How Young Consumers in Thailand Respond to Global Sporting Apparel Brands: The Mediation Effect of Self-Identification

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Abstract

Competition in global markets is not only fierce, with rivalry among various brands in the same industry, but also because of the threat of an increasing number of counterfeit products. The concept of brand equity studies how brands may become more prominent in the marketplace. Thus, this study investigates the causal relationships of (i) brand awareness and brand image and; (ii) brand image and self-identification with global consumer culture. This study also examined the mediation effect of self-identification with global consumer culture on the relationship of brand image and loyalty. The research was conducted on 276 young Thai consumers asking about global sporting apparel brands. The statistical analysis used for hypothesis testing was regression analysis, with mediation testing included. The findings suggest that the relationship of brand awareness and brand image is a causal relationship, indicating that stronger brand awareness will lead to stronger brand image. It was also found that brand image will influence consumer self-identification with global consumer culture for global sporting apparel brands. Finally, the mediation effect of self-identification with global consumer culture on the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty was found to be fully mediated.

Keywords: *Global Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Self-Identification, Brand Loyalty, Global Brand*

Introduction

The existence of globalisation has increased competition among brands all around the world. With lower barriers to globalisation, a number of products have expanded their markets in the Asia-Pacific Region. Global brands can be defined as brands that offer standardised positioning and image in most countries, with well recognized consumer perceptions towards their products (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016). Sporting goods is one industry that has experienced global growth, and which now includes sport events, sport sponsorship, and sports media as well as the tangible sport product categories—apparel, athletic shoes, and sporting equipment (Gerke, Chanavat, & Benson-Rea, 2014). Just like many other product categories, it has encountered counterfeit products, and it turns out that sporting goods face a relatively high level , compared with other product categories (Chiu, Lee, & Won, 2014). In other words, sporting good brands are not only competing with other genuine brands in the same categories, but they also have to fight against counterfeit products in the market.

According to the study of (Weisheng & Keat, 2016), evidence was found that Singaporian and Taiwanese consumers are more than likely to buy counterfeit sporting good brands if they have positive attitudes towards counterfeit products, positive affirmation from their friends, and the ability to control the purchase of counterfeit products. However, the relationship between brand consciousness and intention to purchase counterfeit sporting goods was found to be negative. This suggests that if consumers have more knowledge about brands, they will be more likely not to buy counterfeit products.

For this reason, creating strong brand equity is essential for protection from the threat of counterfeit products and achievement of firm financial goals. (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016). Moreover, for brands to survive globally, consumer responses towards the brands play an important part in this process. The challenge is to generate brand equity among customers across national borders, as customer-based brand equity will lead to favorable marketing outcomes for the brands (Keller, 1993). Specifically, young consumers are an important segment in this market, with much interest from practitioners and academia (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016). Thus, this research is

specifically focusing on sporting apparel brands, which has become a global trend for young consumers, particularly in Thailand. This study's objectives were to (i) investigate the relationship of global brand awareness and global brand image as they contribute to the understanding of brand knowledge; (ii) examine the impact that global brand image has on self-identification with global consumer culture for global apparel brands; and (iii) identify the mediation effect of self-identification with global consumer culture on the relationship of global brand image and brand loyalty. The findings of this study should enable marketers to understand the process by which young consumers in Thailand become loyal to global sporting apparel brands.

Literature Review
Brand Knowledge

This study is concerned with the threat of increased competition in global markets, as well as the threat from counterfeit products. It has been suggested by (Weisheng & Keat, 2016) that if consumers are brand conscious, their intention to purchase counterfeit products will become a less likely outcome. As the study of (Weisheng & Keat, 2016) focused on the effect of brand consciousness on purchase intentions toward counterfeit products, it is theorized in this study that the affect should be inverse, suggesting that brand consciousness should lead to a higher level of intention to purchase authentic sporting good brands. In other words, more consumer knowledge about a brand should lead to more favorable outcomes.

Keller (1993) introduced the concept of customer-based brand equity, explaining consumer responses to marketing strategies based on their brand knowledge. The notion of brand knowledge is "consisting of a brand node in memory to which a variety of associations are linked" (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Each node represents the information communicated through verbal, visual, abstract, and contextual nature that has been stored in the memory of consumers (Keller, 2008). As brand knowledge is an important aspect in customer-based brand equity, the concept itself can be explained through the notions of brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993). The concept of brand awareness can evaluate the degree to which consumers can recognise and recall brands While brand recognition is consumer ability to identify and differentiate a brand from other competitive brands, brand recall is the ability to bring the brand to mind with or without the use of any cues given (Keller, 1993). Nevertheless, both brand recognition and brand recall comprise consumer brand awareness, which can be disseminated through various marketing communication tools (Macdonald & Sharp, 2003).

