

Spiritual Value and Its Influence on the Consumer-Brand Relationship

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Abstract: Pursuing spiritual satisfaction has become a consumption trend. However, research on the spiritual value that consumers obtain through brands is scant. This study investigates the brand relationship formed by consumers' spiritual value through brands along three dimensions: spiritual belonging, brand spiritual identity, and extraordinary experience. The study finds that consumers experience "brand conversion" by acquiring spiritual value through the mediating role of brand beliefs. This is the first study to examine consumers' acquisition of spiritual value through brands and the outcomes of the newly formed consumer-brand relationship, brand conversion. This study expands the research on the consumer-brand relationship by proposing a new theoretical approach and highlighting the role of the consumer-brand relationship in the acquisition of spiritual value.

Keywords: Spirit; Spiritual value; Brand belief; Brand conversion

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1. Introduction

Spirit is the root of value, affecting consumers' beliefs and behaviors ^[1]. With the advent of globalization, the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction and the realization of spiritual value have attracted significant attention in the field of marketing management. Kotler et al. point out that in the marketing 3.0 era, marketing management should shift focus from products and customers to human spiritual needs ^[2].

In the field of brand management, research on spiritual value has mainly focused on sectarian branding in the past two decades. Sectarian brands arouse strong emotional reflections from consumers, often gaining their spiritual recognition. For example, Belk and Tumbat propose the concept of "sanctification" in Apple's brand research ^[3]. However, research on consumers' spiritual consumption has not made a breakthrough in brand management.

First, the connotation of consumers obtaining spiritual value through brands is unclear. Research indicates that sacred brands have spiritual attributes that inspire consumers' sense of respect, but it does not identify such

characteristics. Second, the brand relationship and the mechanism formed when consumers obtain spiritual value have not been clarified. Traditional research on brand loyalty addresses the satisfaction of consumers' physiological and psychological needs. In recent years, scholars have begun addressing the relationship between consumers and brands based on the satisfaction of spiritual needs ^[4]. However, existing research has mainly proposed theoretical models based on qualitative methods, while empirical tests are still lacking.

The consumer-brand relationship is crucial in marketing management research and a core issue in relationship marketing. In today's globalization, post-modern consumers' pursuit of spiritual satisfaction is a topic of concern in the field of marketing ^[5]. Based on the definition of spiritual demand and its related concepts, this study identifies the connotation of consumers obtaining spiritual value through brands. It proposes a new research model to empirically test the consumer-brand relationship and the mechanisms formed when consumers receive spiritual value through brands.

2. Literature review

2.1. Spirit and spirit value

The word "Psyche" comes from Greek, and psychology means the science of the soul. Hegel has described the mind as the inner spiritual world that contrasts with the outer material world ^[6]. He has proposed the dualism between the mind and body, contending that the mind is the entity of the spirit. Hegel has argued that the spirit (mind) is a formal construct and has content. The mind is a whole unit, combining form and content, and individuals realize their spirit through spiritual activities. Modern psychologists believe that psychology alone is not enough to describe mental health. Factors related to the soul and spirit are also worth investigating. Huston Smith has divided men into four levels: body, mind, soul, and spirit. In a broad sense, heart, soul, and spirit may be understood as belonging to the spiritual level ^[7]. In a narrow sense, the spirit only includes the soul and spirit.

Berghash has argued that spiritual value consists of the meaning of life, the perception of transcendence, the sense of community, the pursuit of the ultimate truth or the highest value, and the awe of the mystery and personal transformation ^[8]. According to Nazam and Husain, spiritual value is the comprehensive value of the human soul, consisting of altruism, humanism, individualism, sanctity, and emotional value, leading to the spiritual growth of one's personality ^[9]. Hence, the value of the mind exceeds the self and leads to the growth of the mind.

2.2. Brand spirit

Brand spirit refers to the meaning, symbol, personality, emotion, taste, and cultural factors represented and implied by a brand in consumer cognition. For example, Harley represents the spirit of passion and freedom, and Apple embodies the spirit of continuous innovation.

Brand spirit is the ultimate source of the consumer-brand relationship. The brand is the extension of one's self. Consumers may express themselves through brands and improve themselves. Pursuing the consistency between brand and self-image is an essential goal for consumers when buying a brand. Aaker has summarized the consistency between consumer and brand self-image into five dimensions, including emotional and spiritual factors ^[10]. In the brand pyramid model, Keller has pointed out that brand resonance is a common reaction involving brand owners, brand consumers, and brand users. Brand resonance is the highest level of the consumer-brand relationship.

