



Impact of Self- Identification on the Development of Brand Loyalty of Generation Y

Lora Edmond Santurdzhiyan

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Abstract

English: The present master thesis investigates the impact of self-identification on the development of brand loyalty of the European generation Y. The central concept of this paper is the consumer-brand identification of the European Millennials and its contribution to the understanding of how, when and why they use brands as means for expressing their personal identities. One emphasis of this paper is to reveal what drives their self-identification with brands and another one is to assess how that is related to their brand loyalty. Consumer-brand identification is defined by six antecedent drivers (namely, brand-self similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, brand social benefits, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences), which are measured through a survey with a sample of 422 European students. Through correlation analysis the relationships between each of the six drivers and the consumer-brand identification are assessed, as well as the connections between self-identification and brand loyalty and self-identification and brand advocacy. Finally, it is also tested whether the degree of involvement in the respective product category of the brand has a moderating impact on the relationships between the drivers and the consumer-brand identification, and also whether the degree of individual brand loyalty propensity has a moderating effect on the relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty. The results of this quantitative study are applicable to serve marketing practitioners, interested in targeting the generational cohort of the European consumers born between 1980 and 2000.

German: Der vorliegende Aufsatz untersucht die Wirkung von Selbst-Identifikationen auf die Entwicklung von Markenloyalität in der europäischen Generation Y. Das zentrale Konzept des Artikels bildet die Identifikation der europäischen Millennials mit Verbrauchermarken. Der Artikel trägt zum Verständnis bei, wie, wann und warum diese Millennials Marken als Mittel zum Ausdruck ihrer persönlichen Identität verwenden. Ein Schwerpunkt liegt darauf herauszufinden, was ihre Selbst-Identifikation mit Marken antreibt; ein anderer bewertet wie dieser Sachverhalt mit ihrer Markenloyalität zusammenhängt. Die Identifikation mit Verbrauchermarken wird anhand von sechs vorhergehenden Antriebskräften bestimmt (namentlich die Ähnlichkeit zwischen der Marke und dem Selbst, Markenunterscheidbarkeit, Markenprestige, gesellschaftlicher Nutzen einer Marke, Markenwärme und einprägsame Markenerfahrungen). Die Studie misst diese anhand einer Umfrage unter 422 europäischen Studierenden. Mittels einer Korrelationsanalyse werden die Beziehungen zwischen jeder der sechs Antriebskräfte und der Verbrauchsmarkenidentifikation ermittelt. Außerdem prüft die Studie die Verbindungen zwischen Selbst-Identifikation und Markenloyalität sowie zwischen Selbst-Identifikation und dem Eintreten für die Marke. Schließlich testet die Analyse, ob der Grad an Interesse in der entsprechenden Produktkategorie der Marke einen moderierende Wirkung auf die Beziehungen zwischen den Antriebskräften und der Identifikation mit der Verbrauchermarke hat bzw. ob der Grad an individueller Neigung zur Markenloyalität einen moderierenden Effekt auf die Beziehung zwischen der Identifikation mit der Verbrauchermarke und die Markenloyalität hat. Die Ergebnisse dieser quantitativen Untersuchung können von Praktikerinnen und Praktikern im Marketing angewendet werden, die an der Kohorte der zwischen 1980 und 2000 geborenen Konsumentinnen und Konsumenten als Zielgruppe interessiert sind.

Keywords: generation Y, brand loyalty, consumer-brand identification, self-identification, quantitative research

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1 Introduction

Brands serve customers in two ways – they signal them the functionality and quality of the particular offering and they incite meaningful associations in order to add value to the offering beyond its intrinsic product attributes. (Chernev, et al., 2011) However, the last decades of marketing research have shown that the meaning, which consumers attach to brands, transcends their functional characteristics and benefits, and involve non-functional, symbolic qualities, often known as “brand image”. Part of the meaning of that image is the brand’s “personality”, or the “set of human-like characteristics associated with a brand”. (Aaker, 1997, p. 347)

Nowadays due to the increased degree of product commoditization in the past two decades, brand associations — especially those related to a person’s self-identity — have become a more and more central source of brand value (Chernev, et al., 2011). It is believed that consumers prefer those brands which, apart from fulfilling their functional needs, also symbolize the personality aspects, which they consider most aligned and fitting with their own - real or aspired to - personality associations. Therefore, it is not surprising that marketers today try to differentiate their brands on the basis of brand personality perceptions. (Achouri & Bouslama, 2010)

The concept of self-image is argued to determine and to be used as a cognitive referent when consumers evaluate the symbolic elements of a brand personality and that through branded products or services customers manage to satisfy their immaterial wishes. What consumers are assumed to seek is certain congruence between the features of a brand’s image and the way their personality is presented, or in other words – a similarity between the brand’s symbolic attributes and the consumer’s self-image (Sirgy, 1982).

Furthermore, consumers often feel they relate to brands in a personal way and ascribe human qualities to them - there is found to be a relationship between a consumers’ identity and the brands they consume (Guthrie & Kim, 2009). Moreover, consumers’ purchase of particular brands is linked to the benefits from the meaning that the brands add to their self-identities and personal lives (Fourier, 1998).

Stokburger-Sauer, et al.’s (2013) research builds upon the present body of theory on the topic by developing a framework for the drivers, moderators, and consequences of consumer-brand identification. They outline a set of six antecedent factors for consumer-brand identification (brand-self similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, brand social benefits, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences) and determine that, depending on

the degree of product category involvement, these factors define the degree of self-identification a consumer has with a brand, which subsequently should lead to brand loyalty and brand advocacy.

The market segment researched in this master thesis is Generation Y (also known as the Millennials). It was chosen because it represents a specific challenge as a target market as it is considered to be resistant to marketing efforts and difficult to capture and hold as loyal customers (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). Repeat purchase is hard to secure because Millennials are believed to be especially disloyal to brands (Sebor, 2006). Clearly, generation Y has developed a different approach to shopping and consumption, when compared to other demographic segments, and it is still not clear how exactly this important cohort shops or makes consumption decisions. (Lazarevic, & Petrovic-Lazarevic, 2007)

The main question, to which this master thesis attempts to give an answer, is the following:

What is the impact of self-identification with a brand on the development of brand loyalty of generation Y?

