

Self-Expressive Brands and Brand Equity: Unveiling the Mediating mechanism of Emotional Brand Experience and Inspirational Brand Engagement

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Consumers don't merely buy brands for their practical benefits but also utilize them symbolically to express themselves. This study delves into the dynamics of self-expressive brands and their impact on brand equity. Through Structural Equation Modeling, significant relationships emerge between inner and social self-expressive brands, emotional brand experience, inspirational brand engagement, and brand equity. Emotional brand experience and inspirational brand engagement are found to sequentially mediate the relationship between self-expressive brands and brand equity. These results underscore the pivotal role of consumers' emotional responses and inspirational connections with self-expressive brands in shaping brand equity, emphasizing the significance of emotional brand experience and inspirational brand engagement in this process. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer-brand dynamics and offers actionable insights for marketers.

Keywords: self-expressive brands; emotional brand experience; inspirational brand engagement; brand equity

Introduction

Research in consumer behavior has consistently acknowledged that consumers aim to communicate their identity through brands (Belk 1988). Brands serve as a means through which consumers can associate themselves and express their actual self (Belk 2013; Karjaluoto et al. 2016). Such brands, known as self-expressive brands, represent a consumer's perception of how accurately a specific brand reflects their actual self (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006 p. 82). Self-expressive brands can address two different aspects of consumer self, the inner self, and the social self. Inner self-expressive brands represent an authentic extension of the consumer's personality and signify the individual's true self. On the other hand, social self-expressive brands are perceived by consumers as enhancing their image, aligning with their social roles, and positively influencing others' perceptions of them.

Upon scrutinizing the extant academic literature on self-expressive brands, it becomes evident that most studies concentrate solely on one dimension of self-expressive brands, namely the inner self (de Vries et al. 2017; Algharabat et al. 2020), largely overlooking the investigation of the social self-expressive factor (Wallace et al. 2021). Although some researchers have acknowledged the importance of both dimensions (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Kemp et al. 2014; Wallace et al. 2014; Ruane and Wallace 2015), they have tended to treat the overall construct as a unified entity rather than separately examining each dimension (Choi and Burnham 2021). However, there is a need for further investigation in the topic (Babić-Hodović et al. 2023; Wallace et al. 2021) as self-expressive brands have a different impact on brand performance, dependent on characteristics of inner self-expression or social self-expression (Wallace et al. 2014).

This study examines how inner self-expressive and social self-expressive brands function as distinct drivers of brand outcomes, particularly in relation to brand equity. While previous studies have extensively investigated brand love, brand engagement, and brand loyalty as outcomes of self-expressive brands (Babić-Hodović et al. 2023; Christino et al. 2020; Leckie et al. 2016; Wallace et al. 2021), no prior research has examined brand equity as an outcome of self-expressive brands. Understanding brand equity is crucial for firms as it enables them to pursue new brand opportunities, extend their brands successfully, and build enduring consumer brand relationships (Rojas-Lamoren et al. 2022).

Drawing upon Russell's (1980) model of affect, which suggests that affect mediates the relationship between cognition and response, and building upon the study by Babić-Hodović et al. (2023), which proposes that the connection between cognition and behavior can be sequentially mediated by two emotionally linked mediators, this study examines the sequential mediating roles of emotional brand experience and inspirational brand engagement in the relationship between self-expressive brands and brand equity. Although inspiration has

been acknowledged as an emotional component of consumer brand engagement (Dwivedi 2015), it remains largely overlooked in branding literature (Böttger et al. 2017; Chang 2020). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to center inspirational brand engagement as a mediator in explaining the mechanisms of consumer behavior that lead to brand equity.

