

Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Personality: The Relative Importance of the Actual and the Ideal Self

Creating emotional brand attachment is a key branding issue in today's marketing world. One way to accomplish this is to match the brand's personality with the consumer's self. A key question, however, is whether the brand's personality should match the consumer's actual self or the consumer's ideal self. On the basis of two empirical studies of 167 brands (evaluated by 1329 and 980 consumers), the authors show that the implications of self-congruence for consumers' emotional brand attachment are complex and differ by consumers' product involvement, consumers' individual difference variables, and the type of self-congruence (fit of the brand's personality with the consumer's actual self versus with the consumer's ideal self). On a general level, actual self-congruence has the greatest impact on emotional brand attachment. Product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness increase the positive impact of actual self-congruence but decrease the impact of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. The authors discuss important managerial and academic implications of these findings.

Keywords: emotional brand attachment, brand personality, self-congruence, actual self, ideal self, product involvement, self-esteem, public self-consciousness

Increasingly, companies are searching for ways to create strong emotional brand connections with consumers. This is motivated by the finding that such connections lead to higher levels of consumer loyalty, which increases company financial performance (Park et al. 2010). For example, cosmetics companies have communicated for years to consumers that using their products will make them more attractive and beautiful and bring them closer to realizing an ideal vision of themselves (an "ideal self"). More recently, however, Unilever's Dove line has used models who are more average in appearance, presumably corresponding more closely to how the majority of consumers actually see themselves (an "actual self"). This approach hit a nerve with many consumers, causing them to form a strong emotional connection with the brand. Thus, the "actual self" seems to be growing in importance to consumers looking for reality and authenticity in marketing

messages (Gilmore and Pine 2007), and many marketing managers seem to increasingly favor an authentic approach to branding. Nevertheless, other companies still create emotional connections with campaigns that focus on ideal beauty. In other words, the "ideal self" seems to remain important because many consumers like brands that do not fit with their actual reality but, rather, represent an aspiration (as a means of self-improvement; Sirgy 1982). Thus, both strategies could be effective, depending on the situation. In light of this, a key question is which strategy to use and when to use it to strengthen emotional brand attachment.

A key concept for investigating this question is the concept of "self-congruence" (i.e., a fit between the consumer's self and the brand's personality or image; Aaker 1999; Sirgy 1982). It has been suggested that self-congruence can enhance affective, attitudinal, and behavioral consumer responses to the brand (e.g., Aaker 1999; Grohmann 2009). In particular, because the consumer's self-concept must be involved for an emotional brand attachment to occur (Chaplin and John 2005; Park et al. 2010), self-congruence should play an especially prominent role in creating emotional brand attachment.

To the best of our knowledge, however, no study has investigated which consumer's self is best to target in particular situations to increase emotional brand attachment. When should marketers emphasize a brand personality related to aspirations (i.e., tailored to the consumers' ideal self), and when should they pertain to the real (actual) self of consumers? Thus, our study has two research objectives:

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(1) to understand the implications and the relative impact of consumers' actual versus ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment and (2) to gain insight into how the effect of actual versus ideal self-congruence on consumers' emotional brand attachment varies across different contexts and consumers.

Previous research on consumer-brand relationships has clearly demonstrated that understanding the emotional components of such relationships is highly relevant to both marketing academics and practitioners (e.g., Fournier 1998). The feelings that a brand generates have the potential to strongly differentiate one brand from another, especially as consumers usually emotionally attach to only a limited number of brands (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Our first objective contributes to the knowledge regarding the development of such an emotional brand attachment. According to Park et al. (2010, p. 36), "Given the uniquely strong effects of brand attachment..., additional research is needed on how marketers can enhance brand attachment." In terms of our second objective, we examine the consumers' product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness as moderators of the relationship between (actual and ideal) self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. This second research objective is especially relevant for marketing managers in providing guidance on which strategy to use in a particular situation.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents our conceptual framework. Note that both actual and ideal self-congruence affect the consumer's emotional brand attachment. However, the influence of actual and ideal self-congruence may vary, depending on the consumer's level of product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness.

Our central assumption is that consumers use products as a way to define themselves to others and purchase brands with a particular personality to express their self-concept (Aaker 1999; Belk 1988). The concept of brand personality

attributes human characteristics or traits to a brand on the basis of a consumer's perception of that brand (Aaker 1997; Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf 2009; Grohmann 2009). Specifically, it has been suggested that brand personality can be instrumental in helping consumers express their self-concept and provide a sense of comfort to consumers who have found a brand that "fits" their self-concept (Aaker 1999; Sirgy 1982).

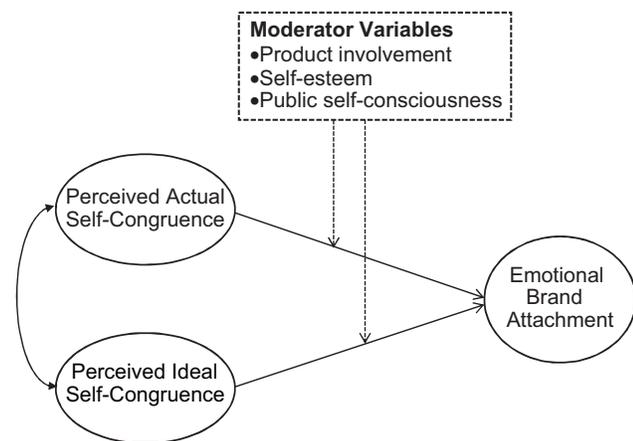
The self-concept is defined as the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are and can take two forms: the "actual self" and the "ideal self." The actual self is based on the perceived reality of oneself (i.e., who and what I think I am now), whereas the ideal self is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what a person believes that he or she would like to be or aspire to become (Lazzari, Fioravanti, and Gough 1978; Wylie 1979). Either way, the consumer can achieve self-congruence by consuming a brand with a personality that he or she regards as similar to either the actual or ideal self. Actual self-congruence reflects the consumer's perception of the fit between the actual self and the brand's personality, whereas ideal self-congruence is the perceived fit of the brand personality with the consumer's ideal self (Aaker 1999). An actually self-congruent brand reflects who the consumer actually is ("this brand's personality is like who I really am"), whereas an ideally self-congruent brand reflects who the consumer would like to be ("this brand's personality is like who I would like to be").

The dependent variable in our framework is "emotional brand attachment." In psychology, attachment is an emotion-laden bond between a person and a specific object (Bowlby 1979). In a marketing context, people can also build and maintain emotionally charged relationships with brands (Belk 1988; Fournier 1998). Thus, emotional brand attachment reflects the bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand and involves feelings toward the brand. These feelings include affection, passion, and connection (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), which represent "hot" affect from the brand's linkage to the self (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007).

We examine three moderators of the relationship between the type of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment: product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness. As we argue in the "Hypotheses" section, each of these variables has an important motivating impact on the link between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. Understanding these interaction effects can have important implications for the design and implementation of a brand personality.

Product involvement has important implications for consumer information processing and has been shown to be an important contingency variable for the success of various marketing strategies and activities (e.g., MacInnis and Park 1991; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). According to Celsi and Olson (1988, p. 211), "a consumer's level of involvement with an object, situation, or action is determined by the degree to which s/he perceives that concept to be personally relevant" (see also Zaichkowsky 1985). Similarly, Park and Young (1986, p. 11) state that "most researchers agree that the level of involvement can be understood by the degree of personal relevance or importance." In addition, Richins and Bloch (1986) define involvement in terms

FIGURE 1
Proposed Framework Linking
Self-Congruence to Emotional Brand Attachment



of the consumer's degree of interest or arousal for a given product. On the basis of these previous studies, we define product involvement as the personal relevance of the product, which is determined by the extent to which the product is interesting and important to the consumer.

