

# Impact of Self-Brand Connection on Willingness to Pay Premium: Relevant Mediators and Moderators

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how self-brand connection in an interactive multi-actor single-brand retail context can lead to consumers' willingness to pay premium through the sequential mediation of brand attitudes (intransigent and flexible) and brand love. Study 1 shows that self-brand connection strengthens (weakens) consumers' intransigent (flexible) brand attitude, thereby increasing their brand love and willingness to pay price premium. Furthermore, consumers' high level of cynicism attenuates brand love and willingness to pay premium for consumers' displaying flexible brand attitudes. Study 2 shows that favorable other customer perceptions can mitigate the detrimental impact of high consumer cynicism on consumers' brand responses. In Study 3, we found that other customers' favorable behaviors (over similarity and/or appearance) can best mitigate the negative effects of consumer cynicism on brand love and willingness to pay premium. The research contributes by showing how varying degrees of consumers' self-brand connection can develop willingness to pay premium through developing either intransigent (constructive route) or flexible (mitigating route) brand attitudes and brand love. For consumers harboring flexible brand attitudes accompanied with high cynicism, other customer perception serves as a conditioning tool, that alleviates their cynicism, and garners higher brand love as well as willingness to pay premium, and behavior dimension of other customer perception dominates in this quest.

**Keywords:** Self-brand connection, brand love, intransigent brand attitude, flexible brand attitude, cynicism, other customer perception.

## Introduction

Approximately 75% of consumer purchasing experiences are based on emotions (Zaltman, 2003). As a result, brand love has emerged as a critical construct. It is associated with many positive consumer responses (e.g., brand loyalty, willingness to pay premium, recommendation intentions) that drive firm performance (Bairrada et al., 2018). While brand managers strive to create loved brands, Edelman agency's 2014 Brandshare report (Stein, 2014) reveals that 87 percent of consumers want more meaningful interactions with brands, but only 17 percent believe brands are delivering it, leaving the vast majority of consumers feeling unloved. As a result, the extant strength of consumer-brand relationships is relatively weak. According to Edelman (2018), the answer to the conundrum of how brands can earn, strengthen, and protect consumer-brand relationships is contingent on consumers' general attitudes towards brands. This explains the importance of managing customer perceptions/attitude with respect to the brand (Chan & Lowe, 2021). Therefore, managing customer attitude towards the brand across channels has become a priority for practitioners (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2020; Krishen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Our research aims to elucidate the psychological nuances that shape consumers' relationships with brands. Consistent with past studies (e.g., Cheng et al., 2012; van der Westhuizen, 2018; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Tildesley and Coote, 2009), we believe that consumers develop differing brand attitudes owing to their differing self-brand identity alignments. We anticipate that consumers' brand attitudes will fall into two categories: *flexible* or *intransigent*. Flexibility is the awareness that there are multiple alternatives available in any situation, which is fostered by the desire to be flexible and self-efficacy in terms of being flexible (Ionescu, 2017). On the other hand, intransigence refers to the unwillingness to

deviate from a well-established course of action, which is fueled by a desire to stay on the 'right' path (Weisberg, 2014). While consumers with flexible brand attitudes are expected to have weak consumer-brand relationship ties consumers with intransigent brand attitudes are expected to have strong consumer-brand relationship ties.

Existing evidence from the branding domain shows that some brands are more aligned with consumers' self-identities than others, and a strong self-brand connection elicits favorable consumer responses (Eelen et al., 2017). Given the well-established role of “self” in shaping consumer behaviour (Dwivedi et al., 2015), it is expected that improving self-brand connection will elicit managerially desirable responses from consumers (in terms of developing intransigent consumer attitude and high brand love). In this context, brand love is an important predictor of consumer willingness to pay premium to buy the loved brand (Thomson et al., 2005), because brand love includes consumers' willingness to make monetary and/or non-monetary sacrifices for the loved brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013) and invest resources in the loved brand (Batra et al., 2012), which is a very desirable prospect for brand managers aiming to build strong brands. Premium brands command a high price by instilling a sense of superior quality and limited availability (Quelch, 1987). In the context of premium retail brands, it is critical to investigate relevant factors other than quality that can motivate consumers to pay premium (Anselmsson et al., 2014).

Consumer's motivations in the marketplace are multifaceted and are not solely based on their desire to achieve a specific outcome (Sarkar et al., 2020). Consumer cynicism is one such trait that would shape consumers' market responses (van Esch et al., 2021). Cynical behaviors characterize goal-oriented consumers, who work hard to protect themselves from unsolicited marketing efforts and may engage in managerially undesirable behaviours (Chylinski and Chu,

2010). Consumer cynicism is associated with distrusting marketers and is “conceptualized as a relatively stable, learned attitude associated with negative affect,” which frequently leads to outcomes such as minimizing spending (Helm et al., 2015, p. 516) which would result in an unwillingness to pay premium. Because brand love represents positive affect (Batra et al., 2012), cynicism is likely to demotivate consumers to love brands and pay premium to consume those brands in the context of premium retail brands. Past studies provide evidence of how consumer cynicism impacts consumers’: 1) brand responses (Hernandez et al., 2019) and 2) price judgements (Berdysheva and Romanova, 2017). As a result, premium brand marketers (Pombo and Velasco, 2021) must understand how to mitigate the negative impact of consumer cynicism on brand love and willingness to pay premium, and our research makes an endeavor to contribute to this aspect.

The first aspect of developing an understanding of consumer cynicism on brand-related outcomes extends the extant stream of research that mainly focuses on understanding the impact of consumer cynicism on their responses towards brands promoting sustainability (Ishaq and Maria, 2020; Kuokkanen and Sun, 2020; Mora et al., 2021) to understanding consumer-brand relationship outcomes for premium retailers. Torres et al. (2018) call for identifying potential ways to mitigate the negative impact of consumer cynicism on their willingness to pay premium. We cater to this research gap by demonstrating that managing other customer perceptions (OCP) in a service environment can assist marketers in reducing the negative impact of consumer cynicism and may even enhance positive outcomes such as willingness to pay premium. In doing this, we also extend the current stream of research which is mainly focused on understanding the role of OCP as a service recovery tool in face of service failure (e.g., Kim and Baker, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2021) to developing an understanding of OCP as a pre-emptive strategy to stall highly cynical consumers’ detrimental brand responses.

While most of the constructs in our research have been studied across different contexts (e.g., different product and service classes), we test our framework in premium single brand retail context. The A. T. Kearney 2019 Global Retail Development Index (A. T. Kearney, 2019) ranks China, India, and Ghana as the key emerging markets that are redefining the global retail landscape. The retail sector in emerging markets offers a promising landscape grounded in economic growth combined with population growth (Reinartz et al., 2011) and is likely to hit the \$1.1 trillion mark by 2025 as per a report by Retailer’s Association of India (RAI) along with Boston Consultancy Group (BCG) (Singhi et al., 2020). Such burgeoning retail landscape is also marked with challenges such as high competition and consumers’ divided store preferences (Zhang et al., 2017). While luxury retailers eyed the ultra-rich of emerging markets, the prospects of retailing in emerging markets are also characterized by a swing from luxury to premium retailing as “the declining middle class in emerging markets can no longer afford even accessible luxury” (A. T. Kearny, 2016). As a result, we believe that premium retail setting in an emerging market (India) is an appropriate setting to test our conceptual framework empirically. By conducting three studies, we investigate:

*RQ1: Impact of self-brand connection (SBC) on consumers’ willingness to pay price premium (WPP) via sequential mediation of consumers’ flexible (FLEX) vs intransigent (INTR) brand attitudes and brand love (BL) (i.e.,  $SBC \rightarrow FLEX \rightarrow BL \rightarrow WPP$ ;  $SBC \rightarrow INTR \rightarrow BL \rightarrow WPP$ ).*

*RQ2: Role of consumer cynicism in conditioning the relationships posited in RQ1*

*RQ3: Conditional roles of other customer perception- appearance, similarity and behavior (OCP-A, OCP-S, OCP-B) in alleviating the detrimental effect of consumer cynicism posited in RQ2.*

Our findings have several theoretical and managerial implications. The first contribution lies in distinguishing between consumers' flexible and intransigent brand attitudes and explaining how self-brand connection can increase consumers' intransigence, leading to brand love and an increased willingness to pay premium. These findings provide retailers operating in emerging markets with an adequate segmentation ground. Second, we propose that consumer cynicism negatively conditions the effect of self-brand connection on subsequent outcomes, thus building on existing research on consumer cynicism, which mainly characterizes the highly cynical consumer as anti-consumers (Odou and Pechpeyrou, 2011). Third, in a multi-actor service ecosystem, favorable OCP plays a vital role in mitigating the negative effects of high consumer cynicism, resulting in desirable brand relationship outcomes even among consumers with flexible brand attitudes.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Self-brand connection (SBC)**

Consumer-brand relationship theory posits that consumer can forge meaningful relationships with brands. Self-brand connection is established when brand associations resonate with consumer identities (Gaustad et al., 2018). According to Fournier (1998, p. 367), "brands cohere into systems that consumers create not only to help them live but also to give meaning to their lives. Simply put, consumers do not select brands; they select lives." Self-brand connection refers to the strong and meaningful ties that consumers form with brands and perceive it to be an integral part of their self-identity (Escalas, 2004). When the consumer's image is strongly associated with the brand's image, a strong self-brand connection is expected to emerge. Consumers with high self-brand connection see traits of their selves mirrored in the brand and become highly attached to it; on the other hand, consumers with low self-brand connection find it

challenging to see the brand as reflecting their selves, are less likely to be attached to the brand and have a somewhat malleable view about the brand (Ferraro et al., 2013).