Theoretical Background and the Conceptual Research Model

Consumers do not just purchase branded products for their functional benefits but also for the symbolic meanings associated with them. Brands can function as an extension of their self (Fournier 1998), and consumers can use them to build their self-identity (Belk 1988). These brands are regarded as an integral part of the consumer self-expressiveness, reflecting both the social and the inner self (Dwayne and Tasaki 1992). While the social self is oriented towards the public realm and seeks validation from reference groups, the inner self is characterized by privacy and focuses on personal fulfilment. Thus, brands have the dual capacity to reinforce individuals' self-image (Matzler et al. 2011) and assist consumers in crafting aspirational self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Self-expressive brands can exert a positive influence on emotional brand experience, which pertains to the subjective, internal responses of consumers to brand stimuli (Brakus et al. 2009). Brands that empower consumers to express themselves tend to evoke more favorable emotional responses (Bıçakcıoğlu and Bayraktaroğlu 2018; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Huber et al. 2015), as they resonate deeply with individuals' values, identities, and aspirations (Bai et al. 2021). By aligning with consumers' self-concepts and facilitating self-expression, these brands foster connections that enrich emotional brand experience (Ruane and Wallace 2015). Thus, this study proposes that:

H1: a) Inner self-expressive brands and b) social self-expressive brands positively influence emotional brand experience.

Inspirational brand engagement refers to the dynamic and interactive relationship between consumers and brands characterized by a sense of interest, pride, inspiration, enthusiasm, dedication, and challenge that the brand fosters in the consumer (Dwivedi 2015). Despite its intriguing nature, this type of engagement is almost absent in branding literature, as most studies focus on the dimensions of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral brand engagement (see Hollebeek et al. 2014).

Consumers are inspired by objects, insights and ideas that excite them (Thrash and Elliot 2003). Brands facilitate self-expression for consumers through the establishment of meaningful associations (Fournier 1998). This potential for self-expression drives consumers to invest more time, energy, and resources, leading to deep and enthusiastic engagement with the brand (Park et al. 2010). Consumer desire for self-expression serves as a driving force in cultivating brand relationships, ultimately fostering meaningful and inspirational consumer brand engagement (de Vries et al. 2017; Leckie et al. 2016; Nyadzayo et al. 2020). Based on this, the study posits that:

H2: a) Inner self-expressive brands and b) social self-expressive brands positively influence inspirational brand engagement.

Emotional states, whether positive or negative, wield significant influence over consumer engagement with a brand (Khan et al 2021). Positive emotions such as enjoyment, pleasure, and excitement derived from brand experience, lead to more favorable and inspirational engagement outcomes (Ahn and Back 2018; Rauschnabel et al. 2019). Notably, emotional brand experience has been identified as a predictor of consumer brand engagement (Merilees 2016). It plays a crucial role in fostering an emotional, meaningful, and inspirational connection between the consumer and the brand, with the potential for repetition in future brand interactions (Ahn and Back 2018; Dwivedi 2015). Consequently, the present study suggests that:

H3: Emotional brand experience positively influences inspirational brand engagement.

Brand equity pertains to the additional value or utility imbued into a product by its brand name (Yoo and Donthu 2001). It signifies the discrepancy in consumer responses between a focal brand and an unbranded product, even when exposed to equivalent marketing stimuli and possessing identical product attributes. Consumer brand engagement is recognized as a significant factor in the development brand equity (Bruhn et al. 2012). Investigating the intriguing dimension of inspirational brand engagement, research indicates its strong impact on brand loyalty (Böttger et al. 2017), a focal component of brand equity (Aaker 1991). When consumers engage with a brand in a dynamic, inspired, and enthusiastic manner, they build distinctive associations with the brand that positively impact their purchasing decisions (Hutter et al. 2013), contribute to value co-creation (Gummerus et al. 2012), and nurture brand equity (Schivinski and Dabrowski 2015). Based on this analysis, the present research proposes that:

H4: Inspirational brand engagement positively influences brand equity.