When personally relevant knowledge is activated in memory, a motivational state is created that energizes or drives consumers' cognitive behavior (e.g., attention, comprehension, information search; Celsi and Olson 1988) or affective responses (e.g., emotions; Park and Young 1986). Thus, product involvement is perceived by consumers rather than inherent within the product itself. Although there are products that on average (across various consumers) are high or low involvement, the actual level of involvement is still defined individually. In other words, involvement resides within the consumer but is influenced by the product. For example, most people would consider Procter & Gamble's product line to consist of "low-involvement products" (e.g., soap, laundry detergent), but the firm has two panels of 750,000 consumers (one of teenagers, the other of mothers) who advise the company about its brands on a regular basis through the Internet. Clearly, these products are of higher involvement for these people (Marsden 2006).

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall evaluation of his or her worthiness as a human being (Rosenberg 1979). Traditionally, self-esteem has been conceptualized as a uni-dimensional construct that represents an "overall positive-negative attitude toward the self" (Tafarodi and Swann 1995, p. 322). People with high self-esteem like, value, and accept themselves, imperfections and all. Low self-esteem represents an unfavorable definition of the self. However, each of us is strongly driven to feel good about ourself, and we try to maintain and enhance our self-esteem (for a review, see Wylie 1979). In the current context, one way to do so is to consume brands that are congruent with either our actual or ideal self-view (Sirgy 1982).

Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) conceptualize public self-consciousness as the awareness of the self as a social object or the awareness that others are aware of the self. Thus, people with high public self-consciousness are more aware of how others perceive them and try harder to create a favorable public image (Scheier 1980). Public self-consciousness has been used previously in consumer behavior contexts to assess a person's awareness of and concern with his or her self-image and self-appearance in public (e.g., Gould and Barak 1988). Because self-image is important to publicly self-conscious people, we assume that this variable will moderate the relationship between type of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Hypotheses

Main Effects of Actual and Ideal Self-Congruence on Emotional Brand Attachment

Our first two hypotheses refer to the impact of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. On a general level, we can state that the brand's personality (which is the point of reference for self-congruence) provides the basis for the consumer's affection toward the brand by animating and humanizing the underlying brand

(Fournier 1998). Some basic theoretical arguments support the impact of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. First, self-congruence belongs to a broader class of cognitive-consistency theories (Festinger 1957; Heider 1946) that suggest that people strive for consistency in their beliefs and behaviors because inconsistency produces feelings of unpleasantness and tension. Applying these theories to the current context, consumers are motivated to hold a set of beliefs about themselves (self-concept) that motivate them to act in ways (e.g., prefer, purchase, and use brands with a matching brand personality) that reinforce their self-concept.

Furthermore, self-expansion theory (Aron et al. 2005) posits that people possess an inherent motivation to incorporate others (in our context, brands) into their conception of self. The more an entity (brand) is part of a person's self-definition, the closer is the emotional bond. In the consumer behavior literature, emotional attachment has been inherently tied to the consumers' self-concept (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). Some scholars have argued that brand attachment depends on the degree to which consumers view the brand as being part of themselves and reflecting who they are (e.g., Park et al. 2010). The more the brand reflects the consumer's self (i.e., self-congruence) and the greater the personal connection the consumer feels between the self and the brand, the stronger his or her brand attachment becomes.

The general arguments we have discussed apply to both actual and ideal self-congruence. What differentiates them is the underlying motive. In terms of actual self-congruence, self-verification theory (Swann 1983) indicates that people are motivated to verify, validate, and sustain their existing self-concepts. They search for experiences that affirm their sense of self and avoid those experiences that threaten their sense of self (the self-verification motive; see Swann 1983; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler 1992). Self-verification leads to positive self-evaluations and positive evaluations of others that facilitate attachment to others (Burke and Stets 1999). In addition, the self-verification motive leads people to behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves (i.e., their actual self; Lecky 1945). One way to accomplish this is to consume a brand with a personality that is congruent with the actual self, which results in positive reinforcement for the consumer and leads to positive feelings about the brand and greater emotional brand attachment.

H₁: Actual self-congruence has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment.

In terms of ideal self-congruence, self-enhancement has been identified as people's underlying tendency to seek information that increases their self-esteem (Ditto and Lopez 1992). Self-enhancement theory assumes that people are motivated to increase their feelings of personal worth (the self-enhancement motive; Sedikides and Strube 1997). This motive drives people to approach their aspirations (i.e., their ideal self) to enhance their self-esteem (Higgins 1987). A brand with a personality that reflects consumers' ideal selves can support them in their self-enhancement activities by giving them the feeling of getting closer to their ideal self (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Thus, if the consumer sees his or her aspirations and dreams embodied in a brand

(i.e., ideal self-congruence), he or she will be attracted to that brand (see also Boldero and Francis 2002) and become emotionally attached to it.

H₂: Ideal self-congruence has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment.

Relative Effect of Actual and Ideal Self-Congruence on Emotional Brand Attachment

If H₁ and H₂ both hold and the actual and ideal self-congruence both have potential positive effects on the consumer's emotional brand attachment, the next logical question is whether actual or ideal self-congruence is more important for the consumer's emotional brand attachment.

To develop this next hypothesis, we draw on construal-level theory (Liberman and Trope 1998). Construal-level theory suggests that the greater a person's psychological distance from an object (e.g., a brand) or event (temporal, spatial, hypothetical, or social distance; Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007), the greater is the likelihood that he or she will mentally conceptualize this object or event in an abstract way (a so-called high-level construal) rather than in a concrete way (a low-level construal). When an object is further removed from a person's reality (i.e., psychologically distant), he or she tends to have less available and reliable information about it, which leads to the formation of a more abstract and schematic representation of the object. In contrast, when an event occurs in the "here and now" (a low-level construal), an individual tends to have a lot of information about it (he or she is, after all, currently experiencing it) and therefore thinks of it in concrete terms that make use of all the rich and contextualized detail available (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007).

Construal-level theory has generated significant research in consumer behavior, including studies on brand extensions (Kim and John 2008). It may also play a role in the relative importance of actual versus ideal self-congruence for emotional brand attachment. Specifically, the actual and ideal selves are associated with certain levels of psychological distance, which then affect the construal level and the degree of emotional brand attachment.

In general, consumers perceive their actual self as something psychologically close (i.e., lower psychological distance) and their ideal self as something psychologically more distant. Several arguments support this view (see Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007). First, psychologically distant things are those not present in an individual's direct experience of reality. They may be thought of or constructed, but they cannot be experienced directly. Second, an ideal self-view refers to something that takes place further into the future (versus the actual, which is viewed in the here and now). Third, the ideal self is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what an individual believes he or she would like to be (Wylie 1979), and thus is hypothetical (further away from reality) and less likely to occur than a consumer's actual self. Because one does not know the precise way a distant (ideal) self will manifest itself, this improbable event seems more distant than a probable event and therefore has greater psychological distance (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). In other

words, the actual self is more probable (psychologically closer), whereas the ideal self is something desirable (psychologically more distant). Furthermore, the regulatory focus literature suggests that promotion goals (e.g., ideal self-congruence) are perceived as more temporally removed (i.e., psychologically distant) from the present than prevention goals (Pennington and Roesse 2003).