2.3. Brand worship and brand conversion

Since Fournier first applied the interpersonal relationship theory to brand relationships and proposed the “brand relationship quality model”, scholars have proposed the concepts of “brand attachment” and “brand beloved” to describe the consumer-brand relationship ^[11]. In extant research, the concepts of consumer brand related to the soul include brand worship and brand conversion.

Belk and Tumbat have shown that Apple fans have pious trust and fanatical worship for Apple Mac series products, with behaviors similar to religion ^[12]. Acosta and Devasagayam have defined brand worship as a group of people with a common consciousness and identification behavior in a group with strong connections established through a brand ^[13]. They have divided brand worship into three dimensions: brand following, brand connectivity, and brand fan image consistency.

Jin Daiping has addressed fanatical fans from the perspective of religion, arguing that the result of the relationship between fanatical fans and a brand is different from brand loyalty and brand worship ^[4]. This relationship reflects a sense of belonging that consumers form by recognizing the brand spirit, in line with believers converting to a religion. Therefore, they use religious terms for reference, define the relationship between fans and brands as “brand conversion”, and refine the three dimensions of brand conversion as unconventional purchase behavior, exclusive brand loyalty, and willingness to join the enterprise.

This literature review indicates that spiritual value has been widely addressed in management and other research fields. However, despite being an essential element of the consumer-brand relationship, the connotation of consumers’ spiritual value through the brand is still unclear. In addition, the results of brand relationships formed by the creation of spiritual value need to be empirically tested.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Initial scale of spiritual value

In line with the definitions of spiritual value by Nazam and Husain, this study defines the spiritual value obtained by consumers through brands as the knowledge that they acquire through brands beyond themselves, the perception of the meaning of life, and the growth in spiritual strength ^[9]. Based on in-depth interviews, the study builds an initial scale to measure spiritual value (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Initial scale of mental value

No	Item	Resource
S1	I think the brand is divine	Yi-Chia Wu, 2019
S2	Owning the brand makes me feel like I belong	
S3	Owning the brand makes me feel empowered	
S4	I would feel empty without the brand	
S5	I identify with the brand’s values	Liuwei, 2015
S6	The brand spirit is my belief in life	
S7	This brand enables me to have an extraordinary experience	Depth interviews
S8	This brand can make me feel the meaning of life	

3.1.1. Questionnaire design and data collection

In line with Belk and Tumbat, this study addresses avid brand fans. The proposed questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part investigates the relationship between fans and brands. The primary purpose of this part is to identify fans, allowing consumers to judge whether they are fans of a certain brand. The authors asked interviewees to write the brand's name and describe whether they can resonate with the brand and their use of the brand's products and other information. The second part of the questionnaire collects fans' personal data, and the third part reports the specific measurement items of the scale, a seven-item scale ranging from complete agreement (7) to complete disagreement (1).

The authors distributed the questionnaire on the Nike Forum (Nikefans.com), Apple Forum (Feng.com), Xiaomi Forum (Mi.com), and Huawei Pollen Club (Club.huawei.com). To increase the amount of data collected, the authors also shared the questionnaire link on the Baidu Tieba of the above four brands simultaneously. The survey received a total of 485 clicks.

3.1.2. Exploratory factor analysis

The study used multivariate analysis of variance to test whether the data from the four brands were consistent across the eight survey items. A multivariate analysis of variance conducted using SPSS 22 shows no significant difference in the scores of the four brands in each measurement item of the scale. The *P*-values exceed 0.05, and the minimum value Sig. (s8) is equal to 0.07. Therefore, data from the four brand measurement items may be combined for analysis.

The study also used SPSS 22 to conduct exploratory factor analysis and perform KMO and Bartlett's sphericity test on the scale. **Table 2** reports the results.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure		.929
Approximate chi-square		1698.745
Bartlett's test for sphericity	Df	28
	Sig.	.000

Table 2 shows that KMO=0.929, greater than 0.7, and Bartlett's sphericity test value is significant (Sig.<0.001); hence, the questionnaire data meet the requirements for factor analysis.