Brands should aspire to build strong and meaningful bonds with consumers. Once they've created a positive emotional connection through brand experience, they should focus on cultivating strong emotional engagement relationships with consumers (Dwivedi et al. 2018; Japutra et al. 2018) that can bring positive behavioral outcomes (Konu et al. 2020).

The Russell's affect model (1980), originating from environmental psychology, posits that emotional processes play a mediating role between cognitive stimuli and behavioral responses. Expanding upon this framework, Babić-Hodović et al. (2023) enhanced the model by proposing a sequential mediation, involving two emotional factors, offering a more critical explanation and deeper insights into the model.

Building upon these findings, the present study suggests that self-expressive brands can serve as cognitive stimuli, reflecting consumer perceptions of whether a product aligns

with their social or inner selves (Babić-Hodović et al. 2023; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Self-expressive brands positively affect emotional brand experience by facilitating self-expression (Ruane and Wallace 2015). In turn, a positive emotional experience facilitates consumers to engage in an emotional, meaningful, and inspirational connection with the brand (Algharabat et al. 2020), particularly when initiated by the opportunity to express themselves (Bai et al. 2021). This sequential effect leads to the development of brand equity, identified as a consumer behavioral response (Yoo and Donthu 2001). Based on the above analysis, combined with the examination of each direct effect in this section, the study proposes that:

H5: Emotional brand experience mediates the relationship between a) inner self-expressive brands, b) social self-expressive brands and inspirational brand engagement.

H6: The relationship between a) inner self-expressive brands b), social self-expressive brands and brand equity, is sequentially mediated by emotional brand experience and inspirational brand engagement.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the present study. [Figure 1 near here]

Methodology and Data

To address the above hypotheses, an online survey was conducted in Greece with the use of a structured questionnaire. The context of the study was personal smartphone brands, as this product category is commonly examined when exploring the concept of self-expressive brands (Algharabat et al. 2020; Leckie et al. 2016; Nyadzayo et al. 2020). This is because personal smartphone brands enhance the preference for unique and self-expressive choices (Song and Sela 2023). The survey, utilizing convenience sampling, gathered 533 reliable responses, aiming for a sample size suitable for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. This method allows for simultaneous estimation of multiple variables, enhancing the reliability and validity of findings in multivariate analysis. Further details on sample characteristics and brand frequency are provided in Table 1. [Table 1 near here]

Measures

All variables were measured with the use of validated and established five-point Likert scales (from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree), adopted by previous studies (see Table 2). Inner and social self-expressive brands were measured by means of a four-item scale each, adopted by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Emotional brand experience was measured by means of three-item scale adopted by the seminal study of Brakus et al. (2009). Inspirational brand engagement was measured by means of five-item scale adopted by Dwivedi (2015). Finally, brand equity was measured by means of four-item scale, adopted by the seminal study of Yoo and Donthu (2001) where the authors introduced a unidimensional short-form scale of brand equity, which serves as a measure of overall brand equity. For all scales, Cronbach's values are greater than 0.70 and are provided in Table 2.

Results

The present study employed AMOS 29 software. Initially, Confirmatory Factor analysis assessed the discriminant and convergent validity of the measures. The results indicated that for all variables $CR \geq 0.70$ (Hair et al. 2006), $AVE \geq 0.50$ (Bagozzi and Yi 1988), $CR > AVE$ (Dillon and Goldstein 1984) and $AVE > MSV$ (see Table 2). Furthermore, results demonstrate that for all variables, the criterion ($Corel < \sqrt{AVE}$) applies (see Table 3). The model determines a good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 1.757$, $CFI = 0.985$, $TLI = 0.981$, $AGFI = 0.936$, $RMSEA = 0.038$, $SRMR = 0.0287$). All standardized coefficients were significant, ranging from 0.657 to 0.916 (Table 2). Finally, Harman's test (Podsakoff et al. 2003) was used and results demonstrated a poor fit for the one-factor model ($CFI = 0.634$, $TLI = 0.591$, $RMSEA = 0.174$, $SRMR = 0.105$). Hence, common method bias is not a problem for the present study. [Table 2 near here] [Table 3 near here]