The psychological distance associated with the ideal or actual self can then be transferred to the underlying self-congruent brand. If a consumer perceives a certain level of congruence between the ideal self and the brand, this brand is psychologically more distant than a brand that the consumer perceives to be congruent with his or her actual self. Hence, the brand is psychologically closer in the case of actual self-congruence. As a consequence, the consumer will mentally construe an actual self-congruent brand on a lower construal level (i.e., concretely with many details). When a brand's personality is close to a consumer's ideal self, it is linked with an abstract and high-level mental construal. These differing psychological distances and construal levels have an impact on the consumer's emotional brand attachment because psychological distance and affect are inextricably linked. Empirically, it has been shown that distance reduces the affective intensity of stimuli, and distant future events (i.e., abstract and high-level construals) are rated lower in experienced affect than near future events (i.e., concrete and low-level construals) (Williams and Bargh 2008). On the basis of these considerations, we hypothesize the following:

H₃: Actual self-congruence has a stronger effect on emotional brand attachment than ideal self-congruence.

Moderating Effects

It is important to note that the hypothesized effects in H₁ through H₃ may not be equally pronounced for all people. In other words, these effects may be stronger for those with certain characteristics or predispositions. Thus, we further explore three key variables that might moderate the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Our first hypothesized moderator of the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment is product involvement. As we outlined in the context of H₁, actual self-congruence increases emotional brand attachment because it supports a consumer in his or her aim for self-verification. According to research in psychology, self-verification requires substantial cognitive effort and is more likely to occur when people are motivated to process deeply (Swann et al. 1990). Thus, consumers with high product involvement will be more motivated to invest the cognitive effort required for self-verification (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

Furthermore, motivation for self-verification tends to be more important among consumers with high product involvement. For example, in the context of interpersonal relationships, Hixon and Swann (1993) find that people tend to prefer self-verifying partners when they perceive the consequences of choosing an interaction partner to be important. Choosing self-verifying partners requires a certain amount

of self-reflection and thus more cognitive effort because the person must access his or her own self for a comparison process (Hixon and Swann 1993). Because previous research has indicated that brand relationships often take on the characteristics of interpersonal relationships (Fournier 1998), consumers will be more likely to prefer self-verifying brands (i.e., with a high actual self-congruence) when involvement is high. In addition, the increased cognitive effort leads to a greater incorporation of the brand into the consumer's self-concept. As we mentioned previously, when this occurs the consumer feels a greater personal connection between the self and the brand, resulting in a stronger emotional brand attachment.

When involvement is low, consumers may not be willing to process deeply and therefore do not engage in the cognitive elaboration required to engage in self-verification. In this case, the product is not important enough for consumers to invest the effort of choosing the brand as a self-verifying brand relationship partner. As a result, these consumers are less likely to make the connection between the brand and their actual self and therefore are less likely to form an emotional brand attachment, which leads to the following hypothesis:

H_{4a}: Product involvement strengthens the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Alternatively, in the case of ideal self-congruence, we argue that the impact on emotional brand attachment is weakened by the consumer's product involvement. As we discussed in the context of H₂, the self-enhancement process that results from the consumption of ideally self-congruent brands increases the consumer's emotional brand attachment.

Our first line of reasoning is based on interpersonal relationship theory. According to research in this area, self-enhancement is more likely to occur when cognitive capacity is limited (Swann et al. 1990), which is the case when product involvement is low (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). In other words, people tend to like self-enhancing interaction partners when there is little self-reflection (i.e., when the selection of the interaction partner does not have important consequences; Hixon and Swann 1993). This occurs because the choice of a self-enhancing interaction partner is much easier to make (in comparison to a self-verifying partner). In other words, because the person does not have to access his or her own self for a comparison process, the positive image of the interaction partner is used as an indicator for potential self-enhancement. Translating this to a branding context, consumers with low product involvement should prefer self-enhancing brands (i.e., with a high ideal self-congruence) because they can use the brand's positive image for self-enhancement without elaborating in detail about their own ideal self.

In addition, these effects are consistent with the self-evaluation-maintenance model of Tesser (1988), which examines the processes through which people can maintain positive self-evaluations when facing potentially threatening comparisons with others. When relevance is high, consumers are more likely to engage in an upward comparison process and relate themselves to ideal others. When this

occurs, the better performance of the ideal person is a threat to self-evaluation and can cause negative emotions. In this case, a person will put distance between him- or herself and the ideal other. In the present context, the image of the ideal brand could be threatening to highly involved consumers and cause negative emotions as well, which makes consumers aware that they have not achieved their ideal.

However, when relevance is low, people are less likely to engage in a detailed comparison process; rather, a heuristic reflection process is more likely to be used, in which the self is assimilated with the other and the person can "bask in the reflected glory" of the other's successes (Cialdini et al. 1976, p. 366). The same process can occur in a branding context. According to MacInnis and De Mello (2005), brands or products that envision ideals can be sources of hope and promote status, desires, symbolic self-completion, and enhanced self-esteem. When involvement is low, consumers can simply experience the positive emotions (such as hope) associated with the brand, thereby increasing their emotional brand attachment. These arguments lead us to the following hypothesis:

H_{4b}: Product involvement weakens the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Our second hypothesized moderator of the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment is self-esteem. Work in psychology indicates that all people strive to maintain a positive self-concept (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988). Self-esteem is considered one of the strongest psychogenic needs, and people are strongly driven to feel good about themselves. People high in self-esteem evaluate their actual self as positive (i.e., positive self-conceptions; Kernis 2003) and seek to confirm their actual self-views. On the basis of these self-verification processes, they will feel closer to a brand that reflects their actual self. Thus, self-verification leads to more positive feelings toward the underlying brand. People with low self-esteem perceive their actual self as more negative, and they are less likely to make an emotional connection with brands that come close to their actual self, because linking a brand to a self that is perceived as negative generates negative feelings. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H_{5a}: Self-esteem strengthens the relationship between actual self-congruence with a brand and emotional brand attachment.

In the case of ideal self-congruence, self-enhancement strategies become central. In particular, people with low self-esteem are more likely to have a gap between their actual and ideal selves (Higgins 1987). Self-enhancement is a way to reduce this discrepancy (e.g., Markus and Wurf 1987). According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987), reducing the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves (i.e., getting closer to the ideal self) can generate positive emotions toward the cause of such a self-enhancement. In other words, connecting with brands that embody an ideal personality is a self-enhancing strategy for consumers who are dissatisfied with their actual self (i.e., low self-esteem). This strategy makes consumers feel that they get closer to their ideal self, which bolsters their self-confidence and leads to positive emotions toward the underlying brand. For

example, Solomon (1983) provides the example of adolescent boys' use of "macho" products such as cars, clothing, and cologne to bolster their fragile masculine self-concepts. Thus, a brand that is similar to a person's ideal self may be used to bolster his or her self-confidence (which is emotionally pleasing), which in turn can increase the emotional attachment to that brand.

People with high self-esteem rarely attempt to bolster their feelings of worth because their actual-ideal self-discrepancy tends to be low (Higgins 1987). As a consequence, they are less likely to engage in self-enhancement strategies and therefore do not experience the positive emotions that result from such a symbolic self-improvement. Thus, they are less likely to develop a strong emotional attachment with self-enhancing brands.