Branding logic and service-dominant (SD) logic have evolved to realize that brand value is co-created by the brand and the consumer (Merz et al., 2009). When consumers discover that a brand can co-create significant value in contributing to the consumers' meaningful self-identity, they will form a strong self-brand connection. Positive consumer responses, such as positive brand attitudes and a greater likelihood to purchase the brand, are correlated with high self-brand connection (Harrigan et al., 2018).

Consumers must feel strongly connected to the brand in order to purchase premium brands. According to Tildesley and Coote (2009), "the self-brand connection component explained more variance in a set of outcome variables such as loyalty and willingness to pay a price premium." "Consumers process information to form beliefs, use those beliefs to form attitudes, which in turn inform behavioral actions" (Harrigan et al., 2018, p. 390). Consumers with high self-brand connection demonstrate favorable attitudes towards the brand (Cheng et al., 2012). Several past studies posit that self-brand connection (which is a belief framework) predicts consumer loyalty (e.g. Loh et al., 2021; van der Westhuizen, 2018; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Tildesley and Coote, 2009). As extant research identifies that loyalty manifests as an attitudinal construct towards the brand (e.g., Kamitov et al., 2019; Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011), we anticipate that self-brand connection would well predict consumers' brand attitudes. As report by Edelman (2018) highlights that how brands can earn, strengthen, and protect consumer-brand relationships is contingent on consumers' general attitudes towards brands, it is important to investigate the role of SBC in shaping consumers' brand attitudes.

### **Flexible and intransigent consumer brand attitudes (FLEX and INTR)**

Brand attitude is a construct of salience in marketing, and favorable brand attitudes are a primary asset towards building strong brands (Gupta and Hagtvedt, 2021; Pathak et al., 2020; Edelman, 2018; Park et al., 2010). Brand attitude is defined as a consumer's evaluation of a brand about how would the brand deliver with regards to the consumer's buying motive (Rossiter, 2014). Strength of brand attitude is theorized on a bipolar valence dimension (Park et al., 2010). Consumer brand attitudes can be either intransigent (rigid) or flexible (malleable) along a bipolar valence. In the current study, intransigent and flexible brand attitudes are defined as the degrees of consumers' inflexible and adaptive attitudes towards consumption object (brand) while making decisions, respectively. Thus, an intransigent attitude would reflect consumers' predisposition that the focal brand is best suited to fulfil his/her consumption motive. A flexible brand attitude would reflect consumers' malleable predisposition where s/e would be willing to consider other brands as well which may be better suited over focal brand to fulfil his/her consumption motive.

A flexible brand attitude is an attitudinal state in which the consumer has the brand in his/her consideration set while simultaneously keeping in mind that other switching options are also available to accommodate various difficulties and issues related to consumption decisions. On the other hand, an intransigent brand attitude refers to the attitudinal state in which the consumer believes that the focal brand is uncompromisable and refuses to consider any other switching incentive. Consumers' firm beliefs and behaviors towards the brand will reflect an intransigent brand attitude, whereas consumers' malleable beliefs and behaviors will reflect a flexible brand attitude. Consumers may develop flexible attitudes due to contextual factors such as price/sales promotion (Szmigin et al., 2009), or it may be driven by intrinsic factors such as desire to try a new brand (Mazursky et al., 1987). Similarly, prior research indicates that consumers adopt an



intransigent attitude towards consumption decision-making due to self-concept and social factors (Duarte et al., 2016; Coimbra and Ferreira, 2020). According to Szmigin et al. (2009, p. 226), “in the absence of a consumer-based definition of the term, flexibility is described here as the inherent ability to change.” Wang et al. (2019) characterize intransigent brand consumers as Apple fanatics who do not consider any brand other than Apple to be worthy of consideration. In Woodham et al. (2017)'s opening example, Michael characterizes a consumer demonstrating a flexible brand attitude, as he has used several brands of toothpaste throughout his life. Valta (2013) posits that attitude determines individual's relationship with the exchange partner. Therefore, we focus on assessing the impact of consumers' brand attitudes on their relationship with brands that manifests in the form of brand love, which is an important understanding required to build strong loved brands (Edelman, 2018).

### **Brand love (BL)**

Brand love is "the degree of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Brand love is a relationship concept that includes several components such as passionate behaviors, positive emotional connect, self-brand integration, long term commitment, anticipated separation distress, positive attitude valence, and attitude strength, which is a strong conviction in one's feelings about a brand (Batra et al., 2012; Schmid and Huber, 2019; Maxian et al., 2013). Brand love is a highly desirable managerial construct because it strengthens the relationship between customers and brands, resulting in the brand's success. (Bairrada et al., 2018). Park et al. (2010) posit ‘although the brand attitude strength construct may capture a brand's mindshare of a consumer, attachment is uniquely positioned to capture both heart and mind’ (p. 14). Based on this, we anticipate that consumers' brand attitudes

(intransigent vs. flexible), which are a share of their mind, progress to shape their love towards the brand, which is a higher order construct, capturing consumers' minds as well as hearts.

People are willing to make sacrifices in close relationships (Van Lange et al., 2007). Strong consumer-retailer relationships would manifest through consumers' willingness to make monetary and/or non-monetary sacrifices for the retailer (Xia et al., 2010), and one such sacrifice would be in monetary terms through an enhanced willingness to pay premium. Brand love is such a close consumer-brand relationship that determines consumers' willingness to pay premium (Batra et al., 2012; Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bairrada et al., 2018).

### **Willingness to pay premium (WPP)**

Willingness to pay premium refers to a willingness to pay more for a specific service brand than for comparable alternatives (Casidy and Wymer, 2016). According to Azen and Driver (1992), in the absence of accurate knowledge about the 'actual' economic value of goods/services, consumers rely heavily on contingent value estimation based on the 'affect' associated with consumption concerning payment considerations. Consumers' willingness to pay price premium is related to their positive perceptions of the brand's value and quality, as higher prices represent superior value and quality (Casidy and Wymer, 2016). It is desirable for any brand, as it demonstrates effective brand management, to be able to charge more than competitor brands (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003), and demonstrates consumers' willingness to make monetary sacrifice for the brand.

### **Consumer cynicism (CC)**

Consumer motivations to consume are complex, and are shaped by person-situation interaction (Sarkar et al., 2020). Therefore, we investigate the impact of one such 'person' (i.e. consumer) specific variable of salience, consumer cynicism on consumers' brand responses. Prior

studies well establish the importance of gaining consumer trust as a precursor to building a strong brand (e.g. Ye et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2018; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Mora et al., 2021). Thus, consumer cynicism (which represents consumer mistrust) is a variable of salience that impacts consumers' brand responses (Hernandez et al., 2019). Cynicism denotes a belief that other people's actions are devious (Van Dolen et al., 2012). It is frequently accompanied by irrational beliefs and a general sense of being disappointed by others, feeling of treachery inflicted by others, and having a negative affect (Hochwarter et al., 2004). A highly cynical consumer has mistrust/suspicion about brands and retailers' intentions (Odou and Pechpeyrou, 201). A cynical consumer would conclude that in a consumption situation, the other parties involved (such as the manufacturer/service provider or other consumers present at the same time) intend to exploit the (cynical) consumer in order to maximize their interests (Balaji et al., 2018). When irritated, cynical consumers are more likely to engage in negative consumption behaviors such as low purchase intentions (Chylinski and Chu, 2010). According to previous researchers, psychological flexibility and intransigence are contextual and relate to the specific problem at hand (Ionescu, 2017; Weisberg, 2014). We envision consumers' cynicism as a context for emphasizing/diminishing consumers' flexible/intransigent brand attitudes.