Next, the path model of the present study was built, to test the research hypotheses. Considering the goodness-of-fit measures, the path model determines an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 1.376$, $CFI = 0.999$, $TLI = 0.998$, $AGFI = 0.985$, $RMSEA = 0.027$, $SRMR =$

0.0098). The coefficients of determination (R^2) for the endogenous variables are 0.508 for emotional brand experience, 0.674 for inspirational brand engagement, and 0.463 for brand equity.

Considering the direct effects, all research hypotheses are supported (see Table 4). As far as the mediation paths, a bootstrap sample of 5000 with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) was used to test all the mediation hypotheses. Again, all mediation hypotheses are supported (Table 4). [Table 4 near here]

Discussion

The present study built a structural equation model about the dynamics of self-expressive brands and their impact on brand equity, filling academic gaps in the branding literature. By distinguishing between inner self-expressive and social self-expressive brands as separate factors, this study extends prior research, which often focused solely on one dimension (de Vries et al. 2017; Algharabat et al. 2020) or treated the construct as a unified entity (Choi and Burnham 2021). This approach responds to the growing need for more comprehensive and critical examinations on the domain of self-expressive brands (Babić-Hodović et al. 2023; Wallace et al. 2021).

Both dimensions of self-expressive brands have a positive impact on emotional brand experience. However, upon comparing the standardized coefficients of the two antecedents, it becomes evident that it is the inner self-expressive dimension ($\beta = 0.452$) that exerts a greater influence compared to the social self-expressive factor ($\beta = 0.312$). This insight highlights the significance of brands aligning with the inner and authentic self, as they tend to evoke more positive emotional responses than those focused on enhancing social image. When consumers perceive a brand as authentically reflecting their true selves (Escalas and Bettman 2003), it fosters a deeper emotional connection and a sense of resonance, compared to brands that reflect the social self.

Results indicate that self-expressive brands possess the capability to cultivate

inspirational brand engagement. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study represents the first academic exploration of the concept of inspirational brand engagement as a mediator in elucidating consumer behavioral mechanisms. Self-expressive brands have the power to foster dynamic and interactive consumer relationships characterized by a sense of interest, pride, inspiration, enthusiasm, dedication, and challenge (Dwivedi 2015). Brands that reflect the social and inner selves serve as sources of inspiration, infusing consumers' lives with meaning, purpose, and enthusiasm. When comparing the standardized coefficients of the two dimensions of self-expressive brands, it is evident that the social dimension exerts a greater influence ($\beta = 0.309$) on inspirational brand engagement compared to the inner self dimension ($\beta = 0.150$). This suggests that brands which reflect the social self and tap into communal aspirations and societal norms, foster greater inspirational brand engagement compared to brands focusing on inner self-expression.

Finally, the study demonstrates that inspirational brand engagement serves as an antecedent of brand equity. When coupled with emotional brand experience, the two variables elucidate a sequential relationship between self-expressive brands, emotional brand experience, inspirational brand engagement, and brand equity. This study represents the first investigation establishing the critical link between self-expressive brands and brand equity, as well as providing robust evidence that inspirational brand engagement contributes to building brand equity. This mediation mechanism expands previous research on Russell's (1980) model of affect and confirms that the link between cognitive stimuli (self-expressive brands) and consumer behavioral response (brand equity) can be sequentially mediated by two emotional factors (Babić-Hodović et al., 2023). Self-expressive brands evoke emotional reactions that create meaningful associations, serving as sources of inspiration and meaningfulness ultimately contributing to the development of brand equity and building competitive advantage.

