Enhancing Self-Brand Connection in Service Firms with special reference to Commercial Banks in Sri Lanka

Charles Jebarajakirthy*, Swinburne University of Technology, cjebarajakirthy@swin.edu.au
Dhanushanthini Yoganthan, University of Jaffna, dhanushanthini@mail.vau.jfn.ac.lk

Abstract
The main aim of this research study is to investigate the drivers of Self-Brand Connection (SBC) in service organisations. The findings of this study can be useful to form strong and enduring SBC in service firms, which will bring various benefits to service business. Literature review suggests Satisfaction, Trust, Affective Commitment and Rapport are the drivers of SBC. This study investigates SBC in the context of banks, and the data was collected from 451 customers of Sri Lankan commercial banks. A structural equation model was run to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that, of the drivers, Satisfaction, Trust and Affective Commitment significantly enhanced SBC in commercial banks. Based on these findings, implications to theory and practice have been discussed.

Keywords: Self-Brand Connection, Service Firms, Banks, Trust, Affective Commitment
Track: Brands and Brand Management

Introduction
During last few decades, the concept of Self-Brand Connection (SBC) has received intense attention in service marketing literature as a main consequence of strong customer-brand relationships (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Individuals use products to form and communicate their self-concept. In doing so, consumers may form meaningful personal connection between themselves and a given brand such that the brand itself is somehow closely associated with the individuals’ self-concept (Escalas, 2004; Kirmani, 2009). This is known as self-brand connection. SBC enhances attitudes and purchase intentions of the brand (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013). If customers have strong attachment with favoured brand, they will likely to be committed to that brand (Aaker, 1999). The business benefits of SBC include repeat purchase, purchase postponement in case of brand unavailability, price insensitivity, resistance to negative brand information and active participation in brand communities (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012).

The process of building self-brand connection has been documented in the marketing literature (Cheng et al., 2012). However, a few studies have investigated self-brand connection in service industries. In service contexts, customers associate their self-identity with brands, whilst they become strongly engaged and involved with service brands (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Brand engagement means paying a strong attention on brands and their meaning, and using brands to shape and enhance self-concept (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2012). This suggests customers’ engagement with brand can possibly lead to self-brand connection. To this end, marketing scholars argue that satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport would be the drivers of customers’ engagement with service brands (Bowden, 2009; Sashi, 2012; Van Doorn et al., 2010). This therefore implies that these drivers can influence self-brand connection in service contexts. However, drivers of self-brand connection have not yet been investigated in service industries. This study aims to investigate this gap. Extant marketing literature is still ambiguous about how self-brand connection is formed and enhanced in service contexts. Thus, this study would reveal new insights about forming, strengthening and enhancing self-brand connection in service
marketing. The following literature review articulates the influence of Satisfaction, Trust, Affective Commitment and Rapport on Self-Brand Connection in service contexts.

**Literature Review**

**Satisfaction and self-brand connection**

It is important that customers are satisfied throughout the purchase and usage of a brand in order to form strong and enduring SBC (Bowden, 2009; Escalas, 2004). Generally, consumers expect that a service brand will enable them to create desired self-image. The extent to which customers are satisfied with a brand will determine their willingness to integrate that brand into their lives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007). In marketing literature, a handful of studies provide more concrete links between satisfaction and customer-brand connections. For example, Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) reveal that satisfaction is a strong determinant of customers’ identification with a brand. Hence, based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated,

**H1**: Satisfaction positively influences SBC in service firms

**Trust and self-brand connection**

Another driver of SBC is trust, which is defined as the expectations held by the consumers that the service provider is dependable and can be relied upon its promises (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002, p. 17). In the service contexts, trust is deemed to be essential, as a service is normally obtained with trust prior to experiencing it (Berry, 1995). To this end, trust is considered to be a driver of SBC in service contexts. Trustable service encounters are retained in customers’ mind, which can contribute to drawing customers’ self-concept closer to service brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Additionally, trust encourages consumers to participate in online brand communities. This will result in stronger and enduring self-brand affiliation (Cheng et al., 2012). Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated.

**H2**: Trust positively influences SBC in service firms

**Affective Commitment and self-brand connection**

Affective commitment is defined as the emotional attachment formed when the attributes of a product or service, extrinsic from its functional qualities, motivate consumers to develop strong positive feelings towards a brand (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006). Customers who are emotionally attached with a brand can use the brand for self-enhancement purposes. When customers feel positive affect like happiness and excitement from a service brand, they would likely experience emotional attachment with the brand (Bowden, 2009). In order to maintain these connections, they may align their self-concept closer to the brand (Escalas, 2004; Frimpong, 2014; Park et al., 2006). The extent to which customers have emotional commitment with a brand influences their willingness to use the brands to express their self-concept (Swaminathan et al., 2007). To this end, Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen (2012) demonstrate that customers are likely to incorporate the attributes and meaning of the brands into their lives, if they have established strong affective and emotional bonds with the brands. From the foregoing discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated.