### **Other customer perception (OCP)**

A situational factor that plays an important role in shaping the person-situation interaction experience of the focal customer in a service setting is other customer perception (OCP) (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Cai et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019, Hanks et al., 2020; Kim and Tang, 2020; Kim and Baker; 2020; Sarkar et al., 2020; Sarkar et al., 2021). During the service encounter, the presence of other customers can significantly impact the experiences of the focal customer (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Brocato et al., 2012). Research on customer-to-customer interaction (CCI)

highlights the importance of CCI, as customers with long-term (relational) orientation with the brand are highly invested in seeking the social benefits of CCI and demonstrate customer citizenship behaviours (Black et al., 2014; Kim and Choi, 2018; Heinonen et al., 2018). Other customer perception (OCP) as a construct contributes towards understanding quality as well as value of CCI (Brocato et al., 2012). Other customer perception (OCP) refers to the characteristics (appearance, similarity, and behavior) of other customers who are present in the service setting at the same time as the focal customers and influences their evaluations of the service experience (Nguyen et al., 2019). Brocato et al. (2012) define three dimensions of OCP: perceived appearances, status similarities, and other customer behaviors.

Recent research has suggested the importance of OCP as a tool for managing customer responses towards service brands in a multi-actor service setting (e.g., Cai et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019, Hanks et al., 2020; Sarkar et al., 2020). Therefore, researchers are invested in understanding the detrimental impact of other customers' unfavorable (bad/disruptive) OCP (e.g., Cai et al., 2018; Baker and Kim, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2020) as well as constructive impact of favorable (positive) OCP (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2019; Kim and Baker, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2021) on focal customer's brand responses. We further this stream of research by theorizing and empirically examining the role of favorable OCP in mitigating focal customer's cynicism (mistrust) thereby eliciting favorable brand responses. In doing this, we also contribute the theory and practice of 'recruiting the right customer' as a brand management tool to build a strong brand (Brocato et al., 2012; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007; Sarkar et al., 2020).

## **Study Hypotheses**

### **Sequential mediation of brand attitudes and brand love**

Self-brand connection refers to the extent to which a consumer integrates a brand into their self-concept (Harrigan et al., 2018). It is the level of identification consumers have with a brand. When a customer's sense of self is strongly connected to a brand, the focal brand is evaluated favorably by the consumer, and such a consumer tends to become loyal to the brand (van der Westhuizen, 2018; Tildesley and Coote, 2009) and is highly likely to advocate the brand (Moliner et al., 2018). High self-brand connection is likely to strongly predict consumers' favorable attitude towards the brand and a strong resistance to switch to alternative brands. Thus, a strong self-brand connection is expected to result in an intransigent brand attitude (Layzer, 2016), with a firm belief that the focal brand will be best able to deliver with regards to the consumer's buying motive (Rossiter, 2014). Such brand intransigence is an attitudinal state in which the consumer believes that the focal brand best matches his/her consumption values (which are static, and can't be compromised) and refuses to consider any other switching incentive

The theory of the psychological meaning-making process (Kaufmann et al., 2016) suggests that consumers who form an intransigent attitude towards a brand would deeply love the focal brand, as they would infer strong meanings from such a brand, which coincides with their own belief system. Brands are more likely to be loved when associated with something the customer perceives to be more profound, such as self-actualization, close interpersonal relationships, or existential meaning (Batra et al., 2012), which is anticipated to be the case for consumers perceiving to have high self-brand connection. When consumers develop a strong attachment with a brand, they would be willing to make monetary/non-monetary sacrifices for the brand, such as a

heightened willingness to pay premium for the brand (Batra et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005).

Thus, we posit:

*H<sub>1a</sub>. Self-brand connection strengthens the consumers' intransigent brand attitude and brand love, which increases willingness to pay price premium (SBC → INTR → BL → WPP)*

On the other hand, consumers with low self-brand connection find it challenging to see the brand as reflecting their selves, are less likely to be attached to the brand and have a somewhat malleable view about the brand (Ferraro et al., 2013). This leads to development of flexible brand attitudes, in which consumers are willing to compromise with their existing beliefs, and maybe skeptic about the brand's ability to best satisfy their consumption motives (Rossiter, 2014). Along the same line of reasoning, high self-brand connection will diminish consumers' flexible brand attitude.

Flexible consumers believe that other suitable alternative options (e.g., alternative brands) may exist to better achieve the desired consumption goal (Ionescu, 2017). Consumers with flexible brand attitudes will not consider the focal brand as an irreplaceable/monogamous choice. Such a flexible brand attitude leads to low brand love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). This is because consumers with flexible brand attitudes are less likely to feel separation distress without consuming the focal brand, and are more prone to be influenced by intrinsic and/or extrinsic switching incentives (Biraglia et al., 2021; Mazursky et al., 1987). As high brand love predicts strong intention to pay price premium (Batra et al., 2012), low brand love derived from a highly flexible brand attitude will garner a lower willingness to pay price premium. However, a strong self-brand connection is bound to mitigate consumers' flexible attitude by strengthening the belief

that the focal brand will be best able to deliver with regards to the consumer's buying motive (Rossiter, 2014). Thus, we posit:

*H<sub>1b</sub>. Self-brand connection weakens consumers' flexible brand attitude which in turn strengthens brand love, and increases willingness to pay price premium (SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP)*

### **The moderating role of consumer cynicism**

In H1a, we hypothesized that self-brand connection increases brand love by increasing consumer intransigence. We argue in this section that the effects of self-brand connection on brand outcomes are contingent on consumer cynicism, and would manifest for consumers developing flexible brand attitudes

A highly cynical consumer cannot truly trust a brand and is more likely to use manipulative tactics when interacting with the brand and acts opportunistically (Odou and De, 2011). In hypothesis H<sub>1b</sub>, we outlined the role of self-brand connection in accentuating consumers' brand love and willingness to pay premium by mitigating consumers' flexibility. A flexible attitude leads the consumer to choose the brand opportunistically as per situational demands, and restricts the consumer from finding strong brand meanings with respect to the focal brand. As the basic premise of consumer cynicism is a mistrust of brand meanings, grounded in the perception that the brand is opportunistic (Helm et al., 2015; Odou and De, 2011), it is anticipated that consumer cynicism will moderate M2 (SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP), such that consumer's flexible attitude would enhance if the consumer is highly cynical. Thereby, the mitigating impact that favorable self-brand connection has on consumers' flexible attitude will be attenuated. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

*H<sub>2</sub>. Consumer cynicism negatively moderates the sequential mediation of flexible brand attitude and brand love, such that the effect of self-brand connection on flexible brand*

*attitude, in turn on brand love, and thereby on willingness to pay price premium will be weaker (vs. stronger) in case of high (vs. low) consumer cynicism.*

### **Accentuating the effect of other customer perception (OCP)**

“Managers who want to encourage and enhance interactions between their customers should have a better chance of success if they understand whether their customers view each other positively, and, if not, what characteristics might be at issue” (Brocato et al., 2012, p. 385). In an interactive service setting, favorably perceived OCP dimensions positively influence focal customer’s satisfaction towards the service provider (Sreejesh et al., 2018; Brocato et al., 2012). We posit that focal customer’s satisfaction generated due to favorable perception of other customers’ appearances, similarities, and behaviors will help attenuate the negative moderating influence of consumer cynicism for a consumer having a flexible brand attitude. For a consumer having an intransigent brand attitude, OCP will not play such a role, and cynicism is anticipated to become an insignificant moderator.

Following Reichers et al. (1997), it is argued that consumer cynicism is strategically manageable attitude. Many a times brand managers are worried when consumers have “an unfavorable attitude toward their brands” which makes it important to “investigate the creation of a self-brand connection with new and unfavorable brands” (Tan et al., 2018, p. 71). In this context, it is important to investigate how favorable OCP can be used as a strategic tool to attenuate the negative moderating effect of cynicism, especially when target consumers have flexible brand attitude. OCP as an interactive factor can attenuate the negative moderating effect of cynicism through generating satisfaction (Kim and Baker, 2017; Kim and Baker, 2020) and may even enhance brand love (Sreejesh et al., 2018). As heightened satisfaction with the brand is known to enhance consumers’ brand trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2001), it is bound to



reduce consumers' cynicism i.e. mistrust regarding the brand. We argue that through generating satisfaction, favorable OCP can attenuate the adverse effect of high consumer cynicism on the relationships between SBC, flexible brand attitude and its follow-up outcomes. Thus, we conceptualize OCP as the moderator of the moderator (cynicism).