Managerial Implications

Understanding self-expressive brands and their impact on brand equity, while recognizing inspirational brand engagement as a mediating variable, offers brands an opportunity to cultivate dynamic consumer relationships. Brands should aim to align with consumers' inner and authentic selves through brand messages and experiences that authentically reflect consumers' true identities. This involves understanding and aligning with consumers' innermost values, aspirations, and personal narratives. By doing so, brands can foster deeper emotional connections, ultimately leading to increased inspirational brand engagement and brand equity. For social self-expressive brands, the focus should be on tapping into communal aspirations and societal norms. Brand managers should aim to create brand experiences and messaging that resonate with consumers' desire for social acceptance, belonging, and validation. By aligning with these collective values and aspirations, brands can evoke a sense of pride, inspiration, and enthusiasm among consumers, driving higher levels of brand engagement and brand equity.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The present study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the Greek cultural context may restrict the generalizability of the findings, underscoring the need for future research in diverse cultural settings. The study exclusively focused on smartphone brands. Future research could broaden the conceptual model's application to various product contexts. Also, inspirational brand engagement was measured using a dimension adapted from Dwivedi's (2015) study, which built a high-order model of consumer brand engagement. While this approach yielded promising results, the development of a more robust scale tailored specifically to inspirational brand engagement could enrich the understanding of its implications. Finally, brand equity assessment used a unidimensional scale. Future studies could explore the influence of inspirational brand engagement on different dimensions of brand equity.

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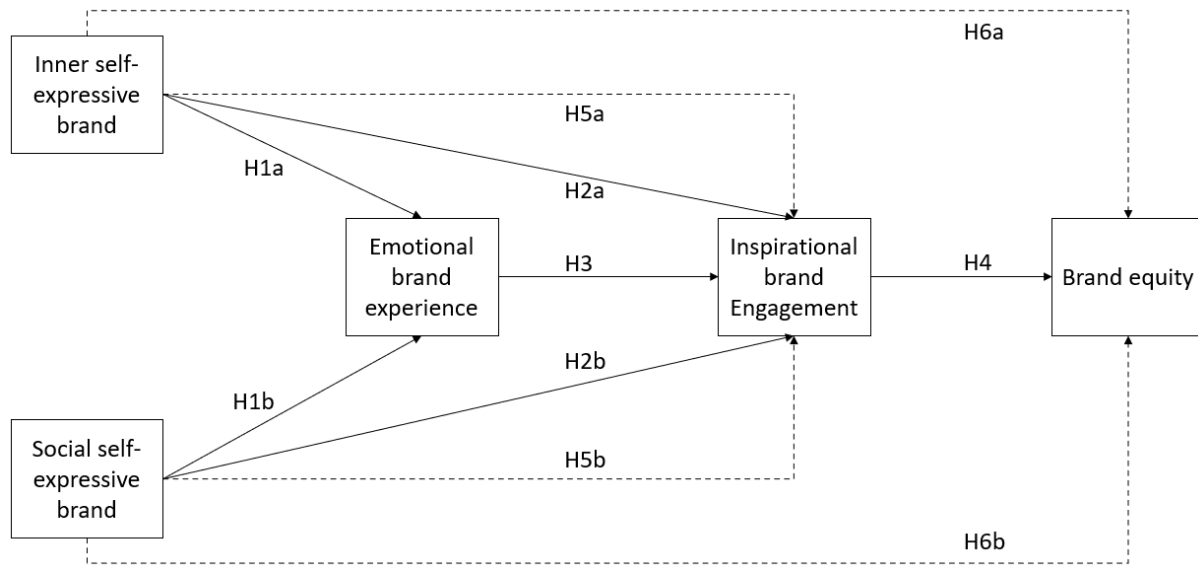