As mentioned above, Generation Y represents a particular challenge for marketers since they are more resilient to traditional marketing efforts, they have been raised in an environment full of brands and commercial media and are aware when it is being marketed to (Merrill, 1999). They are also addicted to stimulus, have a shorter attention span and are more critical and cynical towards brands, no longer willing to trust them solely on faith, and difficult to impress. Additional challenges are that they are more open to switching between different styles and also pickier. (Bergh, Behrer, & Kerkstoel, 2011)

Nevertheless, they still seem to develop selectively loyalty to those elements of brands that move them emotionally, manage to keep their promise, and to fit with their complex identities. They have a much greater emotional attachment to brands that show they really understand their lifestyles and that make themselves relevant by supporting their needs. Millennials are open to brand engagement, as long as the brands have the right approach and see them as a partnership and as a form of self-expression. (Bergh, Behrer, & Kerkstoel, 2011)

The thesis attempts to see whether and what impact self-identification with a brand has on the development of their brand loyalty. It does this by empirically measuring the

antecedent drivers for consumer-brand identification of the European generation Y by surveying a sample of 422 respondents. Based on these drivers, the degree of self-identification with a brand is measured and then through a correlation analysis its impact on brand loyalty is also assessed.

By answering the research question, this master thesis is of both academic and practical relevance, as it is dealing with matters of both theoretical and managerial importance. The findings can serve marketing managers and practitioners, who wish to target and incite brand loyalty in consumers from generation Y. The research analyzes the process of brand loyalty development through consumer-brand identification in a novel, detailed, clear and structured way, which can later on easily be employed as a strategic framework for marketing practitioners, aiding them when targeting Gen Y.

2 Empirical Framework

The main aim of this study is to assess the impact, which self-identification has on the development of brand loyalty of people from generation Y in Europe.

In order to achieve that, the starting point of this research was Stokburger-Sauer, et al.'s (2013) measurement framework for the drivers, moderators and consequences of consumer-brand identification.

According to their research the human need for identification is motivated by the so-called “higher-order self-definitional needs” of (1) knowing ourselves (or the consumer's need for self-continuity), (2) feeling relatively unique (or the need for self-distinctiveness), and of (3) feeling good about ourselves (or the need for self-enhancement). From there they define the first three cognitive drivers for consumer-brand identification – brand-self similarity, brand distinctiveness and brand prestige.

In addition to those, Stokburger-Sauer, et al. (2013) outline three additional more affect-driven consumer-brand identification antecedent factors - the extent to which consumers (1) feel that their interactions with a brand helps them to connect socially with important others (or brand social benefits), (2) perceive a brand in warm emotional terms (or brand warmth), and (3) have fond memories of brand consumption experiences (or memorable brand experiences).

Since the present research is specifically examining consumers from generation Y, there are certain additional factors, which can be derived from the academic literature and are expected to have an impact on the degree to which the consumer-brand identification antecedent drivers result in increased brand loyalty.

2.1 Heading at the second level

Firstly, the particular importance, which the Millennials place on shopping and consumption, has transformed those activities into vessels of self-definition and self-expression. Additionally, the youngsters today expect from the brands to fit into their complex identities, rather than the other way around, and they perceive them not just as product providers but as life and lifestyle supporters - they expect from brands to offer them a certain way of self-expression. Therefore, it is expected that the need for brand-self similarity

will play an important role for the development of consumer-brand identification for the representatives of Gen Y, which forms the first hypothesis of this research:

H₁: The higher the brand-self similarity, the more the consumer will identify with the brand.

Secondly, the Millennials value highly the opportunity to create their own personalized products and services, which fit with their individual needs. They seek from brands a degree of choice that allows them to interact with the brand elements they like and to create their own personalized products by combining the brand's personality traits, which reflect their own identity. For them is important to maintain and manifest a distinct image of themselves, which they can use in order to reinforce their personal uniqueness. In addition, the European Millennials have placed the factor of cultural diversity at a high esteem within their value systems and strive to be able to establish a balance between their own and the other different cultures surrounding them. Therefore, it is expected that the distinctiveness of a brand, aiding the consumer in his/her individual pursuit for relative to others differentness for the purpose of establishing and enhancing his/her personal and social identity, will be a key driver for the development of consumer-brand identification for the representatives of Gen Y, which formulates the second hypothesis of the research:

H₂: The higher the perceived by the consumer brand distinctiveness, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

Thirdly, for Gen Yers self-esteem and self-importance are of exceptional importance, as also is being financially secured. They have high expectations of themselves and not being able to live up to them, will lead the Millennials to feel ashamed. Additionally, brands are charged with the responsibility of symbolizing and expressing the consumer's status and supporting their lifestyles. Therefore, it is expected that the self-enhancement role of brands' consumption, combined with the intensified feeling of status anxiety among the Millennials, will be a particular driver for the development of consumer-brand identification for the representatives of Gen Y, which leads to the third hypothesis of the research:

H₃: The higher the perceived brand prestige by the consumer, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

Regarding to Stokburger-Sauer, et al.'s affect-rooted antecedent factors, it is also relevant for the purposes of this research to consider the particularities of Gen Y in this regard as well.

Firstly, the Millennials are never out of touch with their friends, they are constantly connected through various social networks and are always equipped with their mobile phones or other gadgets, which enable them to never be alone. As already pointed out, shopping and consumption are their sources of self-identification, but not only - talking about clothes, music, cars and the latest techno gadgets brings Gen Y together and keeps them engaged, those topics help them to communicate and to connect. They are therefore also expecting from brands to acknowledge this need to be connected with their friends. In general, the Gen Yers love to work, shop and date collaboratively a lot more than previous youth generations. Additionally, for the Millennials their peers' filter and opinion are automatically relevant and nearly all of them seek advice and recommendations from external sources such as friends and family. All this leads to the fourth hypothesis of this research:

***H₄:** The more social benefits a consumer perceives in a brand, the more he/she will identify with that brand.*

Secondly, the Gen Yers are often described as stimulation junkies and with having an uncontainable need for immediate gratification. They are also pickier as consumers, but tend to be selectively loyal to those elements of brands that move them emotionally and that keep their promise. This youth generation has a much greater emotional attachment to the brands which display that they really understand their lifestyles and make themselves relevant by supporting their needs. (Bergh, Behrer, & Kerkstoel, 2011) From here it is expected that warm, lovable brands will be viewed as more suitable for carrying out the inherently affective processes of identity construction and maintenance, which leads us to the fifth hypothesis of this research:

***H₅:** The more a brand personality is perceived to be warm (vs. cold) by a consumer, the more he/she will identify with that brand.*

Along this logic, it can be also expected that since the Millennials put much more emphasis on brand experience and have a greater emotional attachment to brands (Bergh, Behrer, & Kerkstoel, 2011), they would also easily build positive, affectively-charged memories of previous experiences with those brands. Consequently, it is also expected that such brands will have a defining impact on the process of personal identity construction,

because the generated brand-related autobiographical memories will also trigger self-referencing processes, which in turn create strong feelings with deep traces in the memory. This leads to the formulation of the sixth hypothesis of this research:

H₆: The more memorable experiences a consumer has with a brand, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

As explained above, Stokburger-Sauer, et al. (2013) also add the category-level variable product category involvement as a moderator of the relationships between consumer-brand identification and the different drivers of it. They explain its moderating impact with two main reasons. The first one states that in order for a person to feel more involved in a certain product category, he/she needs to associate it with important higher order goals (Bloch, & Richins, 1983) and consequently such categories are likely to be more closely associated with the person's self-concept and viewed as self-defining, and thus making them more fitting for consumer-brand identification purposes. The second reason is that people are motivated to process information, which refers to categories with which they feel more involved, which suggests that regarding high involvement product categories consumers are more likely to have developed deeply processed and reasoned beliefs on the extent to which certain brands are able to meet their self-definitional needs. As a result from this moderating category-level variable, it is expected for the six antecedent variables to have stronger implications for the self-identifications in product categories where the consumer is highly involved. This defines the seventh hypothesis of the research:

H₇: The higher the consumer's product involvement in the product category to which a brand belongs, the stronger the relationship between:

H_{7.1}: the brand-self similarity and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.2}: the brand distinctiveness and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.3}: the brand prestige and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.4}: the social value of a brand and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.5}: the brand warmth and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.6}: the memorable brand experiences and the consumer-brand identification

Following Stokburger-Sauer, et al.'s framework, the logical line of thought reaches the core of this research— namely the impact of consumer-brand identification on customer loyalty.

With regards to brand loyalty Generation Y is particularly challenging as it is described to be resistant to marketing efforts and as especially disloyal to brands (Sebor, 2006). Millennials have been raised in an environment full of brands and commercial media and is aware when it is being marketed to (Merrill, 1999). More experienced than other generations, they are also addicted to stimulus, have a shorter attention span and are more critical, cynical towards brands, no longer willing to trust them solely on faith, and are difficult to wow. Additional challenge is that they are more open to switch between different styles and are also pickier.

However, Gen Y tend to be selectively loyal to those elements of brands that move them emotionally. Gen Y expect from the brands to fit into their complex identities and have a much greater emotional attachment to brands which display that they really understand their lifestyles and make themselves relevant by supporting their needs. Millennials are quite open to brand engagement and advertising, as long as the brands have the right approach. They want brands to entertain them and see them as a form of self-expression.

On the other hand, from the marketing literature the notion is derived that self-identification with a brand is linked to a sustained, long-term preference for the brand. It is also acknowledged that consumer-brand identification on one hand inhibits consumers from switching brands and on the other hand leads to actual purchase behavior. Based on that Stokburger-Sauer, et al. (2013) argue that consumer-brand identification is a predictor of brand behavior within the meaning of Oliver's (1999) definition of a deeply held intent to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred brand in the future. And on the basis of this is formulated the eight and main hypothesis of this research:

***H₈:** The higher the self-identification of a consumer with a brand, the more loyal he/she will be to that brand.*

Additional consequence of consumer-brand identification is the promotion to others of the identified-with brand. With regards to such brand advocacy Gen Y again represents a particular case, for them social relationships are highly valued. Millennials love to shop collaboratively a lot more than previous youth generations. They prefer to trust word-of-mouth and their friends' opinions, have the tools to advise each other and their peers' filter is automatically relevant. Moreover, when making purchase decisions nearly all of them seek advice and recommendations from external sources such as their friends and family.

Stokburger-Sauer, et al. outline a consistency between the consumer-brand identification produced brand advocacy in the social sense of a brand's promotion to social others and Park et al.'s (2010) research, which reports a strong influence of brand attachment on such promotion behavior. Therefore, although not the main goal of this research, brand advocacy is also a variable of interest, as it is directly linked to brand loyalty and is one of the key perks for brands, which accompany the generation of loyal customers. From here is derived the ninth hypothesis, which will be tested in the following research:

***H₉:** The higher the self-identification of a consumer with a brand, the more he/she will advocate that brand.*

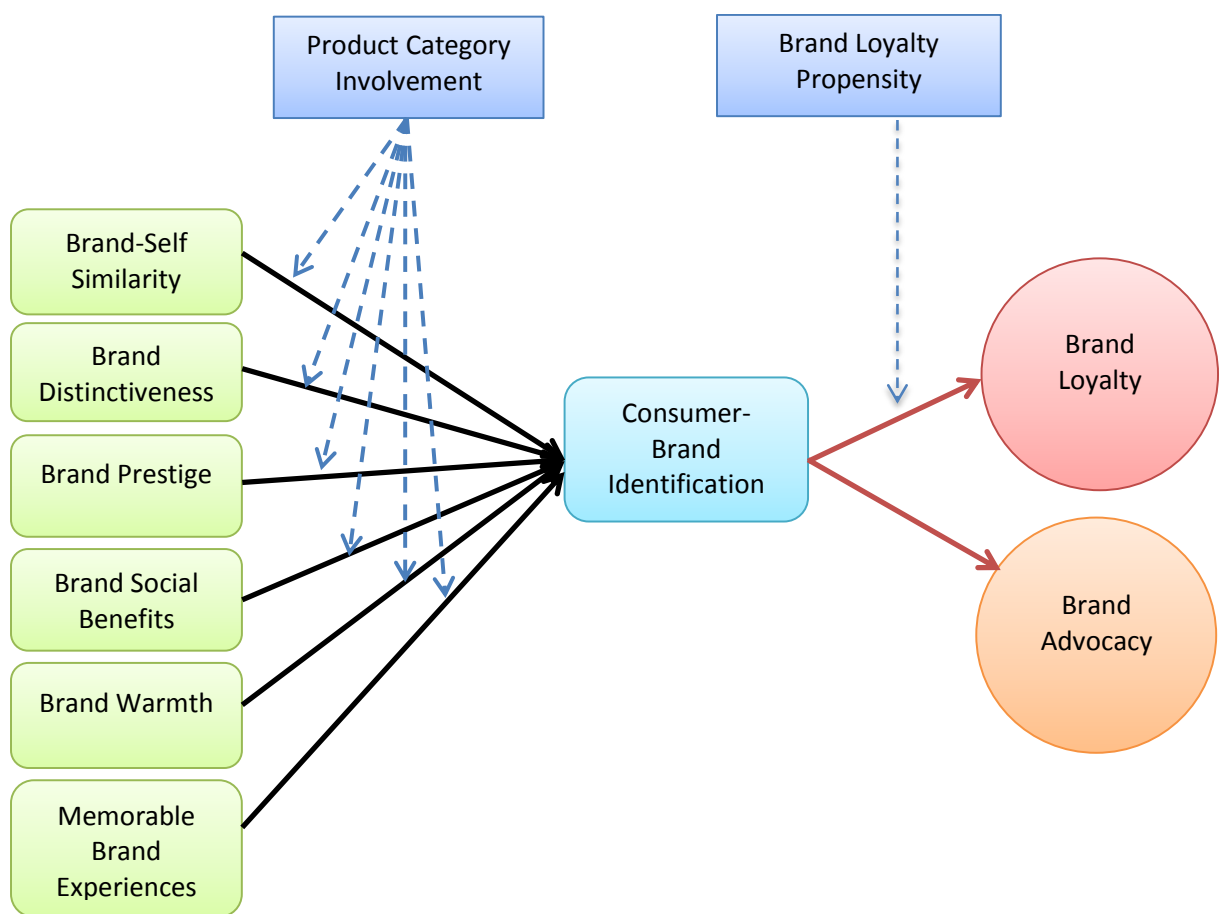
In addition to Stokburger-Sauer, et al.'s (2013) framework, the research at hand takes into consideration Bennett and Rundle-Thiele's (2002) research, who point out that an individual's propensity to be brand loyal is actually a personality trait, rather than a measurement of brand loyalty towards a particular brand. According to Mellens et al.'s (1996) review of brand loyalty measures in marketing, the two types of attitudinal brand loyalty measures personality trait measures, measuring the consumer's propensity to be brand loyal, and product category measures, which quantify brand loyalty levels for a particular product category, measure the same construct. Bennett and Rundle-Thiele (2002) controvert that notion by proving that an individual's propensity to be brand-loyal, or the personality trait approach, relates to the characteristics of an individual customer, possibly personality traits, and positions attitudinal loyalty as a characteristic of the consumer regardless of the brand. Based on their theory, if a customer has high levels of brand loyalty propensity, it would be expected that they would purchase the same brand in most product categories on each purchase occasion. Moreover, attitudinal loyalty as a personality trait means that a person's loyalty levels transcend brands to reflect a consistent response and those customers who have a propensity to be more attitudinally loyal, which may be directly related to risk avoidance. (Bennett, & Rundle-Thiele, 2002)

Based on these research findings it is expected for the purpose of the current research that brand loyalty propensity will have a moderating function on the development of brand loyalty. Thus the tenth hypothesis is formulated:

***H₁₀:** The higher the brand loyalty propensity of a consumer, the more loyal he/she will be to a brand.*

The following figure depicts the full model with all the logical relationships between the hypotheses, which will be tested in the research:

Model of the Research Hypotheses



2.2 Methodology

For the development of the questionnaire a total of 46 statements/measurement items were adopted from three different developed measurement models for the measurement of the 10 research variables (see appendix 1) – 41 items were adopted from Stokburger-Sauer, et al.’s

framework for measuring consumer-brand identification, the antecedent factors of consumer-brand identification, product involvement, brand loyalty and brand advocacy; one additional item measuring brand loyalty was adopted from Moolla and Bisschoff's (2012) measurement model; and four items measuring brand loyalty propensity were adopted from Bennett and Rundle-Thiele's (2002) model (Bennett, & Rundle-Thiele, 2002).

After a thorough research of the different offered online survey platforms a decision was made in favor of SurveyGizmo . In order for the survey link to reach the targeted audience it was spread around as much as possible on Facebook by being posted on 70 various Facebook groups of European students. Eventually, a total of 422 completed surveys were used for the research analysis.

3 Results

After the completion of the survey, the results were exported into an Excel spreadsheet, where the data was cleaned, organized and all the needed variables were calculated and coded.

Firstly, nine of the variables¹ were measured by summing up and averaging the respective measuring items' scores (a number from one to six from the six-point agree-disagree Likert scales) for each variable from the survey responses. The tenth variable, consumer-brand identification (CBI) was estimated by summing up and averaging the scores of its six drivers (BSS, BD, BP, SB, BW and ME⁴). Additionally, for the assessment of hypothesis № 7, six more variables were calculated, by measuring the relationship between each of the six drivers and the consumer-brand identification, and one additional variable (measuring the relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty) was also calculated, which is needed for the testing of hypothesis no.10. Afterwards, all the data from the Excel spreadsheet was imported into the statistical program SPSS 22, where the data analysis was conducted.

In order to test all of the hypotheses, Pearson correlation statistical analyses were conducted. Bivariate correlation is an inferential statistics command in SPSS, which is used in order to test the degree of association between two variables and shows the linear relationship between two sets of data.(StatsDirect Limited, 2000-2014)In order to illustrate all the results scatterplots were created in addition to each correlation box, which can be found in appendix no. 2.

Hypothesis 1. In order to undertake hypothesis testing, it is needed to express this research hypothesis also as a null hypothesis, against which the evidence is tested:

H₁₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification.

In order to test it, a correlation analysis between the two estimated variables brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification was made, which resulted with a correlation coefficient (r), 0.+436. Thus it is concluded that there is a moderate positive correlation between brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification. The Sig (2-Tailed) value

¹ BSS (brand-self similarity), BD (brand distinctiveness), BP (brand prestige), SB (brand social benefits), BW (brand warmth), ME (memorable brand experiences), PI (product category involvement), BL (brand loyalty), BA (brand advocacy) and LP (brand loyalty propensity)

concludes that the correlation between the two variables is statistically significant (at a 0.05 level) as it is 0.000. Therefore, the Null Hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2. For the second hypothesis of this research, the null hypothesis states:

H₂₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between brand distinctiveness and consumer-brand identification.