*H<sub>3</sub>: The adverse effect of consumer cynicism could be managed through OCP, such that, in case of high cynicism, an exposure to favorable (vs. unfavorable) OCP can strengthen (vs. weaken) the mitigating route of self-brand connection on flexible brand attitude, thereby brand love and willingness to pay price premium.*

### **OCP as moderator: Dominance of OCP-Behaviour**

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) maintain that the behaviors demonstrated by other customers have a substantial influence on the focal individual's perception of service quality. Other customers' behaviors are a very prominent factor in any service setting (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007), and influence focal customer's price decisions (Lastner et al., 2019). Customer-to-customer interaction has a significant impact on focal customer's experience of service quality (Kim et al., 2018). Brocato et al. (2012) state, "behaviors of other customers may have a stronger impact on influencing an individual's perception of service quality" (p. 384). Prior research posits that favorable behaviours of other customers elicit positive brand responses of the focal customer (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Kim and Tang, 2020; Kim and Baker, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2021). Fein and Hilton (1994) state that an individual under suspicion (like a highly cynic consumer) displays a strong tendency to draw corresponding dispositional inferences from the behaviors of others. Thus, favorable other customer behaviours are most likely to alleviate the mistrust of a cynic customer. Sarkar et al. (2021, p. 3) show that OCP-behavior is more dominant (compared to appearance and similarity) in attenuating the effect of service failure severity on consumer's dissatisfaction with

service provider as behavior is the most discernible dimension of OCP for relational customers, and includes behaviors like “providing information (by explaining how to download the hotel app and proceed with online check-in) or in terms of providing emotional support (by listening to focal customer’s concerns sympathetically)”. Thus, we anticipate that for highly suspicious cynical consumers, OCP behavior (compared to appearance and similarity) would be of prime concern in enhancing their relational value with the brand, and favorable behaviors of other customers would be the most effective in alleviating cynical focal customer’s suspicions. Therefore, we propose that OCP behavior can act more strongly (over similarity and appearance) in attenuating the adverse effect of consumer cynicism on the influences of low self-brand connection on subsequent outcomes like flexible brand attitude, brand love, and willingness to pay price premium.

*H4: OCP behavior (vs. OCP similarity and appearance) alleviates the adverse effect of consumer cynicism (as stated in H3) most favorably.*

See **Figure 1** for hypothesized study framework

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

## **Overview of Studies**

We tested the proposed hypotheses using three studies. In Study 1, we analyzed the empirical validity of the model linking the key constructs, namely: self-brand connection, brand attitudes (intransient and flexible brand attitudes), brand love, and willingness to pay price premium. We collected data from consumers who visited a premium retail brand store to test the relationships in study 1. In studies 2 and 3, we used experimental designs to examine the role of consumer cynicism, and the roles of OCP types in attenuating the effects of consumer cynicism on self-brand connection-brand love relationship.

## **Study 1: Effect of Self-brand connection on willingness to pay price premium**

In study 1, we examined the role of self-brand connection in developing intransigent and flexible brand attitudes, and thereby developing brand love and willingness to pay price premium.

### **Method**

#### *Study context, sampling, and data collection procedures*

To collect data for this study, the researchers selected a premium branded retail store having its boutiques across India. The selected brand offers a wide range of apparels for both men and women, and delivers high-quality products, which are offered at premium prices to all age groups. Since the study targeted a population group of consumers who visited premium brand retail stores, we utilized a self-administered cross-sectional survey among premium brand store customers with the aid of a commercial research agency. Because we intended to survey consumers who had purchased or had prior experience with the brand, we employed a mall intercept approach. This sampling strategy allowed us to look at customers' recent direct brand encounters. The apparel product category has a large customer base and a significant economic impact. Furthermore, the sector is fiercely competitive, and brand development is critical to marketing activities. This data gathering attempt conducted during January 2020 to March 2020, yielded 791 useful responses (62 percent male). Consumers involved in business made up the bulk of the responders (32 percent), 37.88 percent of those surveyed were between the ages of 25 and 45, and around 42% of the participants reported that their income is in the range of 20-30 Lakhs Rupees. In addition, 44% percent of the respondents reported that they owned at least one vehicle worth above 10 Lakhs Rupees (See Table 1 for sample characteristics). After data collection, the study looked at nonresponse bias by comparing early and late responses (for all the study variables, comparing

means for the first quartile and the final quartile). However, the results reported no significant differences ( $p > 0.10$ ). As a result, nonresponse bias was not a major threat in our investigation.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### *Measures*

In the survey questionnaire, all the items used to measure various constructs were adapted from prior literature. Self-brand connection was measured using seven items adapted from Escalas (2004). Intransigent brand attitude was measured using four items, and flexible brand attitude was measured using three items adapted from Mitchell et al. (2004). Brand Love was measured using ten Likert type items adopted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Three items adapted from Casidy and Wymer (2016), and Sahin et al. (2011) were used to measure consumer's willingness to pay price premium. Consumer cynicism was measured using eight items adapted from Helm et al. (2015). See Table 2 for a detailed list of items used in the survey questionnaire.

## **Results**

### *Basic data screening, reliability, and validity assessments*

To identify the unengaged respondents, we followed Kiatkawsin and Han (2017) and examined the standard deviation. The detailed examination revealed two cases with standard deviation near zero, carrying traces of non-engagement. Data for these two respondents was deleted. Further, we examined the multivariate normality of the collected data, and the result reported no evidence of the violation. Thus, for the final analysis, we retained a total of 789 cases.

Further, we used the Harman's single factor test to assess the common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Results revealed that a single factor explained just 22.55 percent of the variance, which is less than 50%, indicating that the study measures are free from common method bias.

Next, we performed measurement model testing using confirmatory factor analysis (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Following the recommendation from Bentler (1999), we found that the model reported good fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 655.80$ ,  $df = 545$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 1.203$ ,  $SRMR = .020$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.016$ ,  $CFI = 0.994$ ,  $IFI = 0.994$ ,  $TLI = 0.993$ ). Further, all the composite reliability (CR) coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). Thus, results supported that the scales carry adequate convergent validity and reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To establish discriminant validity, HTMT analysis was performed, and the results indicated that the all the estimated HTMT values were below 0.85, indicating that the scales satisfied the discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

*Hypotheses testing: Sequential mediation [ $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ ]*

To test the hypotheses  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ , we performed a structural equation modelling with maximum likelihood estimation. In this model, we examined self-brand connection (SBC) as the exogenous variable, intransient brand attitude (INTR), flexible brand attitude (FLEX) as the mediators connected to brand love (BL), which in turn linked to the outcome variable willingness to pay price premium (WPP). The data reported a good fit with the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2 = 418.38$ ,  $df = 317$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 1.42$ ,  $SRMR = .0340$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.020$ ,  $CFI = 0.987$ ,  $IFI = 0.988$ ,  $TLI = 0.986$ ). As part of analyzing the specific indirect effects, we applied a user defined Estimand option in AMOS 25 with 5000 bootstrapped samples. The results revealed significant positive indirect effects of SBC on WPP through the sequential mediation of INT and BL ( $\beta_{[SBC \rightarrow INTR \rightarrow BL \rightarrow WPP]} = 0.077$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.052$  to  $0.107$ ). Similarly, as expected, the results reported that SBC significantly reduces FLEX, which in turn improves consumer BL and their WPP ( $\beta_{[SBC$

$\rightarrow \text{FLEX} \rightarrow \text{BL} \rightarrow \text{WPP}] = 0.027$ , 95%CI = 0.016 to 0.039). Thus, the study findings support hypotheses H<sub>1a</sub> and H<sub>1b</sub>.

### *Testing moderation [H<sub>2</sub>]*

As part of analyzing moderating effect of consumer cynicism, we first created high (vs low) categories of cynicism following a median split. Iacobucci et al. (2015) support that median split do not inflate Type I error when the independent variables employed in the study are relatively uncorrelated. We performed an unconstrained structural equation model across high (vs low) cynicism groups ( $\chi^2 = 766.5$ , df = 641). Further, a fully constrained model was run, where we constrained regression weights, variances and covariances across these groups ( $\chi^2 = 1622.1$ , df = 696). A chi-square difference test comparing constrained and fully constrained models revealed a statistically significant difference ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 882.7$ ,  $\Delta$  df = 55,  $p < 0.01$ ). It established that consumer cynicism moderates the path linking the exogenous variable, mediators, and the outcome variable.