Figure 1. The conceptual Model of the Study

Table 1: Sample of the study

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Number of Respondents	533	100
Gender		
Male	255	47.8
Female	278	52.2
Age		
<i>Average: 26.35, Min: 18 Max: 66</i>		
18-30	424	79.5
31-40	61	11.4
41-50	37	6.9
51-60	9	1.7
>60	2	0.4
Educational Level		
High School	3	0.6
Bachelor's degree	405	76
Master's degree	97	18.2
PhD	28	5.2
Smartphone Brand		
iPhone	168	31.5
Samsung	135	25.3
Xiaomi	109	20.5
Huawei	84	15.8
Other	37	6.9

Table 2. Scales and descriptive statistics

Construct	Construct Items	M	SD	Standardized Coefficients	AVE	CR	MSV	Cronbach's a
Inner-self expressive brand (Caroll and Ahuvia 2006)	This brand symbolizes the kind of person I really am inside.	1.84	0.84	0.777	0.751	0.923	0.457	0.93
	This brand reflects my personality.			0.858				
	This brand is an extension of my inner self.			0.916				
	This brand mirrors the real me.			0.909				
Social-self expressive brand (Caroll and Ahuvia 2006)	This brand contributes to my image.	2.40	0.99	0.887	0.622	0.876	0.457	0.88
	This brand adds to a social 'role' I play.			0.862				
	This brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.			0.688				
	This brand improves the way society views me.			0.697				
Emotional brand experience (Brakus et al. 2009)	This brand induces feelings and sentiments.	2.63	0.94	0.823	0.581	0.805	0.490	0.73
	I do not have strong emotions for this brand.			0.657				
	This brand is an emotional brand.			0.796				
Inspirational brand engagement (Dwivedi 2015)	I feel enthusiastic when interacting with my brand of phone.	2.42	0.87	0.823	0.622	0.891	0.490	0.90
	I am proud of my brand of mobile phone.			0.769				
	My brand of mobile phone inspires me.			0.848				
	My brand of mobile phone gives me meaning and purpose.			0.690				
	I use my brand of mobile phone with complete dedication.			0.805				
Overall Brand equity (Yoo and Donthu 2001)	It makes sense to buy X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same.	2.80	0.92	0.806	0.673	0.891	0.389	0.89
	Even if another brand has the same features as X, I would prefer to buy X.			0.916				
	If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X.			0.826				
	If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X.			0.722				

Table 3. Results for the Fornell-Larcker Criterion ($\text{Corel} < \sqrt{\text{AVE}}$)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Brand equity	0,820				
2. Inner self-expressive brand	0,431	0,867			
3. Social self-expressive brand	0,429	0,676	0,789		
4. Emotional brand experience	0,510	0,634	0,587	0,762	
5. Inspirational brand engagement	0,624	0,634	0,649	0,700	0,789

Table 4: SEM Results

Direct Effects	Standardized Direct Effect	S.E.	Sig.			Hypothesis	
Inner self. → Em. B. exp.	0.452	0.050	p<0.001			H1a	Supported
Social self. → Em. B. exp.	0.312	0.042	p<0.001			H1b	Supported
Inner self. → Insp. B. eng.	0.150	0.041	p<0.001			H2a	Supported
Social self. → Insp. B. eng.	0.309	0.034	p<0.001			H2b	Supported
Em. B. exp. → Insp. B. eng	0.461	0.033	p<0.001			H3	Supported
Insp. B. eng → B.E.	0.680	0.033	p<0.001			H4	Supported
Mediation paths		Bootstrap 95% Confidence					
	Standardized Indirect Effect	S.E.	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Sig.	Hypothesis	
Inner self. → Em. B. exp. → Insp. B. eng	0.208	0.029	0.156	0.277	p<.001	H5a	Supported
Social self. → Em. B. exp. → Insp. B. eng	0.144	0.026	0.083	0.186	p<.001	H5b	Supported
Inner self. → Em. B. exp. → Insp. B. eng → B.E.	0.244	0.022	0.115	0.202	p<.001	H6a	Supported
Social self. → Em. B. exp. → Insp. B. eng → B.E.	0.308	0.019	0.059	0.135	p<.001	H6b	Supported