The resulting value for Pearson's r from the bivariate Pearson correlation analysis is +0.733, which suggests a fairly strong positive relationship between the two variables. The Sig (2-Tailed) value is again 0.000, which concludes that the correlation is also statistically significant. Therefore, the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 3. The null hypothesis for the third hypothesis states:

H₃₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between brand prestige and consumer-brand identification.

The result from the correlation analysis is a statistically significant positive correlation with a coefficient of $r=+0.662$. The Sig (2-Tailed) value is again 0.000, which concludes that the correlation is statistically significant. Therefore, the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 4. In order to test the fourth research hypothesis, the null hypothesis against which the results were tested is the following:

H₄₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between brand social benefits and consumer-brand identification.

The correlation analysis between the two variables results in quite a high coefficient of positive correlation $r=+0.798$ and a Sig (2-Tailed) value of 0.000, which concludes that the correlation is also statistically significant. Therefore, here once again the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 5. The null hypothesis of the fifth research hypothesis against which the correlation was tested respectively is the following:

H₅₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between brand warmth and consumer-brand identification.

The yielded coefficient of correlation is $r=+0.751$, signifying another strong correlation. The Sig (2-Tailed) value is 0.000, indicating a statistically significant result. Again, here the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 6. In order to assess the sixth hypothesis, a null hypothesis is defined as follows:

H₆₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between memorable brand experiences and consumer-brand identification.

The correlation analysis, which was run results with a correlation coefficient of $r=+0.797$. Here again as a result the Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 7. Six correlation analyses needed to be made, in order to assess the seventh hypothesis along with its six sub-hypotheses.

On one side of all six evaluated relationships in this hypothesis is the moderating variable of the relationships between all the six drivers and the consumer-brand identification – the product category involvement (PI), and on the other side in each case is the estimated ratio between the respective driver and the consumer-brand identification (CBI).

The null hypotheses, against which to test the research evidence, are the following:

H₇₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between product category involvement and the ratio of:

H_{7.1-0}: brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification

H_{7.2-0}: brand distinctiveness and consumer-brand identification

H_{7.3-0}: brand prestige and consumer-brand identification

H_{7.4-0}: social value of a brand and consumer-brand identification

H_{7.5-0}: brand warmth and consumer-brand identification

H_{7.6-0}: memorable brand experiences and consumer-brand identification

The first correlation analysis between the brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement results in a negative correlation coefficient of $r=-0.481$ and the Sig (2-Tailed) value is 0.000, which defines the correlation as statistically significant. Therefore, here the Null Hypothesis is not rejected and we reject the Alternative Hypothesis (H_{7.1-0}).

The second correlation analysis between the brand distinctiveness and consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement results in a correlation coefficient close to zero. With $r=-0.062$ it can be concluded that there is no correlation here. Furthermore,

this analysis did not show a statistically significant correlation (with a Sig (2-Tailed) value of $0.202 > 0.05$), therefore the Null Hypothesis is not rejected and the Alternative Hypothesis ($H_{7.2-0}$) is.

When looking at the result from the correlation analysis between the brand prestige and consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement the value of the yielded coefficient is again very close to 0, with $r=+0.015$. With such a coefficient there is clearly no correlation between the two variables. Similarly here again no statistically significant correlation can be observed ($p=0.757 > 0.05$), therefore the Null Hypothesis is not rejected and the Alternative Hypothesis ($H_{7.3-0}$) is.

When running the next correlation analysis, however, the result is a statistically significant positive correlation with a correlation coefficient of $r=+0.231$ and $p=0.000$. Although the correlation is not very high, it is still sufficient for the Null Hypothesis to be rejected.

The next correlation analysis (between the brand warmth - consumer-brand identification ratio and product category involvement) again fails to yield a statistically significant result ($p=0.289 > 0.05$). Since it is not possible to draw any valid conclusions from the sample on the population, in this case again the Null Hypothesis is not rejected and the alternative ($H_{7.5}$) one is.

Finally, the sixth correlation analysis for the seventh hypothesis, testing the relationship between the memorable brand experiences - consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement result in a statistically significant ($p=0.004$) positive correlation with a correlation coefficient of $r=+0.140$. Therefore, the Null Hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 8. The null hypothesis of the eight research hypothesis against which the evidences are tested is formulated as follows:

H_{8-0} : There is no positive correlation relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty.

The correlation analysis for it yield a rather high correlation coefficient of $r=+0.776$, with a sig. (2-tailed) value of $p=0.000$. From this it can be concluded that there is a rather strong correlation between the two variables, which is also statistically significant. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_8) is not.

Hypothesis 9. In order to test ninth hypothesis of this research, the respective null hypothesis is defined in the following way:

H₉₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand advocacy.

The result from the correlation analysis is once again statistically significant ($p=0.000$) and with moderately high coefficient of correlation of $r=+0.677$. Therefore the alternative hypothesis (H₉) is accepted and the null one is rejected.

Hypothesis 10. In order to test the last hypothesis of this research, the following Null Hypothesis was established:

H₁₀₋₀: There is no positive correlation relationship between the ratio of consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty and the brand loyalty propensity.

On one side of the assessed relationship here is the estimated ratio between the consumer-brand identification (CBI) and the resulting brand loyalty, and on the other side is the moderating variable of that ratio - the brand loyalty propensity (LP).

The analysis here yields a statistically significant ($p=0.000$) positive correlation coefficient of $r=+0.214$. Therefore, the Null Hypothesis is rejected and not the Alternative Hypothesis (H₁₀).

4 Interpretation and Findings

After testing the ten hypotheses of this research on the basis of the results collected with the survey, it is now possible to interpret the results from the statistical analysis and acknowledge the findings to which they lead.

H₁: The higher the brand-self similarity, the more the consumer will identify with the brand.

The first hypothesis of the research was confirmed with a positive correlation between the two tested variables - brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification. According to this result, the need for brand-self similarity (or for knowing and defining oneself through brands) does play an important role for the development of consumer-brand identification for the representatives of the European Gen Y. It seems that today the European Millennials do practice the activities of shopping and consumption as means for self-definition and self-expression. Also it is important for them that the brands they use correspond to their complex identities and offer them certain ways of self-expression.