As reported in Table 3, first we examined the sequential mediation of INTR  $\rightarrow$  BL between self-brand connection and willingness to pay price premium separately for both the moderator groups (high vs. low cynicism). As proposed in hypothesis H<sub>2</sub>, the study results supported that there exists a significant difference in sequential mediation of FLEX  $\rightarrow$  BL between self-brand connection and willingness to pay price premium in both (high vs. low cynicism) the groups (SBC $\rightarrow$ FLEX $\rightarrow$  BL $\rightarrow$  WPP: IND<sub>3</sub>[low cyn] = .047,  $p < 0.01$ ; SBC $\rightarrow$ FLEX $\rightarrow$  BL $\rightarrow$  WPP: IND<sub>4</sub>[high cyn]=0.012,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results supported that, in case of higher (vs. lower) cynicism, the effect of self-brand connection in diminishing flexible brand attitude will be weaker (vs. stronger), which in turn attenuates brand love and willingness to pay price premium (DIF 2  $\Delta$ [IND<sub>3</sub> vs IND<sub>4</sub>] = 0.034,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the results support hypotheses 2

Additional Insights: After checking the role of cynicism between the path mentioned earlier (SBC→FLEX→ BL→ WPP), we examined the role of cynicism for the second path (SBC→INTR→ BL→ WPP). The results showed a significant mediation effect in high (SBC→INTR→ BL→ WPP:  $IND^1_{1[\text{high cyn}]} = 0.096, p < 0.01$ ) as well as low (SBC→FLEX→ BL→WPP:  $IND_{2[\text{low cyn}]} = 0.055, p < 0.01$ ) cynicism groups. Further, we statically compared these indirect effects to examine the conditional role of cynicism. The results show a statistically insignificant difference in indirect effects across high (vs. low) cynic consumer groups (DIF 1:  $\Delta [IND_{1 \text{ vs. } IND_{2}}] = 0.040, p = .207$ ). It confirms that cynicism does not condition this path (SBC→INTR→ BL→ WPP).

[Insert Table 3 & Figure 2 about here]

### *Discussion*

The study results supported that consumers' self-brand connection takes two different routes to develop willingness to pay price premium. For the first route of intransigent brand attitude and brand love (constructive route: INTR→BL), the effect of self-brand connection strengthens the intransigent attitude and brand love, which in turn develops into favorable willingness to pay price premium. For the second route of flexible brand attitude and brand love (mitigating route: FLEX→BL), the effect of self-brand connection weakens flexible brand attitude and strengthens brand love, which in turn develops into favorable willingness to pay price premium. Since, the first route (constructive route) is a stronger route to develop willingness to pay price premium, consumers' high (vs. low) level of cynicism does not exert any conditional influence. On the contrary, the second route (mitigating route) is a weak route to develop willingness to pay price premium, where cynicism exerts a conditional effect, that is, in case of high (vs. low) level of

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<sup>1</sup> IND indicates indirect effects

consumer cynicism, the mitigating route will be weak (vs. strong) to develop brand love, and resultant willingness to pay price premium.

## **Study 2: Moderating role of OCP**

### *Design*

Study 2 was a one-factorial between-subjects experiment with two OCP conditions (favorable vs. unfavorable), designed with the objective to investigate conditional role of OCP. Results from study 1 elucidated that high level of consumer cynicism weakens the mitigating effect of self-brand connection on flexible brand attitude, thereby improving consumers' brand love and resultant willingness to pay the premium, thus making high consumer cynicism a critical construct for brand managers. Thus, we focused only on understanding the brand responses of highly cynic consumers in study 2.

### *Participants and procedure*

As part of data collection in study 2, we used a computer-mediated purchase simulation, and in this, we mimicked a realistic shopping environment of a premium single-brand retail store. Respondents were randomly selected members of a large consumer panel (N = 1350). All these respondents were exposed to a computer-simulated shopping environment, which can provide highly realistic buying behaviour information, especially when cues such as brands, prices, and the store offerings simulate those of a real shopping context (Burke et al., 1992; Campo et al., 1999). Such an environment needs to be developed as part of the experiments when shopping situation needs to be carefully executed, and more importantly, the cost associated with the field experiments is presumed to be exorbitant (e.g., Breugelmans et al., 2006; Massara et al., 2014). The participants were contacted online. All the participants received a unique participant ID, and a set of screening questions (about consumer cynicism) to examine their eligibility to participate



in the final experiment. We did a median split of consumer cynicism scores (Iacobucci et al., 2015), and only those respondents with high cynicism were screened and recruited for the main experiment. Four hundred fifty-five participants were found eligible since their cynicism scores were on the higher side of the median split. In the final experiment, 305 people participated, who were randomly assigned to any one of the two OCP conditions. First, they were exposed to the computer-mediated shopping environment of a single brand retail store, which helped them visualize themselves as the focal customer making a purchase at the store. They were then asked to read the OCP scenario (See Appendix) and respond to the measures of control variables, manipulation questions, and study variables. We received 299 usable responses (See Table 1 for sample characteristics).

### *Measures*

All measures were the same as used in study 1. Additionally, the manipulation check questions of OCP measurement were adapted from Brocato et al. (2012).

### *Results*

The manipulation check results indicated successful manipulation of OCP ( $\alpha = .86$ ; OCP<sub>[high]</sub> = 4.88, OCP<sub>[low]</sub> = 2.93,  $t = 12.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Further, we examined the measurement models using CFA, where two separate models (OCP favorable vs. OCP unfavorable) were assessed using the items representing SBC, FLEX, BL, and WPP, and the values were satisfactory.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Next, as part of examining H3, as shown in Figure 3, we performed an SEM with OCP as a grouping variable (favourable OCP vs unfavourable OCP). The results supported a satisfactory model fit ( $\chi^2 = 476$ ,  $df = 454$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.049$ , CFI = .995, NFI = .911, TLI = .995, RMSEA = .013, SRMR = .0412). As reported in Figure 3, all the path estimates linking SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP

were significant in both favourable and unfavourable conditions. However, in the unfavourable condition, the path estimates were found to be lower in comparison with the favourable condition. We further examined the user-defined estimands in AMOS and estimated the sequential mediation effects in case of favourable (vs unfavourable) OCP conditions, and later these indirect effects were statistically tested for differences to analyze the moderating role of OCP. The results reported a statistically significant sequential mediation in case of both favourable (Indirect effect: .754, CI<sub>[lower]</sub> = .551, CI<sub>[upper]</sub> = .993,  $p < 0.01$ ), and unfavourable (Indirect effect: .074, CI<sub>[lower]</sub> = .026, CI<sub>[upper]</sub> = .129,  $p < 0.01$ ) OCP conditions. The results also supported that the indirect effects were statistically different ( $\Delta$  Indirect effect = .680, CI<sub>[lower]</sub> = .462, CI<sub>[upper]</sub> = .96,  $p < 0.01$ ). This supported hypothesis H3, and thus, we inferred that favourable OCP condition (vs unfavourable) garners a higher level of SBC, which in turn reduces FLEX, thereby developing a higher level of BL, leading to higher level of WPP.

### *Discussion*

In study 1 we established the fact that under high level of consumer cynicism, the mitigating route (SBC→FLEX→BL→WPP) will be a weak path. That is, under high level of consumer cynicism, the effect of SBC will be weaker in mitigating the effect of FLEX, thereby carrying weak effect on BL and WPP. In study 2, we examined the effect of OCP as a boundary condition to further restore the effect of SBC on WPP to manage the mitigating route. The study results show that favorable OCP (vs. unfavorable) acts as a moderator, so that SBC weakens the FLEX, leading to strong BL and high WPP.

### **Study 3: Conditional effects of OCP types**

The objective of Study 3 was threefold. First, we wanted to examine if the OCP types moderate the effect of self-brand connection on flexible brand attitude, thereby brand love and

willingness to pay price premium. Second, by capturing the OCP types, we wanted to understand which OCP type is the most critical (relative influence) in generating the sequential effects proposed, and thereby testing H4. Third, distinct from Study 1 and Study 2, we wanted to change the type of products participants were shopping for, and accordingly in this study we used a different product setting, 'premium skincare and beauty products' that are generally popular in premium single-brand retail shopping. More importantly, a study in a different product setting was conducted to extend the external validity of the previous studies.

#### *Design, procedure & participants*

As part of data collection for study 3, we used a computer-mediated purchase simulation, and in this, we mimicked a realistic shopping environment of a premium single-brand retail store. Respondents belonged to an Indian consumer panel, and were invited through collaboration with a research agency (N = 412, 55% female, M age = 39 years, SD = 3.55 years). We used one factorial (OCP: OCP-appearance vs OCP-behaviour vs OCP similarity) between-subjects design. We first instructed them to visit the store in detail and to evaluate the store environment. We measured the participants' perceptions concerning the extent to which the simulated store environment represented the real-life single-brand retail environment (1 = "not at all represents", 7 = "highly represents"). After that, we asked the participants to imagine and present their views on other customers who would be present in the same service settings. Then, they were instructed to choose one of the three given scenarios (See Appendix) which most closely matched with their views/imagination while visiting this store concerning the other customers present in the store environment. In addition to demographic information (See Table 1 for sample characteristics), they were asked to report their responses towards manipulation questions, self-brand connection,

flexible brand attitude, brand love, and willingness to pay price premium. The scales used were similar to the ones used in study 2.

