843	0.881	0.765	0.620
	pin2	0.797 (14.87)				
	pin3	0.853 (18.32)				
Goodness-of-fit measures						
		BBNFI	BBNNFI	CFI	IFI	RMSEA
S–B $\chi^2$ (296 df) = 405.9638 ( $p = 0.00$ )		0.922	0.973	0.977	0.978	0.035

Measure instrument psychometric properties.

CR Composite Reliability, AVE Average Variance Extracted.

possible to confirm the measurement model's discriminant validity.

#### Analysis of structural relations and hypothesis testing

Table III shows the standardised coefficients for the structural relations tested, including their direct,

indirect and total effects and their respective levels of signification.

As can be seen, the goodness-of-fit indexes for the structural model (BBNFI = 0.869, BBNNFI = 0.911, CFI = 0.922, IFI = 0.923, RMSEA = 0.064) show a good fit and therefore it is feasible to test the proposed hypotheses. First, brand attractiveness has a significant direct, positive influence on C–C identification (H1;

TABLE II  
Discriminant validity

	CSR	BCO	BPR	BDI	ATR	CCI	BAT	PIN
CSR	0.69	0.35	0.12	0.29	0.34	0.48	0.23	0.37
BCO	[0.47; 0.71]	0.59	0.56	0.69	0.79	0.56	0.29	0.29
BPR	[0.23; 0.47]	[0.67; 0.83]	0.57	0.38	0.76	0.21	0.24	0.21
BDI	[0.44; 0.64]	[0.77; 0.89]	[0.52; 0.72]	0.61	0.60	0.52	0.35	0.37
ATR	[0.48; 0.68]	[0.81; 0.97]	[0.81; 0.93]	[0.70; 0.86]	0.56	0.55	0.32	0.30
CCI	[0.61; 0.77]	[0.67; 0.83]	[0.34; 0.58]	[0.64; 0.80]	[0.64; 0.84]	0.75	0.20	0.27
BAT	[0.38; 0.58]	[0.44; 0.64]	[0.39; 0.59]	[0.49; 0.69]	[0.45; 0.69]	[0.33; 0.57]	0.78	0.59
PIN	[0.53; 0.69]	[0.42; 0.66]	[0.34; 0.58]	[0.51; 0.71]	[0.43; 0.67]	[0.40; 0.64]	[0.69; 0.85]	0.62

Note: Diagonal represents Average Variance Extracted; above the diagonal the shared variance (squared correlations) are represented; below the diagonal, the 95% confidence interval for the estimated factors correlations is provided.

TABLE III  
Structural equation model results (including direct, indirect and total effects)

Hypotheses	Structural relationship	Standardised coefficient			Result
		Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	
H1	Brand attractiveness ⇒ C–C identification	0.756***	NH	0.756***	Accepted
H2	Brand coherence ⇒ Brand attractiveness	0.401***	NH	0.401***	Accepted
H3	Brand distinctiveness ⇒ Brand attractiveness	0.277***	NH	0.277***	Accepted
H4	Brand prestige ⇒ Brand attractiveness	0.433***	NH	0.433***	Accepted
H5	CSR image ⇒ Brand attractiveness	0.160*	0.357***	0.517 <sup>a</sup>	Accepted
H6	CSR image ⇒ Brand prestige	0.437***	NH	0.437***	Accepted
H7	CSR image ⇒ Brand distinctiveness	0.607***	NH	0.607***	Accepted
H8	C–C identification ⇒ Purchase intention	0.216***	0.308***	0.524***	Accepted
H9	C–C identification ⇒ Brand attitude	0.466***	NH	0.466***	Accepted
H10	Brand attitude ⇒ Purchase intention	0.661***	NH	0.661***	Accepted

Goodness-of-fit measures					
	BBNFI	BBNNFI	CFI	IFI	RMSEA
S–B $\chi^2$ (307 df) = 684.202 ( $p = 0.000$ )	0.869	0.911	0.922	0.923	0.064

NH Not Hypothesised.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ .

<sup>a</sup>Direct and indirect effects have different  $p$  levels as shown.

$\beta = 0.75$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ); this reinforces the idea that the positive evaluation of brand identity is key for C–C identification to occur (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Marín and Ruiz, 2007).