H₂: The higher the perceived by the consumer brand distinctiveness, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

The second hypothesis of the research was also confirmed by a rather strong correlation between the two tested variables - brand distinctiveness and consumer-brand identification. From this it can be concluded that for the representatives of the European Gen Y the distinctiveness of a brand, aiding them in their personal pursuit for relative to others differentness for the purpose of establishing and enhancing their personal and social identities, is a key driver for the development of consumer-brand identification. As previously discussed, this could be due to the high importance, which Millennials place on the opportunity to create their own personalized products and services that fit with their individual needs. They apparently seek from brands a degree of choice, which allows them to maintain and manifest a distinct image of themselves and thus to reinforce their personal uniqueness.

H₃: The higher the perceived brand prestige by the consumer, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

The third hypothesis of the research was also confirmed and resulted in a statistically significant positive correlation. From here it can be concluded that the self-enhancement role of brands' consumption, combined with the intensified feeling of status anxiety among the Millennials, is a particular driver for the development of consumer-brand identification for the representatives of Gen Y. This outcome is in contrast with the yielded results of Stockburger-Sauer, et al's (2013) research, which did not succeed in attaining statistically significant confirmation of the antecedent role of brand prestige. This difference of results can be explained with the different product categories, which their research used (soft drinks, grocery stores and athletic shoes), and it can be assumed that consumer-brand identification is less sensitive to brand prestige in categories such as supermarkets and soft drinks, whereas in the categories, which are used in this current research, consumer-brand identification has proven to be positively driven by brand prestige. Another possible explanation for this different outcome is the different samples, with which the relationship was tested. Stockburger-Sauer, et al's (2013) research surveyed a panel of German household consumers with an average age of 40.6 years (N=781), whereas the sample for the current research are European Millennials with an average age of 24.6 years (N=422). In such a case it can be also assumed that brand prestige plays a bigger role for the development of consumer-brand identification for the respondents of the current study, as it does for representatives of other generational cohorts. However, further research on the impact of brand prestige is needed for further clarification.

H₄: The more social benefits a consumer perceives in a brand, the more he/she will identify with that brand.

The high correlation coefficient, which the analysis of the fourth hypothesis generated, confirms that the social benefits from a brand have a big impact on the development of self-identification with a brand for the European Millennials. The greater the opportunities for socializing and connecting with others, which a brand provides to its consumers – the more the Gen Yers, will identify themselves with that brand. As already pointed out, shopping and consumption are their sources of keeping them engaged, those topics help them to communicate and to connect. Brands are also expected to acknowledge their need to stay connected with their friends because the Gen Yers love to shop and consume collaboratively.

***H₅:** The more a brand personality is perceived to be warm (vs. cold) by a consumer, the more he/she will identify with that brand.*

The strong correlation, which has resulted from the testing of the fifth hypothesis shows that brand warmth is positively linked to self-brand identification and from this it can be concluded that warm, lovable brands (vs. cold, rational ones) are viewed as more suitable for carrying out the processes of identity construction and maintenance. Millennials also seem to put much emphasis on brand experience and have a great emotional attachment to brands.

***H₆:** The more memorable experiences a consumer has with a brand, the more he/she will identify with that brand.*

Similarly, the resulted strong positive correlation between memorable brand experiences and consumer-brand identification from the analysis of the sixth hypothesis indicates that the generated brand-related autobiographical memories trigger self-referencing processes and have a defining impact on the process of personal identity construction.

***H₇:** The higher the consumer's product involvement in the product category to which a brand belongs, the stronger the relationship between:*

H_{7.1}: the brand-self similarity and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.2}: the brand distinctiveness and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.3}: the brand prestige and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.4}: the social value of a brand and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.5}: the brand warmth and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.6}: the memorable brand experiences and the consumer-brand identification

H_{7.1}: Since the first sub-hypothesis of H₇ was rejected and the analysis resulted in a statistically negative correlation between the brand-self similarity and consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement, it can be concluded that for the European Millennials the higher the involvement in a product category is, the smaller impact does brand-self similarity have on the development of a consumer-brand identification.

H_{7.2,3,5}: The result from the test of the second sub-hypothesis of H₇ resulted in a very weak relationship between your two variables and also lacks statistical significance, based on which we conclude that there is no connection product category involvement and the relationship between brand distinctiveness and consumer-brand identification. Similar is also the situation with the results from the test of the third and the fifth sub-hypotheses.

Again, due to very small correlation coefficients ($r_3=+0.015$ and $r_5=+0.052$) and also lack of significance the conclusion is that product-category involvement does not influence the relationships between brand prestige and consumer-brand identification or between brand warmth and consumer-brand identification.

H₇₋₄: The analysis of the fourth sub-hypothesis of H₇ results in a statistically significant positive correlation between the brand social benefits and consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement. From this it can be concluded that the greater opportunities for socializing and connecting with others, which a brand provides to its consumers, the more the Gen Yers will identify themselves with that brand when it is from a product category in which they feel more involved. Such a brand will intensify the effect of collaborative shopping and consumption on the consumer-brand identification

H₇₋₆: Similarly, the analysis of the sixth sub-hypothesis of the H₇, testing the relationship between the memorable brand experiences - consumer-brand identification ratio and the product category involvement result in a statistically significant positive correlation. This indicates that for the European Millennials memorable experiences with a brand have a greater significance for the development of self-identification with that brand, when it is from a product category in which they are more involved.

H₈: *The higher the self-identification of a consumer with a brand, the more loyal he/she will be to that brand.*

The main hypothesis of this research, which also answers the research question, is the eight one, which is measuring the relationship between the consumer-brand identification of the European Millennials and their brand loyalty and the result from the analysis indicates a strong correlation between the two. From here the conclusion is that the more a consumer from the European generation Y identifies with a brand, the more he/she will become loyal to that brand.

H₉: *The higher the self-identification of a consumer with a brand, the more he/she will advocate that brand.*

The result from the ninth hypothesis is a high coefficient of correlation also between the consumer-brand identification and brand advocacy. The meaning of it is that the more the European Gen Yers identify with a brand, the more they engage in positive word-of-mouth about that brand in front of other people from their social surroundings. This can be further

reasoned with the high importance, which Millennials put on the social and experiential aspect of their purchasing and consumption behavior. Also, since their friends' opinions and their peers' filter are of big relevance when they make decisions, it is logical that they will reciprocate that flow of information when it refers to their brand choices.