**H3**: Affective Commitment positively influences SBC in service firms

**Rapport and self-brand connection**
The intangible nature of services makes them difficult for customers to assess. Hence, customers normally depend on the level of rapport experienced with staff as a measure to evaluate service quality (Berry, 1995). Rapport is defined as the personal, enjoyable and harmonious connections that are formed within customer-to-provider interactions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 90). Type of people customers interact with and nature of such interactions influence construction of customers’ self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Rapport focuses on how relational and pleasant service encounters between customers and staff can contribute to forming strong self-brand connection, therefore rapport is considered as driver of SBC (Bowden, 2009; Escalas, 2004). For example, Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen (2005) demonstrate that favourable service interactions enhance customers’ likeliness of using that brand for self-enhancement purposes. This is due to the fact that enjoyable service experiences are retained in customers’ mind as self-relevant and favourable memories, which in turn influence development of customers’ self-concept (Ahearne et al., 2005). Additionally, as suggested by Ahearne et al. (2005), customers self-image affiliation with service is influenced by their empathy, reassurance and sympathy experienced in service encounters. From the preceding discussion, it is logical to hypothesise that:

**H₄: Rapport positively influences SBC in service firms**

**Method**

**Context and sample of this study**

This study investigates SBC in the context of commercial banks. Of the various services used by consumers, banking seems to be an essential service. Banks enable transactions, thus playing an important role in people’s lives. Generally, other services, such as education and health depend on financial operations. Also, people’s interaction with banks is high (Frimpong, 2014). Additionally, in service marketing literature, brand related studies are increasingly being conducted in banking contexts, as banks focus on differentiating themselves from other banks in terms of their brand attributes, such as brand image and brand loyalty (Bapat, 2009).

The sample of this study comprised 700 commercial bank customers from Sri Lanka. A survey was used to collect data from the sample customers. The survey was carried out in Sri Lanka during March–April 2013. Participants were the regular customers of 10 leading Sri Lankan commercial banks in Colombo. The participants were approached during banking hours within the bank premises. The participants received information relating to the purpose of the survey, and they were assured of their anonymity. The paper based surveys were distributed to 700 customers. 555 customers responded to the surveys and returned them. Of these, 104 surveys had missing data, hence were discarded. The demographic profile of the respondents revealed that 44.7% of the respondents were male and the remaining was female. Also, 27% of the respondents had income below 230 U$$, 45% had income between U$$ 231-500, 19% had U$$ 501-750 and the remaining had income above U$$ 750.

**Measures and Instrument Development**

A paper based survey instrument was designed from previous validated scales, however, these scales were modified to suit the banking context, where appropriate. We measured Satisfaction using three items adopted from Voss, Godfrey, and Seiders (2010). Trust included four items adopted from Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra (2002). Four items measuring Affective Commitment were drawn from Mattila (2006). Rapport was measured with nine items taken from Gremler and Gwinner (2000). The seven items for SBC were adapted from Escalas (2004). A 7-point Likert type scale was used for items operationalising all the constructs. To ensure content validity, the survey instrument was vetted by seven
academics with expertise in the discipline of Marketing. The survey instrument originally in English was translated to Sinhalese, the respondents’ first language. The survey instrument was pre-tested using two focus groups, each comprising eight regular customers of the banks. Consistent with the feedback from the above initiatives, some minor changes were incorporated into the wording and format of the survey instrument. The survey instrument was translated back to English and was cross-checked by three other bilingual researchers to ensure reliability and validity of translation. The respondents had an option of responding to either the English or Sinhalese survey based on their language capacity.

Analysis and Results

Measurement Model

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to ensure that items used to measure study constructs were theoretically consistent. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 in Appendix A. The fit indices of CFA tests shown at the bottom of Table 1 suggest a good model fit to the sample data. CFA results revealed that factor loadings of items in all the study constructs were above 0.5, the minimum threshold value, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of all constructs were also above 0.5, both of which are indicative of convergent validity of measures (Hair & Anderson, 2010). The square root of AVE values presented in the upper diagonal of Table 2 in Appendix B for each construct was greater than the constructs’ correlation coefficients with other constructs. This is indicative of discriminant validity amongst constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of each construct was above 0.7, implying reliability of construct measures.