### *Study results*

ANOVA results supported the manipulation. For the participants who reported identifying most with OCP appearance, their mean score ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $S.D = .77$ ) on appearance was higher in comparison to similarity ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $S.D = .55$ ) and behaviour ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $S.D = .38$ ) dimensions, was statistically significant ( $F = 22.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). People who identified with similarity, scored highest on similarity ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $S.D = .49$ ) in comparison to appearance ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $S.D = .33$ ), and behaviour ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $S.D = .37$ ), with a statistically significant difference ( $F = 12.88$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). People who identified with OCP behaviour, had highest score on OCP behaviour ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $S.D = .76$ ), in comparison to OCP similarity, and OCP appearance ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $S.D = .33$ ), and there was a statically significant difference ( $F = 18.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This confirmed the appropriateness of the manipulation of OCP conditions.

Further, we assessed the validity and reliability of the scales using CFA. In line with studies 1 & 2, we found that the scales used were statistically valid and reliable, and it confirmed the psychometric properties of the scale used.

Next, as part of testing hypothesis H4, following the procedure recommended by prior studies (e.g., Sreejesh et al., 2020), we applied the SEM technique with OCP (appearance, similarity, and behaviour) as the grouping variable. In this, we first examined the sequential mediation ( $SBC \rightarrow FLEX \rightarrow BL \rightarrow WPP$ ) across these three groups independently. Then, in the second stage, we compared these indirect effects statistically to understand the dominance of OCP behavior group (vs. OCP appearance ad OCP similarity). The model test results reported satisfactory fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 1009.7$ ,  $df = 681$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.48$ ,  $CFI = .950$ ,  $NFI = .863$ ,  $TLI = .945$ ,

RMSEA = .034, SRMR = .0446). The results supported that the indirect effects across OCP behaviour (indirect effect: 0.734,  $p < 0.01$ ), OCP appearance (indirect effect: 0.073,  $p < 0.01$ ) and OCP similarity (indirect effect: 0.116,  $p < 0.01$ ) were statistically significant. More importantly, the comparison of the indirect effect of OCP behaviour (vs OCP appearance and OCP similarity) demonstrated that the effect was stronger in case of OCP behaviour over both OCP appearance and OCP similarity and the differences were found to be statistically significant ( $\Delta$  indirect effect [OCP behaviour vs OCP appearance]: .666,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\Delta$  indirect effect [OCP [behaviour vs OCP similarity]: .623,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, there existed no statistical difference in indirect effects between OCP appearance and OCP similarity ( $\Delta$  indirect effect: OCP [appearance vs OCP similarity]: -.043,  $p > 0.01$ ). Thus, the study found support for H4.

### *Discussion*

In Study 2 we hypothesized that OCP behavior (vs. OCP appearance and OCP similarity), works as a strong conditional factor in alleviating the adverse effect of high consumer cynicism. The results supported that in case of high consumer cynicism, OCP behavior works most favorably, and carries a dominance (over OCP appearance and OCP similarity) to condition the proposed sequential mediation (SBC  $\rightarrow$  FLEX  $\rightarrow$  BL  $\rightarrow$  WPP).

### **Discussion**

#### *Summary of findings*

Findings from study 1 demonstrate that consumers' self-brand connection takes two different routes to develop willingness to pay price premium. For the first route of intransigent brand attitude and brand love (*constructive route*: INTR  $\rightarrow$  BL), the effect of self-brand connection strengthens the intransigent attitude and brand love, which in turn develops into favorable willingness to pay price premium. For the second route of flexible brand attitude and brand love (*mitigating route*:

FLEX→BL), the effect of high self-brand connection weakens flexible brand attitude and strengthens brand love, which in turn develops into favorable willingness to pay price premium. In case of high level of consumer cynicism, the *mitigating route* (FLEX→BL) will be weak, i.e., high self-brand connection will not be able to weaken flexible brand attitude, thus attenuating brand love, and resultant willingness to pay price premium. Findings from study 2 elucidate that favorable OCP works as a conditioning factor towards attenuating the detrimental impact of consumers' high cynicism on the mitigating route, leading to strong BL and WPP. Results from study 3 show that OCP behavior carries a dominance (over OCP appearance and OCP similarity) to condition(alleviate) the detrimental impact of high consumer cynicism on the mitigating route.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

Our first contribution lies in delineating consumers' flexible and intransigent brand attitudes in the single-brand premium retail setting, and outlining how self-brand connection can enhance consumers' inflexibility. We conceptualize and empirically investigate how consumer's self-brand connection can lead to brand love through eliciting intransigent and flexible attitude towards the brand. Our empirical model supports that strong self-brand connection predicts high intransigent brand attitude. On the other hand, flexible consumers are open to shifting from one brand to another depending on the situation, instead of being strongly fixated to one brand (Ionescu, 2017). Our study results support that low self-brand connection leads to highly flexible brand attitude. The results also show that intransigent brand attitude generates stronger brand love and subsequent high willingness to pay price premium compared to flexible brand attitude. Thus, the research contributes by showing how the degree of self-brand connection can predict varying levels of brand love through developing either intransigent (constructive route) or flexible (mitigating route) brand attitude.

Second, we extend the extant research on consumer cynicism, which largely focuses on anti-consumption tendencies of highly cynic consumers (Makri et al., 2020; Odou and Pechperou, 2011), to understand the manifestations of distinct consumer cynicism levels in their retail brand relational outcomes. We examine the moderating role of consumer cynicism in shaping SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP relationships. Due to the presence of weak self-brand connection, cynicism negatively moderates the role of SBC in attenuating flexible brand attitude, which diminishes brand love and subsequent WPP. In the case of intransigent brand attitude, cynicism does not play the role of a significant moderator, as intransigent brand attitude is derived from a high self-brand connection already existing in consumer's mind.

The third theoretical paradigm that Our research contributes to the extant understanding of other customer perception in shaping consumers' brand responses. While Brocato et al. (2012) developed and operationalized the OCP construct in the retail setting, much of the extant research on OCP is focused on understanding the (un) favourable role of any/some of the OCP dimensions in shaping customer experiences and responses towards the service provider (e.g., Cai et al., 2018; Baker and Kim, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019, Hanks et al., 2020; Sarkar et al., 2020). We further the stream of research invested in understanding the role of favourable OCP perceptions on consumers' brand responses (e.g., Brocato et al., 2012; Hyun and Han, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2021) by investigating the conditioning impact of customers' favourable OCP in alleviating their cynicism towards the retailer. Our findings elucidate that favourable other customer perception (Nguyen et al., 2020; Baker and Kim, 2018; Sakar et al., 2021) in an interactive retail service environment can negatively moderate the role of high consumer cynicism, such that flexible consumers' brand love and intention to pay price premium (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bairrada et al., 2018) are enhanced. Additionally, extending the extant stream of OCP literature, which

mainly studies the dimensions of OCP as a global phenomenon (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2019; Sarkar et al., 2020) without focusing on the dimension specific differential nuances, we tease out the differential impacts of the three OCP dimensions in alleviating consumer cynicism and find OCP-B (over OCP- A and OCP-S) to be the most effective in such endeavor.

### *Managerial Implications*

We extend the findings of Hollenbeck et al. (2008), who recommend creating themed brand museums to expand brand meanings to strengthen consumers' self-brand connection. Such strong self-brand connections will result in customers turning intransigent in their brand attitudes, thereby engaging in strong monogamous brand love and demonstrating an enhanced willingness to pay price premium. Our findings show that consumer developing intransigent brand attitude loves the brand deeply, and strong brand love predicts the willingness to pay premium. Strong self-brand connection predicts intransigent brand attitude. So, a premium retail brand should spend maximum marketing resources in creating such value/purpose cues and in attracting and retaining the customers having high self-brand connection.

Foubert et al. (2018, p.17) posit the perils of charging premium as: "a premium may be perceived as less fungible or more manipulative". The findings from the present research show, that such perceptions may be rampant for flexible consumers (over intransigents), and would be further aggravated if the customer is highly cynic. However, as findings from present research elucidate, store managers can utilize favourable OCP as a conditioning tool to curb such cynic customers' apprehensions (mistrust). As suggested by Baker and Kim (2018) with regards to maintaining employee appearance guidelines, premium retail can make specific appearance management suggestions for promoting desirable customers' appearances/body language and include them in their marketing communication to enhance favourable OCP.