Using the principal component analysis method, the study finds that the eigenvalue is greater than one, allowing the authors to extract the common factor. When the factor is rotated, the maximum variance orthogonal rotation is used for factor analysis. The study obtains three factors, and their explanatory power is 26.165%, 24.023%, and 21.775%, respectively. The total explanatory power reaches 71.963%, greater than 50%, indicating that the three factors guarantee a good representation. The authors use the Kaiser-standardized orthogonal rotation method to hide coefficients lower than 0.4, obtaining the load coefficients of each measurement item on the three factors, as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Rotated composition matrix ^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
S2	.83		
S4	.81		
S1		.80	
S5		.85	
S6		.82	
S3			.79
S7			.86
S8			.80

Extraction method: principal component analysis.
Rotation method: Kaiser normalized maximum variance method.
a. The rotation has converged after five iterations.

The maximum factor load of each measurement item is greater than 0.5, and the cross load is less than 0.4. The first factor comprises S2 and S4. These two measurement items reflect the fans' spiritual attribution to the brand, named "spiritual belonging." The second factor includes measurement items S1, S5, and S6, which reflect fans' identification with the brand spirit, called "spiritual identification." The third factor comprises S3, S7, and S8 and reflects fans that have gained additional power and an extraordinary experience through the brand; it is named "extraordinary experience." Hence, based on factor analysis of the initial scale, three factors of spiritual value are extracted: "spiritual belonging", "brand spiritual identity", and "extraordinary experience", thus obtaining the consumer's value formed by the brand.

3.1.3. Reliability and validity test

The overall Cronbach's Alpha of the revised scale is 0.881 (>0.7), and the CITC values are all greater than 0.5. The reliability value of the deleted items does not increase; hence, the scale has good reliability.

In the validity test, the result of confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 22.0 shows that CMIN/DF is 1.203, less than three; GFI, AGFI, NFI, NNFI, IFI, and CFI all reach the standard of 0.9 or more, RMR is 0.046 (less than 0.05), and RMSEA is 0.061 (less than 0.08). All the relevant indicators are in line with the standard of research; hence, the model has a good fit. The correlation coefficients of the three variables (after naming) range between 0.4 and 0.7, indicating a moderate correlation between factors. The average variation extraction (AVE) root value of each factor is greater than the correlation coefficient with other factors; hence, each dimension has adequate discriminant validity. In the convergent validity test, the standardized factor loadings of each measurement item exceed 0.7, higher than the threshold of 0.45, the composition reliability (CR) values are all greater than 0.7, and the AVE values are all greater than 0.5 ($P < 0.001$), confirming that the proposed measurement scale has adequate validity.

3.2. Research hypotheses

According to Boswell et al. and Nazam and Husain, among others, the acquisition of spiritual value changes consumers' mental state, affecting consumers' beliefs. Plato points out that belief is a state of mind, namely, the

organic unity of knowledge, emotion, and will, an unswerving belief in a certain objective thing or ideology established by individuals, groups, and even society within the existing cognitive range, used to guide the psychological attitude and spirit of their behavior Gu Shengran contends that belief is a firm confidence in a certain theoretical system ^[14]. Brand belief may be defined as consumers' cognition of brand results. According to classical cognitive theory, consumers have brand beliefs and form a specific brand relationship by acquiring spiritual value. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses.

3.2.1. Spiritual value has a positive impact on brand belief

Spiritual belonging is a sense of belonging obtained by consumers' minds projected on the brand, and it entails psychological commitment. Hawkins has found that the need for attribution affects consumers' willingness to buy ^[15]; hence, companies should increase product beliefs to boost sales. He has argued that the experience of belonging affects consumers' attitudes and beliefs about brands. Daniela has shown that Apple fans' sense of belonging to the community promotes their purchase intention and brand beliefs ^[16].

Brand spirit refers to broad cultural factors such as the meaning, symbol, personality, emotion, and taste that the brand represents and implies in consumer cognition. The essence of the brand spirit reflects the individuality of the enterprise. It is the career belief, value concept, or business purpose gradually formed by the brand or brand decision-makers in long-term production and operation. Therefore, the brand spirit reflects consumers' identification with brand values, affecting people's beliefs.