Another aspect of brand knowledge is brand image, which is defined as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3). In other words, brand associations such as product quality, brand personality, and organisational associations can be stored in the minds of consumers. In fact, brand image is an essential part in nurturing a strong brand that makes it easy for consumers to differentiate their product brands from those of competitors (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2004). According to (Keller, 1993), brand awareness and brand image are related in a sequential manner; that is, brand awareness exists before consumers store the information they have learnt in their memories. A study by (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006) examined the relationship between brand awareness and brand image, and the result was found to be significantly positive. Thus, this research hypothesises that:

H1: Brand awareness will influence brand image of global sport apparel brands.

Self-Identification

The concept of self-identification has been derived from social identity theory (SIT) defined as "an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). This concept generally explains the reaction of how people view themselves as being part of an "in-group" as opposed to an "out-group." Viewing oneself as part of an in-group tends toward favoritism to the in-group, and discrimination against the out-group (Tajfel, 1974). As a result, a person

will later categorise herself/himself as belonging to a particular social group, which can be explained by self-categorisation theory (SCT) (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Importantly, before individuals can categorise themselves in a social group or category, they must understand their own self-concepts, which can be defined as "the set of cognitive representations of self available to a person" (Turner, et al., 1987, p. 44). The adaptation of this concept has been widened to explain the behaviours of people within an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For instance, the concept of organizational identification, rooted in the SIT and SCT (Riketta, 2005), explains "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experiences of its success and failures" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34). In other words, organizational identification can explain how an individual views the success and failure of the organization as one's own.

A similar concept was also introduced, referred to as "brand identification", in order to explain the relationship between consumers and the brand — a consumer's identification with the brand (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001). In general, identification is the degree of belongingness to a group of any form (i.e., organization, brand). The study of brand identification has been investigated previously in the automotive industry by (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010), who examined how various factors such as reputation and brand personality congruence have an effect on brand identification. According to their findings, evidence suggests that both factors of reputation and brand personality congruence contribute significantly to consumer identification with the brand and result in favorable outcomes. Although previous studies sought to find relationships between the perception of how others view a brand and consumer identification with it in the automotive industry, this study suggests that if consumers identify with certain objects, favorable outcomes will follow. Thus, this study conceptualises self-identification to be related to global consumer culture. To elaborate, consumers who self-identify with global consumer culture tend to view themselves as having similar fashion tastes with consumers around the world, and they will favor international brands more than local brands (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016). Thus, this study conceptualises that there is a relationship between brand image and self-identification with global consumer culture, and hypothesises that:

> *H2: Brand image will influence self-identification with global consumer culture for global sport apparel brands.*

Brand Loyalty

In the field of marketing, extant research has investigated consequences of brand identification and found that brand loyalty is an outcome. For instance, the study of (Kim, et al., 2001) investigated the relationship of brand identification and brand loyalty for high-technology products such as cellular phones. Research by (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010) conducted in Germany found that in order for car owners to be loyal to a brand, they needed to first identify with the brand. However, in this particular study, brand identification was incorporated as a mediator to a relationship beween brand reputation and brand loyalty (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). This study proposes that self-identification with global consumer culture also plays a mediating role in the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty.

> *H3: The relationship between brand image and brand loyalty will be mediated by the degree of self-identification with global consumer culture for global sport apparel brands.*