H_{5b}: Self-esteem weakens the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Our third hypothesized moderator of the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment is public self-consciousness (the awareness of the self as a social object). People with high public self-consciousness are more concerned about the impression they make and continuously think about how they present themselves to others (Carver and Scheier 1987; Fenigstein 1987). Therefore, they should be more aware that others can judge them on the basis of their consumption of brands. In line with this argument, Bushman (1993) finds that publicly self-conscious people have a preference for national brand labels versus bargain brand labels because these brands are important means of self-expression. In the current context, consumers with high public self-consciousness should be more aware that by consuming a self-congruent brand, they will express to others who they really are (actual self-congruence) or who they would like to be (ideal self-congruence; Markus and Wurf 1987).

In terms of actual self-congruence, by consuming a brand that is congruent with the actual self, consumers can express their actual (true) self to others. Self-expression is often a key motive for the consumption of a brand, and satisfying this need is emotionally pleasing (Fournier 1998). In doing so, consumers are true to themselves (i.e., authentic) and do not communicate something to others that they are not. Thus, they achieve a balance between their true inner view and the public perception of themselves, which results in cognitive consonance. Consonance creates a positive feeling (Festinger 1957) that can lead to higher emotional brand attachment. Consumers with high public self-consciousness are more aware of this consonance because they care more about the impressions they make on others and thus better recognize the authentic self-expression potential through the consumption of an actually self-congruent brand. Furthermore, publicly self-conscious consumers will appreciate authentic self-expression because they can feel more in control of the social interaction (Doherty and Schlenker 1991). By consuming an actually self-congruent brand, they create a public impression that generates expectations they feel they can meet (Baumeister, Hamilton, and Tice 1985), which leads to a closer emotional bond with the brand.

Less publicly self-conscious consumers, however, are much less concerned about others' impressions and therefore care less about expressing themselves in an accurate way (Fenigstein 1987). They do not gain the same positive emotions that result from self-expression through brands that are congruent with the actual self. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H_{6a}: Public self-consciousness strengthens the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Highly publicly self-conscious people tend to be socially anxious when they are unable to live up to their positive self-presentations (Buss 1980). Thus, they have a desire to avoid disapproval, which motivates them to steer clear of self-presentational failures such as being unable to live up to their claims. Applied to the current context, highly publicly self-conscious consumers may not feel comfortable with an ideally self-congruent brand because they fear that such a brand promises too much to others (i.e., others' expectations become too high). In other words, these consumers may fear presenting themselves in an overly positive and unrealistic way, which could cause others to expect too much of them or to place extravagant demands on them (Baumeister, Hamilton, and Tice 1985). Consumers with high public self-consciousness are aware of the need to fulfill social expectations and worry about the negative public impression they make in the case of not meeting these expectations. This perceived risk of reputational damage and the associated lack of control of public image can result in negative emotions toward the source of that risk: the ideally self-congruent brand, which leads to a lower emotional attachment toward such a brand among consumers with high public self-consciousness.

In contrast, consumers with low public self-consciousness care less about their public perception. Consequently, they should be less concerned about the risk of overpromising and failing to meet these promises. They also would take more risks and care less about their failure to live up to high expectations because they are less concerned with regard to their public impression on others (Tunnel 1984). Therefore, negative emotions toward the underlying brand evoked by risky self-exposure should not play an important role. Thus, there are no negative emotions interfering with the positive emotions the consumer has because of the self-enhancement potential of an ideally self-congruent brand. These positive emotions should then increase the consumer's emotional brand attachment.

H_{6b}: Public self-consciousness weakens the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Method

Data Collection and Sample

To test our hypotheses empirically, we conducted two large-scale studies. In Study 1, we addressed the hypotheses involving the general and relative impact of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment (H₁–H₃) and

explored the effect of product involvement as the moderating variable (H_{4a} and H_{4b}). The goal of Study 2 was to validate the results from the first study involving our basic model (H_1 – H_3) and to explore the impact of two additional moderating variables (self-esteem and public self-consciousness: H_{5a} – H_{6b}).

We followed the same procedure in both studies. E-mail invitations to participate in a survey were sent to 11,093 consumers (6943 in Study 1 and 4150 in Study 2). These consumers included people from the student body of a Swiss university's departments of business administration, economics, law, and medicine; high school students; employees of governmental institutions and individual companies; and members of consumer protection associations in Switzerland. In the e-mail, we provided a direct link to a specific section of a web page that was accessible only through the link provided in the e-mail. As an incentive to participate in our study, we entered respondents' names in a lottery for more than \$4,500 in prizes, including helicopter flights over the Swiss Alps, ski holidays, iPods, iPads, and marketing textbooks.

Respondents followed a link to an online questionnaire that randomly assigned them to a brand. Each respondent answered the questions for only one brand and first reported his or her familiarity with that brand on the three-item brand familiarity scale of Kent and Allen (1994; "I feel very familiar with brand x," "I feel very experienced with brand x," and "I know the product[s] of brand x"). Only if the respondent reported an overall brand familiarity of at least 3.5 (5 = "maximum familiarity," and 1 = "no familiarity") was that person allowed to continue with the corresponding brand. If the brand familiarity was below 3.5, a new brand was randomly assigned. This interactive assignment of a brand to the consumer was a key reason that we used an online questionnaire.

This procedure resulted in 1329 (Study 1) and 890 (Study 2) responses, for overall response rates of 19.1% (Study 1) and 21.4% (Study 2). The two samples included consumers from a variety of backgrounds (Study 1: 68.8% students, 22.1% employees, 9.1% others, 54.9% female, 45.1% male, and average age of 24.5 years; Study 2: 60.3% students, 36.6% employees, 3.1% others, 55.8% female, 44.2% male, and average age of 26.8 years).

We tested the extent to which the students' answers were comparable to the other respondents and conducted mean difference tests for all focal constructs. We found no significant differences with regard to all constructs of our research framework between the answers of students versus nonstudents. Thus, pooling together the groups of respondents seemed appropriate. In addition, multiple group analyses revealed that the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment do not significantly differ between the two groups of respondents (i.e., the chi-square differences with $\Delta d.f. = 1$ are not significant; Study 1: $\Delta\chi^2_{ASC} = 1.22$, $\Delta\chi^2_{ISC} = .01$; Study 2: $\Delta\chi^2_{ASC} = 2.05$, $\Delta\chi^2_{ISC} = .93$).

Our unit of analysis was the individual brand relationship between a consumer and a specific familiar brand. We studied 167 brands, covering several industries, including fast-moving consumer goods (Study 1 = 41.8%, Study 2 = 40.9%),

durable consumer goods (Study 1 = 15.9%, Study 2 = 17.8%), services (Study 1 = 26.0%, Study 2 = 22.6%), and retailing (Study 1 = 16.3%, Study 2 = 18.8%). The brands were chosen from among different Interbrand rankings (the 50 most valuable Swiss brands in 2006 and 2007 and the best global brands in 2006 and 2007) and therefore had a high probability of being familiar to the respondents.

In each study, we sent all initial e-mails on the same day and recorded the specific dates of responses of the individual consumers. This record enabled us to distinguish between early and late respondents. The tests showed no significant differences between the responses from these two groups on all our major constructs and on key demographic variables, which suggests that nonresponse bias is not a problem in our data (Armstrong and Overton 1977).

Measures

We based the items used for our measurement scales on empirically validated scales from previous studies. We measured the questionnaire's constructs with five-point Likert scales anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." We pretested our questionnaire and further refined it on the basis of the comments of 50 business administration graduate students.