Levin and Steele have defined transcendental experience as perceiving the essential meaning of life, realizing the existence of God or eternity, and awakening a higher self ^[17]. This experience is a state of transcendence that many describe as beyond human existence and the realm of consciousness. This kind of experience may trigger positive emotions in consumers, leading to positive changes in attitudes. Belief is a state of mind and an attitude that people firmly adopt, while practice is cognition-based. Brand belief ranks various brand attributes in consumers' minds, affected by consumers' perception of the brand.

Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis H1: Mind belonging has a positive effect on brand belief.

Hypothesis H2: Spiritual identity has a positive impact on brand belief.

Hypothesis H3: Extraordinary experience has a positive effect on brand belief.

3.2.2. Brand belief has a positive impact on brand conversion

Russell has contended that belief is manifested in substance and spirit, with a certain level of paranoia, and is integrated into personal values after repeated tempering. Brand belief is the degree of belief in forming brand attributes, involving fans and brands through contact. Belk and Tumbath have shown that Apple's fans integrate Apple's brand values into their personal values and become faithful believers. Einstein has pointed out that brands may form their "religion" ^[18]. Research on sectarian brands suggests that fans with high spiritual identification with the brand have exclusive brand loyalty and collection behaviors. Jin Daiping has shown that fans who highly identify with the brand spirit are willing to join the company. This study contends that consumers obtain brand belief through spiritual value; it is the identity of consumers based on the spiritual level of the brand.

Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis H4: Brand belief has a positive effect on exclusive brand loyalty.

Hypothesis H5: Brand belief has a positive effect on abnormal buying behavior.

Hypothesis H6: Brand belief positively affects the willingness to join a company.

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The study measures spiritual value using eight items along the three dimensions. **Table 4** reports the items of brand belief and brand conversion.

Table 4. Related variable items

Variable	Measure items
Brand Belief	1. I firmly believe that this brand has an advantage over other brands (F1) 2. I firmly believe that the brand will be successful (F2)
Exclusive Brand Loyalty	1. I will discourage people around me from buying products from the brand's competitor brands (L1) 2. I would prefer to spread negative information about the brand's competitor brands (L2) 3. I do not allow others to say that the brand is not good even if I know that the brand is lacking in some respects (L3) 4. Even though I know that the brand's competitor's brand is better in some ways, I think it is still not as good as the brand (L4)
Extraordinary Purchases	1. I will snap up the brand's products or affiliated products (B1) 2. I will collect the brand's products or affiliated products (B2) 3. To get the brand's products or affiliated products, I do not count time, money, and effort (B3)
Willingness to Join the Business	1. I am willing to be a tester of this brand's product (W1) 2. If possible, I am willing to become a partner of the company to which the brand belongs (W2) 3. If possible, I am willing to join the company and become an employee of the company (W3)

3.3.2. Data collection

The study sent questionnaire links in the form of posting and replying on Apple Forum (Feng.com) and Huawei Pollen Club (Club.huawei.com). The data quality control adopted the same method described in Section 3. The survey received 389 clicks, and the study obtained 257 valid questionnaires.

Among the 257 valid answers, 119 are from Apple users and 138 from Huawei users. The sex ratio is 45% female (115) and 55% male (142). The monthly income distribution comprises three people below 5,000 yuan, 32 people from 5,000 yuan to 10,000 yuan, 167 people from 10,001 yuan to 20,000 yuan, and 55 people above 20,001 yuan. The average brand use is 6.12 years.

3.3.3. Reliability and validity test

The study used SPSS 22.0 to test the reliability and validity of the scale. The Cronbach's Alpha values of all variables are greater than 0.75, indicating that the scale used in this study has high reliability.

The study performed exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis on seven variables to test the scale's validity. After using principal component analysis to perform maximum variance rotation, the study extracted seven factors with initial eigenvalues greater than one; the explained variance percentage exceeds 70%. This result indicates that the scale used in this study has high validity.

The study performed confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 23.0; **Table 6** reports the results. Each latent variable's combined reliability (CR) is greater than 0.8, indicating that the combined reliability is relatively good. The AVE is greater than 0.5, meaning that the convergence reliability is adequate.

4. Results

This study used AMOS 23.0 structural equations for hypothesis testing. The goodness of fit of the structural equation is assessed by $\chi^2=183.781$ (df=128), $\chi^2/\text{df}=1.436$, GFI=0.896, AGFI=0.862, NFI=0.894, IFI=0.967, CFI=0.965, RMR=0.051, RASEA=0.049; hence, the goodness of fit of the model is acceptable. **Figure 1** exhibits the path inspection results.