Furthermore, as OCP-behaviour is found to have statistically most significant impact in strengthening customers' brand love, it is important that brands focus on encouraging positive behavioural cues among its customers. As also recommended by Kim and Baker (2020), service brands should incentivize customer's favourable OCP cues during retail service co-creation, by providing them public recognition and/or monetary rewards for engaging in desirable behaviours. This would motivate other customers to be helpful in retail service co-creation. Firms should also make customers' roles as retail service co-creation agents richer (through creating and communicating desirable consumers' behavioural role scripts).

Furthermore, brand managers must strive try to create a retail store environment that stimulates very desirable interactions between the consumers concurrently visiting the store. Retail facility design should be done to maximize the customers' OCP perceptions. For example, an assortment of merchandise should be done such that friends, people of similar age, ethnicity, people with similar professions etc. have their preferred merchandise aisles/ trial rooms in proximity. Also, having private trial rooms for the consumers who are more disposed to involve in damaging behaviours towards the brand/other customers would help in evading negative inter-consumer interactions.

### **Future Research Directions**

Our study provides directions for future research. First, the study has been conducted in the context of single brand retailing. Future research should examine how the relationships between the study constructs may shape up in case of multi-brand retailers that sell different manufacturers' brands instead of a single brand. Second, the study model is tested in the context of premium retail brand. The model should be tested in the context of masstige retail brands. Third, future research should examine how the model relationships can vary across online and offline retail environments.

Fourth, not all variables could be accounted to analyze consumer's brand love and willingness to pay premium in a parsimonious model. Future research could look at the roles of store ambience cues, consumer personality factors (like attachment styles) in creating consumers' brand attitudes and subsequent outcomes.

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**Endnote:** *All the brands used in studies 1, 2 and 3 are popular single brand premium retail brands in India, and were identified through depth interviews of 27 Instagram retail brand influencers. However, actual brand names have been masked to ensure privacy. Only those respondents with at least one year of purchase association with the respective brand were included for the studies. The computer simulations for studies 2 and 3 were designed to mimic the retail store layout of the respective brands. In all the three studies, we considered the consumers' prior brand familiarity as the control variable, however, we did not find statistical significance of the same. Hence, we did not include this variable during the analysis stage.*

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### Tables & Figures

**Table 1:** Sample characteristics [Study 1, Study 2 & Study 3]

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Study 1</b>	<b>Study 2</b>	<b>Study 3</b>
Average Age (in years)		41	43	39
Gender				
	Male	62%	59%	45%
	Female	38%	41%	55%
Annual Income (in Lakhs Rs.)				
	10- 20	18%	22%	21%
	20-30	42%	37%	39%
	30-40	21%	19%	27%
	40 above	19%	22%	13%
Type of Employment				
	Private	22%	25%	18%
	Government	16%	17%	25%
	Semi	22%	21%	16%
	Business	39%	37%	41%
	Other	1%	-	-
Number of premium/luxury vehicles owned (above 10 Lakhs)				
	One	44%	55%	61%
	Two	39%	38%	23%
	Three or above	17%	7%	16%
Cost of house (s) owned (in Rs.)				
	Less than 50 Lakhs	12%	11%	9%
	50 Lakhs – 1 Crores	32%	16%	13%
	1 Crores -1.5 Crores	34%	44%	41%
	Above 1.5 Crores	22%	29%	37%



**Table 2:** EFA & CFA factor loadings and CR values [Study 1]

Constructs/Items	EFA factor loadings	CFA factor loadings	CR
<i>Self-brand connection (SBC)</i>			0.864
SBC1: This brand reflects who I am	.692	.713	
SBC2: I can identify with this brand	.709	.723	
SBC3: I feel a personal connection to this brand	.687	.677	
SBC4: I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people	.644	.654	
SBC5: I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be	.699	.703	
SBC6: I consider this brand to be 'me'	.700	.681	
SBC7: This brand suits me well	.687	.678	
<i>Intransient brand attitude (INTR)</i>			0.820
INTR1: The brand should always stick to it's principles	.693	.693	
INTR2: In the course of consuming this brand, my self-identity as a consumer of this brand has remained rather static	.706	.752	
INTR3: In the course of the consuming this brand, I have remained a fixed consumer of this brand and stick to only this brand in this product category	.728	.742	
INTR4: If this brand is not available and marketer suggests me alternatives, I find this impossible to accept	.739	.732	
<i>Flexible brand attitude (FLEX)</i>			0.783
FLEX1: The brand should be willing to compromise with its principles	.701	.699	
FLEX2: In the course of the consuming this brand, I have become a more flexible consumer and am willing to try new brands in this product category	.785	.789	
FLEX3: If this brand is not available and marketer suggests me alternatives, I find this easy to accept	.719	.727	
<i>Brand Love (BL)</i>			0.886
BL1: This is a wonderful brand.	.594	.587	
BL2: This brand makes me feel go	.619	.602	
BL3: This brand is totally awesome	.601	.644	
BL4: I have neutral feelings about this brand (-)	.633	.631	
BL5: This brand makes me very happy	.689	.677	
BL6: I love this brand	.687	.697	
BL7: I have no particular feelings about this brand (-)	.702	.688	
BL8: This brand is a pure delight	.666	.687	
BL9: I am passionate about this brand	.704	.700	
BL10: I'm very attached to this brand	.678	.697	
<i>Willingness to Pay Price Premium (WPP)</i>			0.800
WPP1: I am willing to pay a higher price for this retail brand than for other retail brands	.782	.777	

WPP2: I am willing to pay a premium over competing services to be able to visit this retail brand again	.707	.739
WPP3: I am willing to pay a lot more to shop at this retail brand than shopping at other retail brands	.717	.754
<i>Consumer Cynicism (CYN)</i>		0.981
CYN1: To make a profit, this brand is willing to do whatever they can get away with	.914	.915
CYN2: This brand sees consumers as puppets to manipulate	.920	.917
CYN3: If I want to get my money's worth, I cannot believe what this brand tells me	.935	.932
CYN4: This brand will cut any corner they can to improve profit margins	.938	.939
CYN5: This brand does not care what happens once I have bought the product	.936	.939
CYN6: This brand would not mind breaking the law; they just see fines and lawsuits as a cost of doing business	.940	.94
CYN7: This brand is more interested in making profits than in serving consumers	.920	.921
CYN8: This brand will sacrifice anything to make a profit	.927	.928