All three determinants, brand coherence (H2;  $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), brand prestige (H4;  $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and brand distinctiveness (H3;  $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), have direct and positive effects on brand

attractiveness. These results support the notion that these three brand identity characteristics help individuals to satisfy their self-definitional needs; first, information from a coherent brand increases its attractiveness as it is more easily captured, processed, interpreted and remembered by consumers (Scott and Lane, 2000), allowing them to display their self-concept more directly and transparently. Also, these

results confirm the idea that individuals' relation with a prestigious company improves their self-concept (Yoon et al., 2006) as they can perceive themselves as having the qualities which make the organisation prestigious for its publics (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Dutton et al., 1994). Finally, we find that consumer perception of a brand as distinctive makes it more attractive, as it satisfies their need to distinguish and differentiate self, increasing the psychological distance in relation to consumers of competing brands (Kim et al., 2001).

H5 was proposed with a confirmatory intention and has been accepted, but the direct, positive influence of CSR image on brand attractiveness can only be supported with a significance level of 10% ( $p < 0.10$ ), while its indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.36$ ) is significant at a level of 1% ( $p < 0.01$ ). These findings question the idea that CSR associations with the brand make it more attractive without requiring intermediate variables (Marín and Ruiz, 2007; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Moreover, our results suggest that the most powerful influence of CSR image on brand attractiveness has a more complex mechanism than has been considered so far; said influence is explained better through the effects of CSR image on the two intermediate variables, brand prestige and brand distinctiveness, which help to fulfil self-definitional principles (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994). As suggested by H6 and H7, CSR image has a direct, positive influence ( $p < 0.01$ ) on prestige ( $\beta = 0.44$ ) and brand distinctiveness ( $\beta = 0.60$ ). This agrees with the idea that CSR plays an important role in forming a prestigious brand (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999), and as a brand differentiator attribute (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004).

The testing and acceptance of H8 shows that C–C identification has a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) positive influence on product purchase intention, both directly ( $\beta = 0.22$ ) and indirectly ( $\beta = 0.31$ ) through brand attitude. In this case, and in a similar way to hypothesis H5, our results suggest that the indirect effect of C–C identification on purchase intention has a greater explanatory power than the direct effects. As H9 and H10 suggested, the direct, positive influence of C–C identification on attitude towards the brand ( $\beta = 0.47$ ) and the effect of attitude towards the brand on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.66$ ) are clearly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Figure 2 shows a

summary of the final estimated model, indicating the standardised loads for the significant relationships.

## Conclusions, limitations and future research

By testing the proposed theoretical model, the antecedents to CSR-based C–C identification and the consequences of C–C identification on attitude towards the brand and purchase intention have been analysed. Thus, this research makes it possible to extend the findings in the literature on the influence of CSR image on C–C identification, providing a more sophisticated explanation of how this influence occurs.

Previous works had shown a positive direct influence of CSR image on C–C identification and brand attractiveness; this work not only confirms the existence of this later direct relationship, but also has verified the indirect mechanism through which CSR influences brand attractiveness, demonstrating that it is a more complex mechanism than was previously considered. In fact, this influence is best explained through the effects of CSR image on two intermediate variables, brand prestige and brand distinctiveness, which help to fulfil consumer's self-definitional principles (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994).

Firstly, a socially responsible company is perceived by individuals with greater prestige; CSR helps the consumer to believe that everyone else has a more positive perception of the company (Brammer and Millington, 2005; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999). Also, CSR is an attribute which distinguishes the brand from other competitors, making it special and different from other brands. Given an identity with said characteristics (prestige and distinctiveness), a consumer perceives the brand as a valuable element through which to satisfy two basic definitional needs, an enhanced, distinctive self-concept. For that reason, the socially responsible brand achieves greater value and is perceived as more attractive, and therefore individuals related to it can be *positively distinguished*.