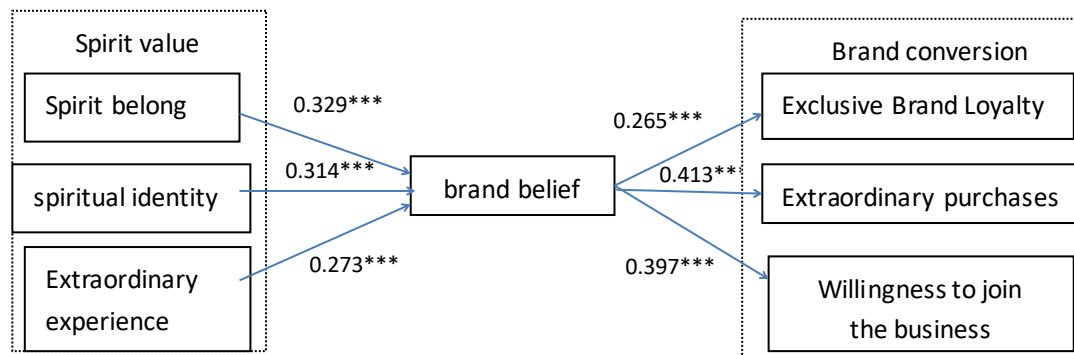


Figure 1. Path inspection results

The results in **Figure 2** show that the standardized path coefficient between spiritual attribution and brand belief is 0.329, significant at the 0.01 level; hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The standardized path coefficient between spiritual identity and brand belief is 0.314, significant at the 0.01 level; hence, the study supports Hypothesis 2. The standardized path coefficient between extraordinary experience and brand belief is 0.273, significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that Hypothesis 3 is also supported. The normalized path coefficient between brand belief and exclusive brand loyalty is 0.265, significant at the 0.01 level, supporting Hypothesis 4. The normalized path coefficient between brand belief and extraordinary purchase is 0.413, significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that Hypothesis 5 holds. Finally, the standardized path coefficient between brand belief and willingness to join a firm is 0.397, significant at the 0.01 level; hence, Hypothesis 6 is supported.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Empirical evidence

This study defines the connotation of spiritual value and summarizes its three dimensions — spiritual belonging, spiritual identity, and extraordinary experience — through factor analysis. It develops a measurement scale for these dimensions. The study empirically investigates the brand relationship formed by spiritual value. It proves that spiritual belonging has a positive impact on brand belief, spiritual identity positively impacts brand belief, extraordinary experience has a positive effect on brand belief, and brand belief has a positive impact on exclusive brand loyalty, extraordinary buying behavior, and willingness to join a company.

5.2. Research contributions

5.2.1. Theoretical contribution

First, this study contributes to consumer-brand relationship research by defining the connotation of the consumer's spiritual value through the brand. It develops a measurement scale, making spiritual value a specific and measurable variable.

Second, the consumer-brand relationship based on the formation of spiritual values is rarely studied in the field of brand management. By testing various theoretical assumptions, this study proves that brand beliefs relate to an extraordinary purchase line, exclusive brand loyalty, the willingness to join the enterprise, and other aspects of the brand relationship. In doing so, this study fills a gap in research on the consumer-brand relationship based on spiritual value.

5.2.2. Management contribution

First, with the improvement of people's living standards, the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction and the realization of spiritual values has become a new trend in contemporary consumption. As a symbol, a brand has rich connotations. Satisfying consumers' spiritual values and establishing a solid brand relationship help enterprises succeed in brand competition. The definition and development of the spiritual value connotation provide theoretical guidance and reference for enterprises to satisfy consumers' spiritual needs through brands.

Second, spiritual needs are the highest level of human needs, and the brand relationship based on spiritual value is stronger than the consumer-brand relationship formed by the traditional path, based on functional and psychological value discussion. By addressing spiritual values, this study demonstrates that the brand relationship formed through brand belief, a new approach to brand management, is stronger than traditional brand loyalty. This result provides a new option for companies to conduct consumer brand relationship management with stronger brand relationship outcomes.

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Author contributions

Study idea conceptualization and experimentation: Daiping Jin

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