We assessed the independent variable of actual self-congruence by using the scale of Sirgy et al. (1997) and adapted it for assessing ideal self-congruence. Assuming that self-congruence is a holistic, gestalt-like perception, Sirgy et al. (1997) show that a method that taps the psychological experience of self-congruence directly is more predictive of different consumer behaviors (e.g., brand preference and brand attitude) than traditional measures (e.g., mathematical discrepancy indexes). This global measure is operationalized using a two-step approach in which respondents take their time to think about and elaborate on the brand's personality, think about their actual and ideal selves, and then indicate the extent of self-congruence in a global manner. Specifically, respondents were instructed to take a moment to think about brand x as if it were a person and to think of the set of human characteristics associated with that brand. Next, respondents were asked to think about how they see themselves and how they would describe their own personality (actual self). After respondents completed this, they indicated their global perception of the degree of match or mismatch between how they see the brand's personality and how they see themselves (for the instructions and the specific items, see Appendix A). The same procedure was used for ideal self-congruence.

In terms of the dependent variable, we assessed emotional brand attachment using six items adapted from measures previously used in consumer research (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). As Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) propose, we loaded these items on three second-order factors (i.e., affection, connection, and passion). To keep the number of parameters in our model at a manageable level while preserving the multifaceted nature of the construct, we followed Little et al.'s (2002) suggestions and used item parcels to measure the consumers' emotional brand attachment in our structural model. More specifically, for each of the three facets of emotional brand attachment

(i.e., affection, connection, and passion), we averaged the values on the respective scales and then used these three average values as indicators for the higher-level construct of emotional brand attachment.

Finally, we measured the moderating variable product involvement with two items from Van Trijp, Hoyer, and Inman (1996) and added three items that reflect the personal importance based on values and attitudes (e.g., “Because of my personal values, I feel that this a product that ought to be important for me”) to ensure that our measure mirrored our conceptual definition of this construct. We instructed the participants to indicate to what extent the given statements apply to the product associated with the brand *x* (which was interactively provided to them) and provided them guidance over what a product is: “Product” refers to the product that is connected to the brand (e.g., product “car” for the brand “Audi”). For the assessment of consumers’ self-esteem, we used all ten items from the widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965). We measured public self-consciousness with Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss’s (1975) seven-item scale. In the course of our measurement validation, four items remained for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and four items remained for the Public Self-Consciousness Scale.

Appendix A provides a complete list of our measures and their psychometric properties, and Table 1 presents the correlations of the framework variables. Overall, our measurement scales show sufficient reliability and validity. More specifically, for all constructs, the composite reliability exceeds the threshold value of .6 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). All coefficient alpha values exceed the threshold value of .7 recommended by Nunnally (1978), except the actual self-congruence measure in Study 1 (.69). All the factor loadings are significant ($p < .01$), which Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips (1991) suggest as a criterion of convergent validity. Furthermore, with few exceptions, item reliabilities are above the recommended value of .4 (Bagozzi and Baumgartner 1994). We assessed the discriminant validity of the construct measures on the basis of the Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) criterion, which indicates that discriminant validity is supported if the average variance extracted exceeds the squared correlations between all pairs of constructs. All constructs

fulfilled this requirement, which suggests that the degree of discriminant validity for all our constructs is sufficient.

To test for potential common method bias, we used a confirmatory factor analysis approach to Harman’s one-factor test (e.g., Podsakoff et al. 2003) and assessed whether a single latent factor would account for all the manifest variables of our basic model. In this test, a single-factor model in which all manifest variables are explained through one common method factor was compared through a chi-square difference test to our multifactor measurement model. In Study 1, the chi-square value of the single-factor model was 1513.87 (d.f. = 14), which was significantly worse compared with our basic measurement model with the three factors actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence, and emotional brand attachment: $\Delta\chi^2 = 1427.92$, $\Delta d.f. = 3$, $p \leq .01$. Also in Study 2, the chi-square difference between the single-factor and the three-factor model was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 887.58$, $\Delta d.f. = 3$, $p \leq .01$), which provides preliminary evidence that the measurement model of both studies is robust to common method variance.

Results

We used AMOS 17.0 to model the structural relationships posited by our conceptual framework (see Figure 1). Actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence were allowed to correlate in our structural equation model. In both studies, the measures of overall fit mostly meet conventional standards, which suggests that our model fits the data well (Study 1: $\chi^2/d.f. = 7.814$, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .072, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .036, normed fit index [NFI] = .984, non-normed fit index [NNFI] = .973, and comparative fit index [CFI] = .986; Study 2: $\chi^2/d.f. = 4.386$, RMSEA = .062, SRMR = .019, NFI = .989, NNFI = .983, and CFI = .991).

In Table 2, we report the parameter estimates of our basic model. In both studies, the results confirm a strong positive relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (Study 1: $\gamma = .55$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\gamma = .57$, $p \leq .01$), which supports H_1 . Ideal self-congruence, however, did not have a significant effect on emotional brand attachment (Study 1: $\gamma = .02$, not significant [n.s.];

TABLE 1
Correlations of Framework Variables

		1	2	3	4	5
1. Actual self-congruence	Study 1					
	Study 2					
2. Ideal self-congruence	Study 1	.62**				
	Study 2	.75**				
3. Emotional brand attachment	Study 1	.47**	.41**			
	Study 2	.53**	.49**			
4. Product involvement	Study 1	.39**	.30**	.42**		
	Study 2	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a		
5. Self-esteem	Study 1	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a		
	Study 2	−.06	−.14**	−.06		
6. Public self-consciousness	Study 1	— ^a				
	Study 2	.11**	.08*	.10**	— ^a	.14**

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

^aNot included in the respective study.

TABLE 2
Results of Hypotheses Testing

		Perceived Actual Self-Congruence → Emotional Brand Attachment		Perceived Ideal Self-Congruence → Emotional Brand Attachment	
		Standardized Estimate (t-Value)	$\Delta\chi^2$	Standardized Estimate (t-Value)	$\Delta\chi^2$
Basic Model					
	Study 1	.547** (8.093)		.018 (.297)	
	Study 2	.565** (6.762)		.074 (.960)	
Basic Model in Different Industries					
Fast-moving consumer goods	Study 1	.527** (5.796)		.023 (.276)	
	Study 2	.656** (5.188)		-.057 (.634)	
Durable consumer goods	Study 1	.594** (4.292)		.012 (.104)	
	Study 2	.372* (1.990)		.321 (1.814)	
Services	Study 1	.632** (2.770)		-.104 (-.493)	
	Study 2	.582** (3.731)		.092 (.621)	
Retail	Study 1	.361* (2.274)		.222 (1.499)	
	Study 2	.540** (3.064)		.097 (.579)	
Moderated Models					
Product involvement	Low	.230** (3.229)	5.617*	.197** (2.914)	5.751*
	High	.589** (5.759)		-.067 (-.743)	
Self-esteem	Low	.412** (4.022)	4.345*	.260** (2.718)	7.487**
	High	.778** (5.560)		-.173 (-1.346)	
Public self-consciousness	Low	.447** (4.298)	3.963*	.207* (2.135)	5.817*
	High	.889** (4.648)		-.244 (-1.410)	

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

Study 2: $\gamma = .07$, n.s.). Therefore, H_2 is not supported. The values of these two path coefficients provide support for our hypothesis regarding the relative impact of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment (H_3). Actual self-congruence has a stronger impact on emotional brand attachment than does ideal self-congruence: The corresponding differences are .53 (Study 1) and .50 (Study 2). On the basis of a chi-square difference test, in which we compared an unconstrained model with a constrained model (i.e., the two path coefficients of actual and ideal self-congruence were constrained to be equal), this difference is highly significant (Study 1: $\Delta\chi^2 = 33.89$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .01$; Study 2: $\Delta\chi^2 = 12.25$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .01$). Thus, in support of H_3 , actual self-congruence has a significantly stronger effect on emotional brand attachment than does ideal self-congruence.