In addition, in a context where a company projects itself as being socially responsible, brand coherence is an important antecedent to its attractiveness. Although our model does not make it possible to state that greater CSR image generates more brand coherence, it does show that this attribute plays a key role in consumer attraction towards a brand which is

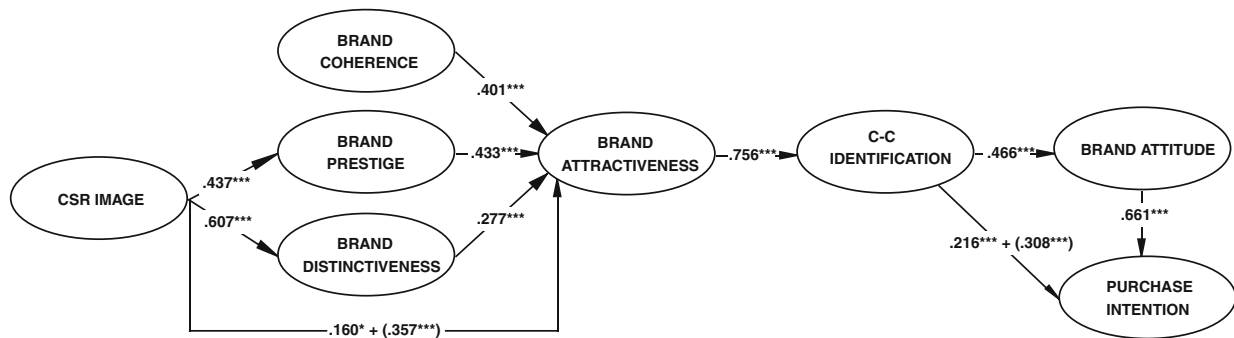


Figure 2. Final model. Indirect effects in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ .

perceived as socially responsible. This conclusion fits in with the proposals by Forehand and Grier (2003) and Dean (2003), who consider that, although individuals are favourable to companies being socially responsible, their initial reaction is one of scepticism. It is therefore logical in this context that the degree to which a new CSR image is consistent with the values and attributes of corporate identity (the degree of brand coherence) should have a significant impact on attractiveness, as it can deactivate negative judgements arising from consumers' original suspicions.

Thirdly, this work confirms that C–C identification can generate attitudinal and behavioural responses in consumers which are beneficial for companies (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Cornwell and Coote, 2005). Moreover, our results suggest that C–C identification is able to influence consumers following a 'think-do' model, in which the mediation of an affective response is not strictly necessary to influence behaviour. However, the influence of C–C identification is more intense on behaviour when mediated by variables of an affective nature, such as attitude towards the brand (0.31 against direct influence of 0.22); this dual route of influencing behaviour intention reinforces the notion that C–C identification is a powerful mechanism for establishing consumer relations in which both actors would benefit.

This research therefore offers a first general implication for brand management; creating and maintaining a state of connection or proximity between consumer and company (C–C identification) is a significant type of relationship for consumers with an enormous potential for generating positive affective and behavioural responses. The main antecedent to C–C identification is the

perceived brand attractiveness for the consumer; therefore is positive any initiative which makes the brand a useful element for individuals to satisfy their personal definitional needs.

This study offers powerful reasons for managers to address CSR: not only does it increase brand prestige and differentiate it from the competition (thereby improving brand equity), but precisely because it does that, consumers can identify with it, as it provides them with useful material to satisfy their distinction need and enhance their self-concept.

Furthermore, our results invite managers to take particular care over brand coherence, because it is an important antecedent to brand attractiveness; literature posits that, when communicating CSR, consumers follow a logic of 'acquiring guarantees' concerning the company's goodwill in projecting itself as socially responsible (Forehand and Grier, 2003; Menon and Kahn, 2003; Webb and Mohr, 1998), so that any judgement which makes the CSR image more legitimate, authentic and well founded will significantly improve brand attractiveness. Brand coherence probably fulfils this role efficiently; a brand identity consistent with pro-social values is the best substrate for a positive CSR image to germinate better consumer responses (in our case, brand attractiveness and C–C identification). So, for generating CSR-based corporate positioning, Integrated Marketing Communication is an essential brand management instrument.

The results and conclusions from this empirical study should be qualified by taking into account a series of limitations, which we consider are present in this research. Firstly, the model has been compared in only one research context (toiletries and cosmetics products) and for a specific brand; this undoubtedly has produced



a bias in the results which means that any generalisation is limited to the underlying circumstances of the research context. Therefore, it would be useful to replicate the study in other sectors of activity and with different brands, in the interests of improving the capacity to generalise the results; for example, it would be interesting to test the model in the services sector, where identification with the company may have a more intense influence on consumer affective and behavioural responses, due to the very nature of the sector which means that C–C relations are more significant (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003).