Hypothesis Testing

A structural equation model was run to test the hypotheses and the model had fit statistics as shown at the bottom of Table 3. These fit indices suggest adequate model fit to the sample data. R² was 0.67, indicating that 67% variance in Self-Brand Connection was explained by this model. The results of the test are summarised in Table 3. These results reveal that Satisfaction (β=.41, p<0.001), Trust (β=.31, p<0.001), and Affective Commitment (β=.14, p<0.05) had significant positive influences on Self-Brand Connections. Hence, H₁, H₂ and H₃ were accepted. Nevertheless, Rapport (β=.06, p>0.05) did not have significant effects on Self-Brand Connections. Hence, H₄ was rejected.

Table 3- Results of Hypotheses Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Hypothesis</th>
<th>Coefficient (β)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>8.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>6.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Commitment</td>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>1.97*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>0.97ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05, ns= not significant. Fit indices X²(258)= 453.08, (p= 0.13), CFI=.91, GFI=.96, TLI=.96, RMSEA=.048, SRMR=.045. CFI= comparative fit index; GFI=goodness-of-fit index, TLI= Tucker-Lewis index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Hypothesis</th>
<th>Coefficient (β)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mean square error of approximation; SRMR=standardized root mean residual</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion

Satisfaction significantly and positively influenced Self-Brand Connections. This finding suggests if customers are satisfied with the bank and the services provided by bank exceed customers’ expectations, they will likely self-identify with the bank. This finding is consistent with that of extant marketing literature (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Trust also had significant and positive influence on SBC. This result implies that if bank customers perceive that they can rely on their bank and its promises and they believe that their bank put customers’ interests first, they will have stronger self-brand connection with the bank. This finding is similar to those of previous studies (Auh, 2005; Sekhon, Roy, Shergill, & Pritchard, 2013). Affective Commitment had significant positive effects on SBC. In line with the arguments of Escalas and Bettman (2003) and Park et al. (2006), this finding suggests the stronger the customers feel emotional attachment and excitement while accessing their banks, the more their willingness to communicate their self-concept via the bank brands. However, Rapport did not significantly predict SBC in banks. This means that customers’ interaction and relationships with bank and its staff do not contribute to stronger self-brand affiliations. This may possibly be due to the fact that current developments in banking sector, such as online banking, ATM and mobile banking, can reduce customers’ interaction and relationship with bank and its staff.

### Implications for Theory and Practice

Being first of its kind, this study investigates the drivers of SBC in service firms with special reference to commercial banks in Sri Lanka. Hence, the conceptual model proposed in this study can possibly be applied to other types of financial institutions, such as finance companies, leasing companies, rural banks and microcredit institutions as well as to other service industries like insurance companies to align customers’ self-concept with service brands. Additionally, there would be some other derivers of SBC in service contexts, which can be investigated in future research. This will make further contribution to service marketing literature. Besides contributing to theory, the findings of this study have several marketing implications to service organisations like banks. Of the drivers, satisfaction enhances SBC. Hence, service entities like banks need to identify their customers’ service expectations via marketing research and tailor their services to exceed the expectations. Using promotional campaigns, the firms could also endeavour to set lower service expectation standards amongst their customers, hence the firms would likely exceed the standards during service delivery. Also, Trust enhances SBC. Household customers carry out their routine transactions with banks based on their trust upon banks. Customers’ trust on banks can be improved by ensuring safety and privacy in their transaction with banks. Trustworthy policies and practices can also contribute to customers’ trust on banks. Moreover, banks need to trust their customers, which can enhance mutual trust between banks and customers. Additionally, Affective Commitment raises SBC. Therefore, service managers need to improve interpersonal brand traits, such as friendliness, warmth, likeability and familiarity during service deliveries. Also, marketers
need to give enjoyable service experience to customers, such that they can be excited whilst obtaining the service.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was confined to commercial banks in Sri Lanka. Hence, to better generalise findings of this study, it needs replication with commercial banks in other countries as well as in other service industries. Also, data for this study was cross sectional. However, due to rapid changes in the banking sector, such as technological developments, customers’ perceptions and attitudes towards banks would likely change overtime. This implies that testing this model with longitudinal data can reveal interesting results.

This study opens avenues for further research. This study focuses on SBC in the B to C context. SBC is also practiced in the B to B context. Therefore, this study can be repeated in the B to B context in future. Additionally, Kleijnen, De Ruyter, and Andreassen (2005) suggest technology might have moderator effects on the association between the drivers and SBC in service contexts. This can be an interest for future researchers.

References


### Appendix A-Table 1- Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Study Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>FL</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>My bank reflects who I am</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can identify with my bank</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel a personal connection with my bank</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I use my bank to communicate who I am to other people</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think my bank helps me become the type of person I want to be</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B-Table 2- Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for study constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Trust</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Affective Commitment</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **Correlation is significant at p<0.01, *Correlation is significant at p<0.05

a Diagonal value indicates square root of AVE of latent constructs