To check the validity of our hypothesized model across different product categories (i.e., fast-moving consumer goods, durable consumer goods, services, and retail), we conducted multiple-group analysis and ran the main model separately for the different subgroups. The results were stable across categories. In all four categories, actual self-congruence has a significant effect on emotional brand attachment, whereas ideal self-congruence does not (for the results, see Table 2). Furthermore, a test of invariance regarding the structural coefficients revealed that the null hypothesis (i.e., that there are no differences regarding the coefficients) cannot be rejected. The constrained model with the same parameter estimates across all four categories does not have a significantly worse model fit than the unconstrained model (Study 1: $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.756$, $\Delta d.f. = 6$, n.s.;

Study 2: $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.972$, $\Delta d.f. = 6$, n.s.). Thus, pooling the different categories was appropriate.

We used multiple group structural equation modeling to test H_4 – H_6 , which refer to the moderating role of product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. First, we performed a median split along the values of the moderator variables to create two subsamples for each moderator, one with low values of the moderator (e.g., consumers with a low level of product involvement) and the other with high values (e.g., consumers with high levels of product involvement). We then analyzed the basic model implied by our theoretical framework simultaneously in both subsamples using AMOS 17.0. Table 2 shows the parameter estimates for the different subgroups.

Regarding our first moderator variable, product involvement, the results confirmed a positive moderating effect of product involvement on the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. Although actual self-congruence has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment among low-involvement consumers ($\gamma = .23$, $p \leq .01$), this effect becomes even stronger among consumers with a high level of product involvement ($\gamma = .59$, $p \leq .01$). To statistically test the significance of this moderating effect, we again relied on a chi-square difference test. In support of H_{4a} , the chi-square difference with $\Delta d.f. = 1$ is significant at the .05 level ($\Delta\chi^2_{ASC} = 5.62$). Ideal self-congruence, however, has a significant and positive effect on emotional brand attachment only among consumers with a low level of involvement ($\gamma = .20$, $p \leq .01$) and

no significant effect among high-involvement consumers ($\gamma = -.07$, n.s.). The chi-square difference again is significant ($\Delta\chi^2_{ISC} = 5.75$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .05$), in support of H_{4b}. To ensure that these observed effects of involvement are not caused by differences between product categories (which happen to also differ in involvement), we tested the interaction of involvement and self-congruence *within* each of the four product categories and found that the interaction had the expected sign in each of the product categories, though it only reached significance for fast-moving consumer goods (the category with the greatest sample size).

Self-esteem is our second moderating variable. Our results indicate a stronger impact of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment among consumers with a high level of self-esteem ($\gamma = .78$, $p \leq .01$) compared with consumers with low self-esteem ($\gamma = .41$, $p \leq .01$, $\Delta\chi^2_{ASC} = 4.35$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .05$), in support of H_{5a}. The effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment becomes significant and positive among consumers with low self-esteem ($\gamma = .26$, $p \leq .01$) but has no significant impact in the condition of high self-esteem ($\gamma = -.17$, n.s.). Here, the chi-square difference is highly significant ($\Delta\chi^2_{ISC} = 7.49$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .01$), in support of H_{5b}.

Our third moderator is the consumer's public self-consciousness. In support of H_{6a}, actual self-congruence has a weaker positive effect on emotional brand attachment among consumers with low public self-consciousness ($\gamma = .45$, $p \leq .01$) compared with consumers with a high level of public self-consciousness ($\gamma = .89$, $p \leq .01$; $\Delta\chi^2_{ASC} = 3.96$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .05$). Ideal self-congruence, however, has a significant and positive effect on emotional brand attachment only among consumers with low public self-consciousness ($\gamma = .21$, $p \leq .05$). This relationship is not significant among consumers high in public self-consciousness ($\gamma = -.24$, n.s.). In support of H_{6b}, the negative moderating effect of public self-consciousness is significant ($\Delta\chi^2_{ISC} = 5.82$, $\Delta d.f. = 1$, $p \leq .05$).

In addition, we tested the moderation of the relative effect of actual versus ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment (H₃) by our three moderators. Using multiple-group structural equation modeling (for a detailed description of the tests performed, see Appendix B), we found that all three moderators (product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness) can significantly increase the relative importance of actual self-congruence as a driver of emotional brand attachment (i.e., compared with ideal self-congruence). However, the relatively stronger effect of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment becomes reliably less pronounced when product involvement, self-esteem, or public self-consciousness is low.

Discussion

The primary focus of our research was to develop a better understanding of when marketers should emphasize a brand personality related to aspirations (i.e., tailored to the consumers' ideal self) or the real (actual) consumer self to increase emotional brand attachment. Our findings support the view that self-congruence can increase emotional brand

attachment; however, both the type of self-congruence and the context/consumer characteristics must be considered. In general, brands with actual self-congruence generated higher levels of emotional brand attachment. This effect was even more pronounced when consumers were involved with the product (Study 1) or had a high level of self-esteem or public self-consciousness (Study 2). Surprisingly, and in contrast to the commonly observed managerial practice of aspirational branding, across our two studies, brands with ideal self-congruence in general were less successful in increasing emotional brand attachment. However, we found that aspirational branding may still work under certain conditions, specifically when involvement, self-esteem, or public self-consciousness is low.

Academic Implications and Further Research

The first important academic contribution is to provide knowledge regarding the issue of whether to focus on the actual or ideal self in generating emotional brand attachment. Our observation across two studies suggests that consumers are more likely to form a strong emotional connection with a brand that validates who they are right now than with a brand that promises them help achieving an ideal self. This is an important finding because it can be linked to the concept of authenticity in the psychology literature (e.g., Erickson 1995) and consumer research literature (e.g., Beverland and Farrelly 2010). A person's authenticity is reaffirmed when he or she acts in ways that reflect the "real me" or "my true self" and is discouraged when acting in ways that they feel are phony or artificial (Harter 2002). An authentic relationship involves presenting one's "genuine" self to someone else in a way that creates strong emotions and bonds based on intimacy and trust (Erickson 1995; Harter 2002). Thus, our research provides a possible explanation for the success of an authentic approach to branding, which recently has been gaining importance in academia and business practice.

Furthermore, our empirical findings for H₃ support construal-level theory arguments, demonstrating the potential relevance of this theory in developing a better understanding of branding phenomena. For example, the construal level may have an impact on consumers' evaluations of emotional branding activities (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006) and collaborative branding (when the company actively engages the consumer in branding activities, for example, through brand communities; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Such activities might bring the brand psychologically closer to the consumer and result in a more concrete (high-level), brand-related mind-set, thereby leading to a different consumer response compared with low-level construals. In other words, construal level can be a theoretical explanation for why certain branding strategies and activities work or do not work. Thus, a brand information-processing perspective based on construal-level theory should be a promising avenue for future brand management research.