A second limitation of the study is concerned with the measurement of C–C identification. This work employed the most commonly used scale in the literature to measure identification in consumption contexts (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000), supplemented by measurements of the perception of similarity between personal and organisational identities. However, Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) scale was originally created to measure company–employee identification and it is a short scale (only two items), with a visual item which can generate problems in the field work.

In addition to Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) scale, other approaches to the measurement of C–C identification, such as the use of the Euclidean distance procedure based on answers on organisational and own personality (Ahearne et al., 2005; Marín and Ruiz, 2007) are not satisfactory either, due to excessive length (hampering inclusion in long questionnaires) and the fact that the subjective sense of overlap between personal and organisational identity is not reflected (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002). Consequently, future research needs to develop a specific scale which measures cognitive identification adapted to the C–C context.

Third, another possible limitation relates to the use of a real brand in the empirical study. Although a real brand adds realism and credibility to the perceptions of the CBA campaign, it also creates a situation in which prior knowledge may positively influence evaluations of brand prestige or brand distinctiveness (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Therefore, additional research should replicate this study with a fictional brand and control for the effect of consumer information.

With regard to other possible lines of future research, it would be interesting to broaden the study analysing the influence of CSR image on other

cognitive states of connection/disconnection with the organisation, such as disidentification (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Given that disidentification is not exactly the opposite cognitive state to identification, it would be interesting to examine whether a negative CSR image influences C–C disidentification and if so, how it exerts that influence. Finally, with regard to CSR-based C–C identification consequences for consumer behaviour, it would be necessary to analyse the influence of C–C identification on other affective (e.g. attitude towards the product or attitude towards the social cause) and behavioural variables (e.g. brand promotion or intention to support the CSR domain).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term 'brand' equals 'company' as proposed by McEnally and de Chernatony (1999) for the fifth stage of brand evolution.

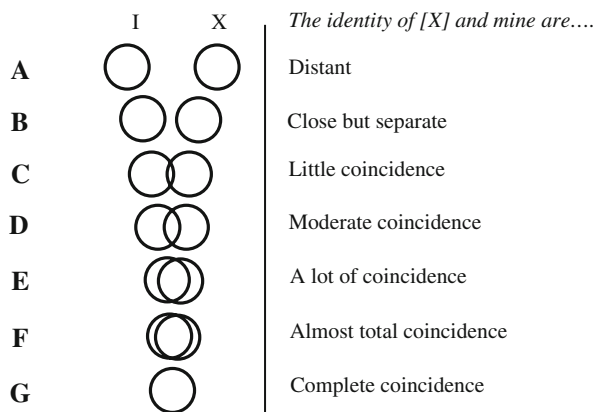
## Appendix

TABLE IV  
Measurement scales

CSR image	
csr1	[X] is aware of environmental issues
csr2	[X] fulfils its social responsibilities
csr3	[X] gives back to society
csr4	[X] acts in a socially responsible way
Brand coherence	
bco1	[X] is a coherent brand
bco2	Through its actions, it is easy to have a clear idea of what [X] represents
bco3	I perceive that [X] offers a coherent global image
Brand prestige	
bpr1	The people around me have a positive image of [X]
bpr2	In general [X] is a respected brand
bpr3	[X] is a brand with a good reputation
Brand distinctiveness	
bdi1	[X] is different from the other brands in the sector
bdi2	[X] is different from the rest of its competitors
bdi3	[X] stands out from its competitors

TABLE IV  
continued

Brand attractiveness	
atr1	I like what [X] represents
atr2	I think that [X] is an attractive brand
atr3	I like what [X] embodies
Brand attitude	
bat1	Bad-good
bat2	Negative-positive
bat3	Unpleasant-pleasant
bat4	Unfavorable-favourable
Purchase intention	
pin1	The next time I need to buy any toiletry and cosmetic product, I will choose [X]
pin2	It is very likely that in the future I will buy a product of [X]
pin3	I will definitely buy a product of [X]
C-C identification	
cbi1	The way I am fits in with what I perceive of [X]
cbi2	I am similar to what I think [X] represents
cbi3	I am similar to how I perceive [X]
cbi4	The image I have of [X] overlaps with my self-image
cbi5	You know that companies and brands have and project their own personality. Similarly, you also have your own personality. Imagine for a moment that the circle on the left in each row is you and represents your own personality and the circle on the right represents [X]. Please indicate what situation (A, B, C, D, E, F or G best reflects the degree of coincidence or superposition between what you are like and what [X] is like)



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