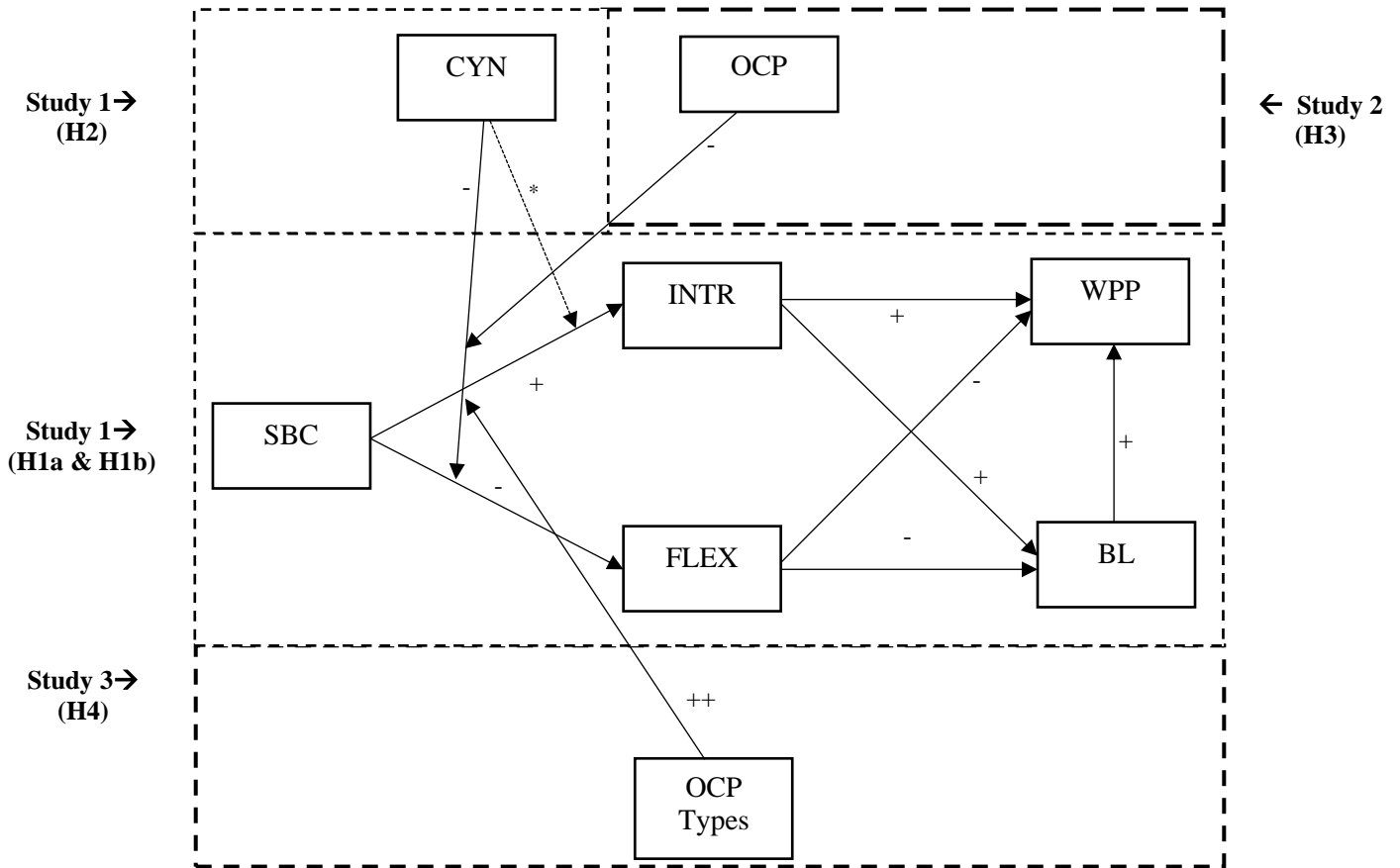
*Note: CR = composite reliability*

**Table 3:** Indirect effect estimates for high (vs. low) cynic consumers [Study 1]

Parameter	Estimate	95%-CI		P value
		Lower	Upper	
SBC→INTR→ WPP: IND1 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.178	0.116	0.249	0.00*
SBC→INTR→ BL: IND2 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.193	0.138	0.256	0.00*
SBC→FLEX→ WPP: IND3 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.060	0.027	0.102	0.00*
SBC→FLEX→ BL: IND4 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.095	0.057	0.139	0.00*
SBC→INTR→ BL→ WPP: IND5 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.096	0.062	0.136	0.00*
SBC→FLEX→ BL→ WPP: IND6 <sub>[high cyn]</sub>	0.047	0.026	0.073	0.00*
SBC→INTR→ WPP: IND7 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.185	0.109	0.278	0.00*
SBC→INTR→ BL: IND8 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.138	0.091	0.193	0.00*
SBC→FLEX→ WPP: IND9 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.042	0.008	0.086	0.029**
SBC→FLEX→ BL: IND10 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.031	0.013	0.053	0.00*
SBC→INTR→ BL→WPP: IND11 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.055	0.023	0.096	0.00*
SBC→FLEX→ BL→ WPP: IND12 <sub>[low cyn]</sub>	0.012	0.004	0.025	0.00*
DIF1 (ΔIND5 vs. IND11)	0.040	-0.013	0.092	0.207 <sup>ns</sup>
DIF 2(ΔIND6 vs. IND12)	0.034	0.011	0.062	0.018**

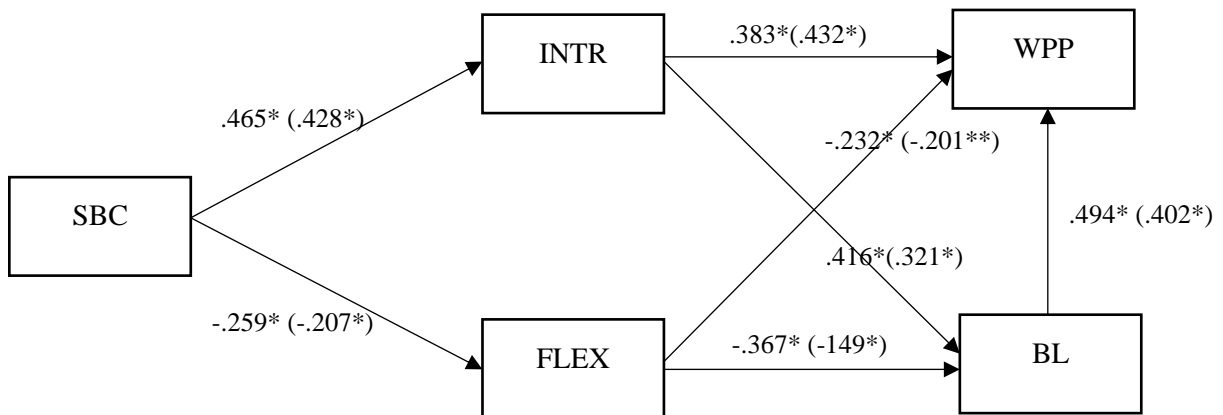
*Note: ns indicates insignificant path. \* Show significant at 0.01 level and \*\* show significant at 0.05 level. cyn indicates consumer cynicism.*

**Figure 1: Hypothesized Study Framework**



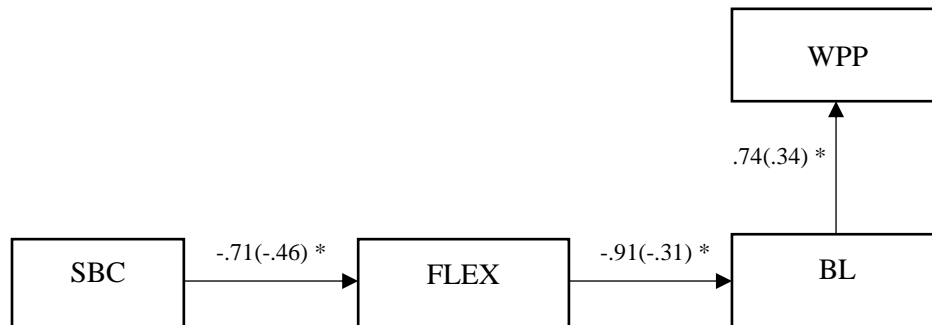
**Note:** \* show no hypothesized effect, - indicates weakening effect, and + indicates strengthening effect, and ++ shows differential effect.

**Figure 2: Results showing the direct path estimates for high (vs. low) cynic consumers [Study 1]**



**Note:** values show the direct path estimates of the high (low) cynic consumers. \* Indicates significant at 0.01 level and \*\* shows significant at 0.05 level.

**Figure 3:** SBC on BL and WPP via FLEX (favourable vs. unfavourable OCP) [Study 2]



**Note:** \* show significant at 0.05 level. The values reported are standardized estimates. Values in the parentheses show estimates in case of unfavourable OCP, and outside indicate estimates in case of favourable OCP condition. Indirect effect [High OCP: SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP = .754,  $p < 0.01$ ; Low OCP: SBC → FLEX → BL → WPP = .073,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## APPENDIX: OCP SCENARIOS PRESENTED [STUDY 3]<sup>2</sup>

Imagine your observation of and/or interaction with other customers simultaneously present in the retail store that you just visited. Please read the following three scenarios carefully and indicate your level of agreement with the scenarios. Next, please choose any one of the three scenarios that you best identify with, to answer the subsequent questions.

### **Similarity:**

I found the other people in the [brand] retail store to be very similar to me, I could fit in so well with the crowd that it made me very comfortable. When I go to a retail showroom, it is very important to me that I feel that other customers appear similar to me, so that I blend in. The other customers in [brand] retail store seemed to be like me, I could identify with them, I kind of felt that I would know them, and a conversation with them would be smooth and flowing.

### **Appearance:**

I found the other people in the [brand] retail store to be very well groomed, they were dressed up nicely and looked elegant. When I go to a retail showroom, it is very important to me that I feel that other customers look well groomed, and not like they are wearing pyjamas, because an upscale retail store would not attract that kind of casual people. The other customers in [brand] retail store looked good, and I could tell that the [brand] retail store is a nice place to go just by looking at the appearance of other customers in the store.

### **Behavior:**

I found the other people in the [brand] retail store to be very well behaved, they were sophisticated, friendly, polite and courteous. When I go to a retail showroom, it is very important to me that not just the store workers, but the people I run into down the aisles behave nicely with me. The other customers in [brand] retail store seemed to be well behaved, they would not curse or shout or behave in any way that would embarrass me. Indeed, their behavior towards me would be helpful and amiable.

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<sup>2</sup> *All these scenarios inspired from Brocato et al. (2012)*