Although we expected a positive overall effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment, the results of both studies revealed otherwise (i.e., no significant effects were found). This finding might be explained by the

coexistence of both positive and negative effects of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. On the positive side, self-enhancement activities can lead to a positive relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (Sirgy 1982), though this seems to occur mainly for consumers with low levels of self-esteem, product involvement, or public self-consciousness. Some consumers, however, may negatively perceive any gap between their own reality and a brand with an idealistic brand personality that personifies their dreams and aspirations (e.g., fashion brands that personify perfect beauty and richness; Richins 1991). Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) supports the notion that such an experience can be an emotional process. Making a social comparison between the self and others (e.g., attractive models in advertising; Gulas and McKeage 2000) may lead to negative feelings (Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris 1995) such as inferiority, jealousy, or envy, which can occur especially when the consumer believes that the other person is “out of reach” or too superior (upward social comparison). Such emotions can be painful and even devastating for the consumer, such that he or she wants to distance himself or herself from the other (superior) person (Collins 1996). Transferred to a branding context, when the brand represents something that is out of reach, this need for distancing could result in a decreased emotional brand attachment.

Another important academic contribution focuses on our moderating variables. We add to existing knowledge on emotional brand attachment by examining several conditions under which actual or ideal self-congruence can create strong attachment. Taking a contingency perspective on self-congruence, we show that the impact of a self-congruent brand personality depends on the type of self-congruence and on individual consumer-related variables and characteristics. Thus, our findings support the view that self-congruence needs a more fine-grained perspective that distinguishes between different types of self-congruence (Sirgy 1982). They also contribute to the literature that calls for a more targeted approach to branding by directly addressing consumer-specific differences in the definition and implementation of branding strategies (e.g., Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010).

Our results indicate that product involvement is an important moderator of the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. When involvement is high, the brand is more personally relevant, and the consumer will elaborate on the connections between the brand and his or her actual self. If these comparisons are congruent, the consumer’s actual self is verified, and the consumer feels a stronger connection with the brand, leading to stronger emotional brand attachment. However, when involvement is low, consumers are less willing to engage in self-verification through the brand because the underlying product is not important enough. However, they seem to be willing to emotionally connect with self-enhancing (i.e., ideally self-congruent) brands. By examining the moderating effect of product involvement, we gained a better understanding of why focusing on the actual self works better in some situations, whereas a focus on the ideal self works in others.

The second moderating variable was self-esteem. Our results are consistent with the notion that consumers with high self-esteem are attracted to a brand that is congruent with their actual self because of a self-verification process, which helps consumers feel good about themselves and builds stronger brand connections. Consumers with low self-esteem, however, would find brands related to the ideal self more attractive because these brands represent an opportunity to make them feel better about themselves by association (i.e., self-enhancement). In contrast, brands congruent with the actual self are perceived negatively when consumers do not feel good about their current selves. Again, these findings add to the knowledge on reasons that actual and ideal self-congruence work in different situations.

Public self-consciousness is the final moderating variable. Our results indicate that when public self-consciousness is high, actual self-congruence produces stronger emotional brand attachment. Again, this finding illustrates the importance of the authentic self-expression motive in relation to brand personality. When public self-consciousness is high, consumers form attachments with brands that allow them to express who they really are. In contrast, ideally self-congruent brands lead to a stronger emotional brand attachment only with consumers who have a low level of public self-consciousness. An academic implication of this finding is that in addition to the congruence between the brand and self, the social context plays a key role in the development of emotional attachment to a brand as well.

Although our study identifies three important moderating variables, further research might consider other moderating effects, particularly product-related context variables. For example, the hedonic versus utilitarian nature of the product could be examined. In particular, the effects of self-congruence may be more important for hedonic and symbolic products and not as important for utilitarian products in which other functions play a role (e.g., technical aspects). In addition, whether the product is consumed in public or private may also be relevant. With regard to the type of self-congruence, future studies might link self-congruence to self-regulation theory (e.g., Higgins 2002), which distinguishes between ideal self-guides and “ought” self-guides and their different mechanisms. For example, the ought self-guides may play a prominent role in the context of publicly consumed goods.

In the current study, we examine an “overall” self-congruence. Further research could also address differences in a brand’s personality dimensions. For example, self-congruence with regard to the personality dimensions of sincerity, excitement, and competence could have a different effect on branding outcomes compared with self-congruence on sophistication and ruggedness. In addition, further research might consider the salience of consumers’ actual–ideal self-discrepancies in relation to the attainability of consumers’ ideal selves (i.e., whether consumers believe their ideal self is likely to be realized; e.g., Rosenberg 1979). Because we did not measure this gap directly, its salience, or the perceived achievability of the consumer’s ideal self, further research is needed to examine these important phenomena and their attendant emotions.

A limitation of the current studies is that only outcome measures of actual and ideal self-congruence are examined. No evidence is provided regarding the exact nature of the process that consumers use to make these kinds of comparisons or judgments. Therefore, future studies that use more detailed process measures are needed. Important questions would include the following: How do self-enhancement processes work? And how do consumers counterbalance positive and negative emotional effects related to ideal self-congruence?

Managerial Implications

Our results have important implications for marketing managers as well. First, marketers are increasingly interested in finding ways to develop strong emotional brand attachments among their consumers, which can lead to stronger brand loyalty and brand performance (Park et al. 2010). Our findings indicate that there are four important issues for managers to consider when trying to increase consumers' emotional brand attachment: (1) incorporating consumers' selves into branding considerations, (2) focusing on authentic branding, (3) reconsidering aspirational branding, and (4) individualizing their branding efforts.

Our studies show that to emotionally connect consumers to their brands, marketing managers should adopt a customer-oriented perspective in defining brand personality that takes the selves of their targeted customers into consideration. In brand management practice, the importance of such an external approach is often underestimated. Many marketing managers focus more on an internal consistency of their intended brand personality by aligning it with corporate strategy, corporate culture, and brand tradition (e.g., Simões, Dibb, and Fisk 2005). Adopting an external approach could enable customers to feel a greater similarity between the brand and themselves, which our findings suggest is a key driver of emotional brand attachment.

Second, our results suggest that on a general level, the actual self is more important for consumers' emotional brand attachment. Thus, in building a brand personality, the more effective strategy seems to focus on actual self-congruence with the brand rather than ideal self-congruence when trying to increase emotional brand attachment. Thus, as mentioned previously, our results provide support for the superiority of "authentic branding" (i.e., targeting the brand personality toward the customer's actual self). This may be an explanation for why authentic branding continues to gain in importance in management practice (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Gilmore and Pine 2007). In addition to the Dove example mentioned previously, several companies (e.g., Converse, IKEA, Nescafé, l'Occitane en Provence, Sprite) have used an authentic branding approach to generate a stronger emotional brand attachment among consumers. Our results indicate that this strategy is particularly effective if product involvement, self-esteem, or public self-consciousness is high.

Our third managerial implication is that aspirational branding strategies (i.e., branding strategies that aim at ideal self-congruence) may need to be reconsidered. Because we did not find an effect for ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment at a general level, the overall effectiveness of this approach must be questioned. One explanation for

the nonexistence of a general positive effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment is that the ideals that the brand envisions may not be attainable (i.e., they are perceived as being out of reach and, therefore, unreal or not authentic). Thus, it may be necessary to set realistic expectations in terms of brand promises. In other words, marketing managers should make sure that the brand does not set the ideal so high that consumers distance themselves from the brand and thus decrease their emotional brand attachment because of this lack of authenticity.