To summarise all the proposed hypotheses investigated in this study, Figure 1 illustrates the research conceptual model accordingly. The theoretical concepts underpinning these relationships are explained in the previous section.
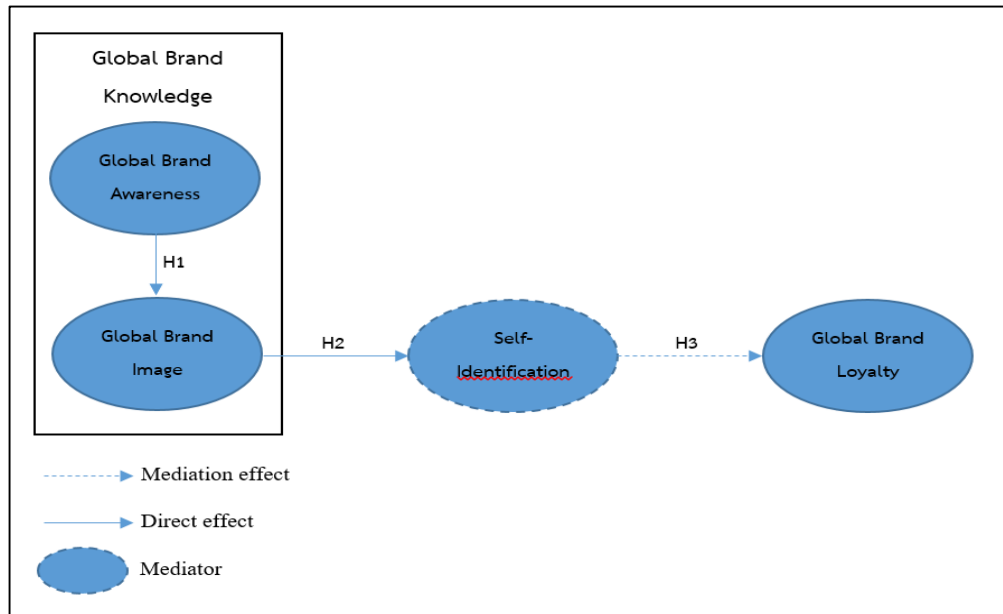
Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model

Research Methodology

In order to examine the proposed hypotheses, questionnaires with closed-ended scale type queries were distributed to college students at a private university in Thailand. The questionnaires asked about factors related to consumer responses toward global sporting apparel brands. A convenience sampling technique was employed. The instrument used in this research was based upon established scales including brand awareness, brand image, self-identification with global consumer culture, and brand loyalty. While a four-item scale of brand awareness was adopted from (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016), a five-item scale of brand image was adopted from (Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012). Another established six-item scale used in this study measured self-identification with global consumer culture, asking about the degree to which respondents viewed themselves to identify with global consumer tastes for sporting apparel brands (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016). Finally, a three-item scale of brand loyalty was employed, asking about the willingness of consumers to continue their purchases of the chosen brand (Martínez, 2015). Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were employed for each question in the questionnaire. The measurements used in this research are illustrated in Table 1, with an acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or higher indicating that these scales are reliable for replication (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994):

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient Scores for Variables

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients (α)
Brand Awareness (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016)	4	0.89
Brand Image (Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012)	5	0.89
Self-Identification (Frank & Watchravesringkan, 2016)	6	0.89
Brand Loyalty (Martínez, 2015)	3	0.84

After questionnaires were distributed to college students, 276 of them were filled in and returned. The data was analyzed using a number of statistical tools, include reliability tests, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and regression analysis. The hypothesised relationships were tested using simple and multiple regression, and a specific method for mediation effect testing was employed. Prior to hypothesis testing, a reliability analysis was performed for each of the dependent and independent variables as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis of Variables

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (α)
Brand Awareness	0.77
Brand Image	0.81
Self-Identification	0.88
Brand Loyalty	0.84

Accordingly, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales exceeded 0.80, which indicates excellent reliability, except for the dimension of employee concern, which obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of above 0.70. This is still considered to be acceptable according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), as illustrated in Table 2.

Research Findings

So far as the demographic characteristics of respondents was concerned, 73.6% of respondents were young Thai females between 18 and 24 years of age. This research investigated global sporting apparel brands, and found that 56.9% of young Thai consumers favor Adidas, followed by Nike (34.8%), spending on average no more than 3,000 Thai Baht per visit (73.9%). Most respondents (54.3%) purchase sporting apparel brands from department stores. Moreover, social media seemed to play an important role in communicating about the brands—73.6% of respondents received brand information through this channel—and it influenced respondents in making purchase decisions (35.5%).

Table 3. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

	Brand Awareness	Brand Image	Self-Identification	Brand Loyalty
Brand Awareness	1			
Brand Image	0.619**	1		
Self-Identification	0.366**	0.279**	1	
Brand Loyalty	0.248**	0.161**	0.746**	1

Prior to hypothesis testing, a Pearson correlation coefficient test was performed to examine for multicollinearity. It found that there was no substantial correlation between any of the predictors (R> 0.90) (Field, 2005), as illustrated in Table 3.

Similarly as shown in Table 4, hypothesis testing on the relationship between brand awareness and brand image (H1) was performed using simple regression analysis. The results show that the predictors explained 38.3% of the variance (ß = 0.619, $p < 0.001$), which indicates a significant impact of brand awareness on brand image. Therefore, hypothesis H1 was accepted.