***H₁₀:** The higher the brand loyalty propensity of a consumer, the more loyal he/she will be to a brand.*

The last hypothesis analysis in this research (H₁₀), measuring the impact which brand loyalty propensity has on the strength of the relationship between consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty, results in a statistically significant positive correlation. The interpretation of this is that the more predisposed a person is to be loyal to brands in general, regardless which exactly, the higher will be the impact of self-identification with a particular brand on the development of brand loyalty. From here it can be concluded that a person's brand loyalty propensity is related to an individual's characteristics and therefore to a certain extent attitudinal brand loyalty is a personality trait, not connected to the particular brand.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to assess the impact, which self-identification has on the development of brand loyalty of the representatives of generation Y. The results from the research confirmed that there is indeed a strong positive correlation between the two.

Furthermore, the research proved a dependency linkage between generation Y's self-identification with a brand and all six antecedent factors, which lead to the development of the consumer-brand identification. Then, it was also proven that Millennials' self-identification with a brand subsequently leads to not only brand loyalty, but also brand advocacy. In addition, it was found out that brand loyalty propensity is an additional factor, which has an impact on the relationship between the identification with a brand and the loyalty to a brand.

What failed to be proven was the moderating impact of the product category involvement on the relationship between the drivers brand distinctiveness, brand prestige and brand warmth and the resulting identification, and that when it comes to European Millennials product category does not play a role when assessing the degree to which the drivers contribute to the self-expression and self-identification fitness of a brand. In contrast to this result, other previous researchers have proven that product category involvement does impact the relationship between all the drivers and the consumer-brand identification. A possible way of explaining this discrepancy might be the self-identification and self-expressive role, which is assigned to the brands in the context of this study. According to Chernev, et al.'s research (2011, p. 68), "the extent to which consumers use brands to express their identities is not limited to self-expressive brands in the same category". They point out that when a person chooses a brand, with which to identify and through which she/he will express his/her identity, they do not compare brands only within a specific category, but across categories, and thus they might decide in favor for one brand from a different product category than another. Based on their findings and also on the results from this research, it can be assumed that the suitability of a brand to serve for self-identification and self-expression is not related to the product category, from which the brand is coming, but rather on the image of the particular brand, on the degree to which all the other six drivers (brand-self similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, brand social benefits, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences) all together contribute to the extent to which a person identifies with the brand.

With its findings this master thesis contributed by advancing the present understanding on the topics of brand loyalty, the relationship between brands and consumer identity, as well

as some particularities in these aspects of generation Y as consumers. These findings can also serve marketing managers and practitioners, wishing to target and incite brand loyalty in consumers from generation Y. By analyzing the process of brand loyalty development through consumer-brand identification in a novel, detailed, clear and structured way, the current results can now easily be employed as a strategic framework for marketing practitioners when targeting Gen Y. By following the developed chain of impact – from the drivers for consumer-brand identification until the resulting brand loyalty and brand advocacy, marketers can more easily take into consideration and decide upon all the important relevant factors when developing their marketing plans and strategies.

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Appendix No. 1: Questionnaire Items

A. Product category involvement (PI)

1. I am very interested in anything related to [product category]. (Survey p. 3)
2. Which brand of [product category] I buy matters a lot. (Survey p. 3)
3. I value [product category] as an important part of my life. (Survey p. 3)
4. [Product category] mean a lot to me. (Survey p. 3)

B. Brand distinctiveness (BD)

5. Brand X has a distinctive identity. (Survey p. 5)
6. Brand X is unique. (Survey p. 5)
7. Brand X stands out from its competitors. (Survey p. 5)

C. Brand prestige (BP)

8. Brand X is very prestigious. (Survey p. 5)
9. Brand X is one of the best brands of [product category]. (Survey p. 5)
10. Brand x is a first-class, high quality brand. (Survey p. 5)

D. Brand social benefits (SB)

11. Brand X offers me the opportunity to socialize. (Survey p. 7)
12. I feel a sense of affiliation with other people who use brand X. (Survey p. 7)
13. I gain a lot from interactions with other customers/users of brand X. (Survey p. 7)
14. Being a customer of brand X makes me feel like I belong to a special group. (Survey p. 7)

E. Brand warmth (BW)

15. Brand X creates warm feelings among its users. (Survey p. 5)
16. Brand X is very loveable. (Survey p. 5)
17. Brand X is emotional rather than rational. (Survey p. 5)

F. Memorable brand experiences (ME)

18. I have had a lot of memorable experiences with brand X. (Survey p. 7)
19. Thinking of brand X brings back good memories. (Survey p. 7)
20. I have fond memories of brand X. (Survey p. 7)

G. Brand loyalty (BL)

21. I stick with brand X because I know it is the best for me. (Survey p. 7)
22. I will buy brand X the next time I buy [product category]. (Survey p. 7)
23. I intend to keep purchasing brand X. (Survey p. 7)
24. I am very committed to brand X. (Survey p. 7) (Moolla & Bisschoff, 2012)

H. Brand advocacy (BA)

25. I like recommending brand X to other consumers. (Survey p. 7)
26. I love t talk about the good points of brand X to people I know. (Survey p. 7)
27. I have managed to convince other people to buy brand X. (Survey p.7)

I. Brand-self similarity (BSS) (Survey p. 6)

Brand X is ...

I am ...

- 28. Down-to-earth.
- 29. Honest.
- 30. Wholesome.
- 31. Cheerful.
- 32. Daring.
- 33. Spirited.
- 34. Imaginative.
- 35. Up-to-date.
- 36. Reliable.
- 37. Intelligent.
- 38. Successful.
- 39. Upper class.
- 40. Charming.
- 41. Outdoorsy.
- 42. Tough. (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2013)

J. Brand loyalty propensity (LP)

- 43. I would rather stick with my brand I usually buy than try something I am not very sure of.
(Survey p. 8)
- 44. If I like a brand, I rarely switch from it just to try something different. (Survey p. 8)
- 45. I rarely introduce new brands and products to my friends. (Survey p.8)
- 46. I rarely take chances by buying unfamiliar brands even if it means sacrificing variety.
(Survey p. 8) (Bennett, & Rundle-Thiele, 2002)