However, our findings show that there are still circumstances in which marketers could emphasize a brand personality related to aspirations. Low product involvement is such a circumstance. Here, consumers can "bask" in the reflected ideals that the brand possesses. Consumers will therefore experience only the positive emotions associated with the ideal self-depiction, thereby increasing their emotional brand attachment. Another circumstance in which aspirational branding may work is the case of consumers with low self-esteem. Here, a brand that comes close to the ideal self can help consumers to compensate their low self-esteem, get closer to their ideal self (i.e., to self-enhance), and increase their emotional attachment toward the brand. From a managerial point of view, this finding is important because it demonstrates that aspirational branding strategies can be implemented if done selectively. In communication activities associated with aspirational branding, marketers should emphasize the self-enhancement potential of the brand and its underlying product. The gap between actual and ideal selves and how the brand contributes to its reduction should be emphasized. Thus, our findings offer a conceptual explanation of why marketing activities that focus on the consumer's self-improvement (e.g., "before" and "after") may be effective in the context of aspirational branding. Aspirational branding can work with consumers who have a low public self-consciousness. One explanation may be that they are not concerned about the risks that self-expression through an ideally self-congruent brand might pose. A managerial recommendation could be to prime consumers for an increased awareness of themselves as individual people (and focusing less on social contexts). For example, corresponding communication activities could focus more on individual advertising spokespeople in private and intimate situations.

A fourth managerial implication refers to a call for more individual branding. This call is based on our finding that the effect of self-congruence on emotional brand attachment depends on the customer-specific context, which is consistent with the current trend in marketing of moving away from mass marketing to one-to-one marketing. Our results suggest that the one-to-one marketing approach should be applied to branding as well. New technologies in Web 2.0 allow individualized advertising based on consumer characteristics to be implemented. In addition, managers might develop innovative ways to combine the consumers' selves with their branding efforts. The trend toward collaborative branding (especially through social media), which enables marketing managers to give consumers the opportunity to contribute to a brand's personality, may be a good way to create a brand personality congruent with consumers' selves.

APPENDIX A

Constructs and Items	Indicator Reliability		M (SD)		Cronbach's α		Spearman-Brown Split-Half Coefficient		Guttman Split-Half Coefficient		Composite Reliability		Average Variance Extracted			
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2		
Actual Self-Congruence			2.30	(.85)	2.11	(.91)	.69	.82	.69 ^a	.83 ^a	.69	.82	.71	.83	.55	.70
Respondents were given the following instructions: Take a moment to think about brand x. Describe this person using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you see yourself (your actual self). What kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:																
1. The personality of brand x is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self).	.40	.73														
2. The personality of brand x is a mirror image of me (my actual self).	.70	.67														
Ideal Self-Congruence			2.05	(1.00)	2.03	(1.02)	.94	.95	.94 ^a	.95 ^a	.94	.95	.94	.95	.89	.91
Respondents were given the following instructions: Take a moment to think about brand x. Describe this person using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you would like to see yourself (your ideal self). What kind of person would you like to be? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:																
1. The personality of brand x is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self).	.93	.93														
2. The personality of brand x is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self).	.85	.89														

APPENDIX A
Continued

Constructs and Items	Indicator Reliability		M (SD)		Cronbach's α		Spearman–Brown Split-Half Coefficient		Guttman Split-Half Coefficient		Composite Reliability		Average Variance Extracted	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
3. This product is very important to me personally.	.63													
4. Compared with other products, this product is important to me.	.38													
5. I'm interested in this product.	.33													
Self-Esteem			4.27 (.60)		.80		.82 ^a		.82		.80		.50	
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.		.59												
2. I feel that I am a person of worth.		.36												
3. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure. (reversed)		.38												
4. I take a positive attitude toward myself.		.68												
Public Self-Consciousness			3.86 (.71)		.78		.83 ^a		.82		.80		.50	
1. I am concerned about the way I present myself.		.61												
2. I usually worry about making a good impression.		.35												
3. One of the last things I do before I leave my house is look in the mirror.		.38												
4. I am usually aware of my appearance.		.68												

^aEqual length (estimate of the reliability if both halves have equal numbers of items).

^bUnequal length (reliability estimate assuming unequal numbers of items).

^cThe facet is measured with one item. Indicator reliability, reliability coefficients, and average variance extracted cannot be computed.

Appendix B

To test the interaction effects of product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness with the relative importance of actual self-congruence as a driver of emotional brand attachment (in comparison to ideal self-congruence; i.e., testing a moderation of H₃), we proceeded as follows (using the procedure of Homburg, Grozdanovic, and Klarmann 2007): For each of the three moderator variables, we first conducted a median split of our sample along the values of the variable to create two subsamples, one with low values of the moderator and the other with high values of the moderator. We then analyzed the model simultaneously in both subsamples by the use of multiple group covariance structure analysis. We then computed the relative importance $IMP_{asc,g}$ of the actual self-congruence for emotional brand attachment in both subsamples ($g = 1$ refers to the subsample in which the value of the moderator is low, and $g = 2$ refers to the subsample in which the value of the moderator is high). Using the respective parameter estimates, we defined $IMP_{asc,g}$ as the ratio of the effect of actual self-congruence (i.e., γ_{g11}) and ideal self-congruence (i.e., γ_{g12}) on the dependent variable emotional brand attachment (using the absolute values of the effects). Stated formally,

$$(B1) \quad IMP_{asc,g} = \frac{|\gamma_{g11}|}{|\gamma_{g11}| + |\gamma_{g12}|} \times 100\%.$$

To test statistically whether the relative importance of actual self-congruence as a driver of emotional brand attachment differs between both subsamples, we relied on chi-square difference tests. Therefore, we reran the multiple group covariance structure analysis with a constraint that forced $IMP_{asc,g}$ to be equal across both subsamples. If the difference between the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics from both analyses was significant, we inferred that the relative importance of actual self-congruence was different in both populations. Because constraining $IMP_{asc,g}$ to be equal across both groups is associated with the gain of one degree of freedom, the critical value for the chi-square difference test at the .05 level is 3.84. Table B1 summarizes the results. These results show that the relative importance of actual self-congruence for emotional brand attachment is higher when product involvement is high ($IMP_{asc,2} = 89\%$ vs. $IMP_{asc,1} = 53\%$), self-esteem is high ($IMP_{asc,2} = 82\%$ vs. $IMP_{asc,1} = 61\%$), and public self-consciousness is high ($IMP_{asc,2} = 79\%$ vs. $IMP_{asc,1} = 68\%$). The chi-square difference tests reveal that these effects are significant for all three moderators. The percentage values for Group 2 for all three moderators would have been even higher (100% each) had we used the value 0 for γ_{112} . Using the value 0 would have been possible because all three γ_{112} were not significant.

TABLE B1
Results of Multiple Group Analysis

Relative Importance of Actual Self-Congruence ($IMP_{asc,g}$)			
Moderator Variable	Low Value of Moderator Variable ($g = 1$)	High Value of Moderator Variable ($g = 2$)	$\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta d.f. = 1$)
Product involvement	$ \gamma_{111} / \gamma_{111} + \gamma_{112} = .23/.23 + .20 = 53\%$	$ \gamma_{211} / \gamma_{211} + \gamma_{212} = .59/.59 + .07 = 89\%$	$\Delta\chi^2 = 8.34$ ($p < .01$)
Self-esteem	$ \gamma_{111} / \gamma_{111} + \gamma_{112} = .41/.41 + .26 = 61\%$	$ \gamma_{211} / \gamma_{211} + \gamma_{212} = .78/.78 + .17 = 82\%$	$\Delta\chi^2 = 12.64$ ($p < .01$)
Public self-consciousness	$ \gamma_{111} / \gamma_{111} + \gamma_{112} = .45/.45 + .21 = 68\%$	$ \gamma_{211} / \gamma_{211} + \gamma_{212} = .89/.89 + .24 = 79\%$	$\Delta\chi^2 = 5.41$ ($p < .05$)

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