Table 4. The Relationship between Brand Awareness and Brand Image (Dependent Variable)

Variable	R	R^2	Adj. R^2	Std. Error
	0.619	0.383	0.381	0.463
Brand Awareness	**B**	**SE B**	**ß**	**Sig.**
	0.562	0.043	0.619	0.000

Table 5 illustrates the steps in testing for mediation effect. Prior to examining mediation effect, a three-step approach is needed to detect the existence of mediation effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In Step 1, the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty was examined and the relationship was found to be significantly positive (ß = 0.161, $p < 0.001$). In Step 2, it was hypothesised that brand image has an effect on self-identification with global consumer culture, and a significant impact was found (ß = 0.279, $p < 0.001$). Thus, hypothesis H2 was accepted. Lastly, Step 3 tested the

relationship between self-identification with global consumer culture and brand loyalty, and once again the results showed that self-identification had a significant impact on brand loyalty (ß = 0.746, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the results found that there are significant relationships at the 0.05 level in steps 1-3, and so mediation effect presumably exists. Step 4 of the model indicated that the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty is fully mediated by self-identification with global consumer culture, as brand image is no longer significant when self-identification is controlled (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). Thus, hypothesis H3 was accepted.

Table 5. The Mediator Effects of Product Attitudes

Testing Steps in Mediation Model	B	SE B	95% CI	ß
Testing Step 1:				
Dependent: Brand Loyalty				
Predictor: Brand Image	0.254	0.094	0.069, 0.439	0.161**
Testing Step 2:				
Dependent: Self-Identification				
Predictor: Brand Image	0.318	0.066	0.188, 0.448	0.279**
Testing Step 3:				
Dependent: Brand Loyalty				
Predictor: Self-Identification	1.033	0.056	0.924, 1.143	0.746**
Testing Step 4:				
Dependent: Brand Loyalty				
Mediator: Self-Identification	1.053	0.058	0.939, 1.167	0.761**
Predictor: Brand Image	-0.081	0.066	-0.211, 0.049	-0.051

Discussion

According to the research findings, all of the proposed hypotheses have been statistically satisfied. First of all, it was found that in order for consumers to assign any image to brands, they need to be aware of brand information and able to differentiate one brand from another. Thus, this research has confirmed that the concept of brand knowledge included both brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993), and their relationship is a causal one (Esch, et al., 2006). In other words, brand awareness will lead to brand image; the stronger the awareness created, the more solid it is for brand image. This suggests that global sporting apparel brands must take an appropriate approach when designing their marketing communication strategies. In other words, if communicated information about the brand is indistinct, it is more likely that consumers will not have a clear image of the brand.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, having little brand consciousness or awareness will damage the brand (Weisheng & Keat, 2016) because customers will not know the difference between authentic and counterfeit products. This is the point where consumers turn to conterfeit products because the price is more attractive, and no other unique selling proposition has been clearly communicated. Another important factor to consider about brand communication relates to self-identification with global consumer culture; this research found that brand image will influence self-identification with global consumer culture. According to a previous study by (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010), although conducted in a different industry, it was found that self-identification is vital to favorable consumer responses. In this study, it was found that as long as consumers identified themselves with the taste in fashion of global consumers, sporting apparel brands could enjoy positive firm performance. More specifically, self-identification with global consumer culture tended to play an important role as it had a mediation effect between brand image and brand loyalty. In other words, in order for consumers to be loyal to a global brand, they must see themselves as being part of the in-group of global consumer culture— and especially favor global brands/products more than local ones. This suggests that even if an individual assigned a positive image to the global brand, but does not view one self to be a global consumer, that individual may not be a loyal customer to that particular brand.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This study contributes to the extant research which previously attempted to examine the mediation effect of self-identificaiton—referred to in other research reports as brand identification (Kim, et al., 2001; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). In both of these studies, different predictors were selected (i.e., brand personality, brand reputation), whilst this study focused on brand knowledge, particularly brand image. Thus, future reseach should replicate this model in different contexts globally and domestically to generalise research findings. Moreover, the findings from this research also contribute to practitioners in that marketers can incorporate the concept of brand knowledge when designing their marketing communication strategies, as it is a key factor in generating brand loyalty among consumers. Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is self-identification with global consumer culture, which in this case mediates the relationship in this study. The marketer should find ways to enhance self-identification of consumers globally. The use of social network sites (SNSs) might be useful to boost self-identification with global consumer culture, especially for young consumers who are known as *digital natives*.

The researcher acknowledges that this was drawn from student samples, although the targeted sample group is young consumers. Thus, future research projects should consider broadening data collection to include respondents from different generations. Future researchers should also consider conducting similar research in different countries to enhance cross-national comparisons.

About the Author

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