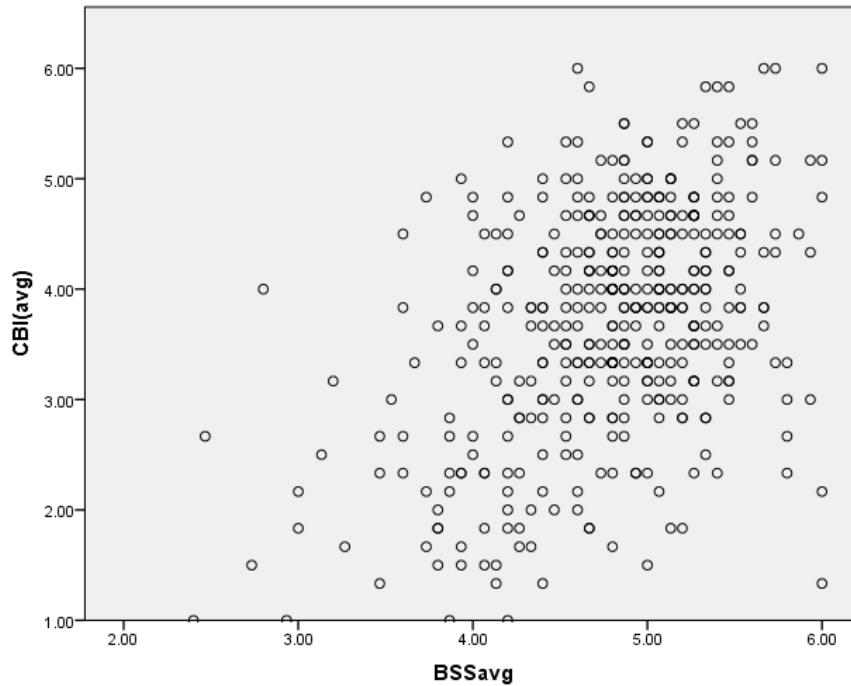
Appendix No. 2: SPSS Correlation Analyses Results

I. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand-self Similarity and Consumer-brand Identification

Correlations			
		C BI(avg)	B SSavg
C BI(avg)	Pearson		.436**
	Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	422
B SSavg	Pearson	.436**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	422

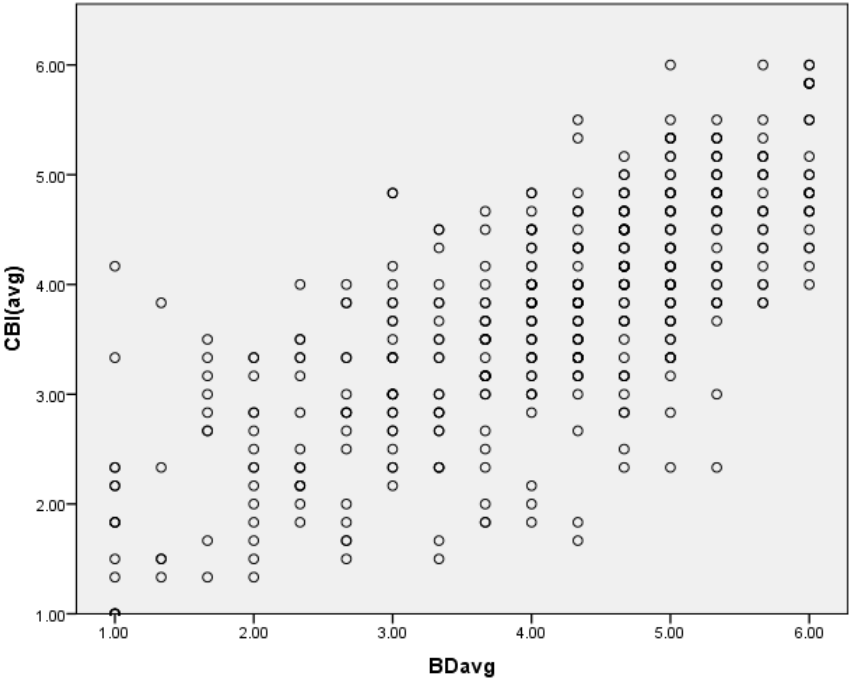
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation coefficients significant at the 0.05 level are identified with a single asterisk, and those significant at the 0.01 level are identified with two asterisks.



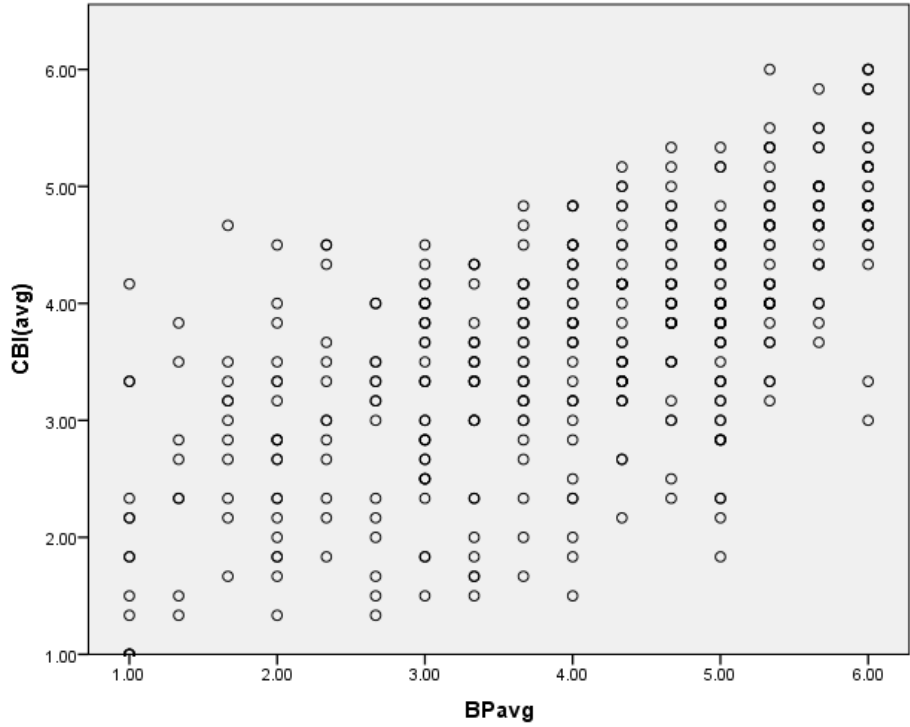
II. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Distinctiveness and Consumer-brand Identification

Correlations		
	C BI(avg)	B Davg
C BI(avg)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.733** .000 4 22
B Davg	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.733** .000 4 22

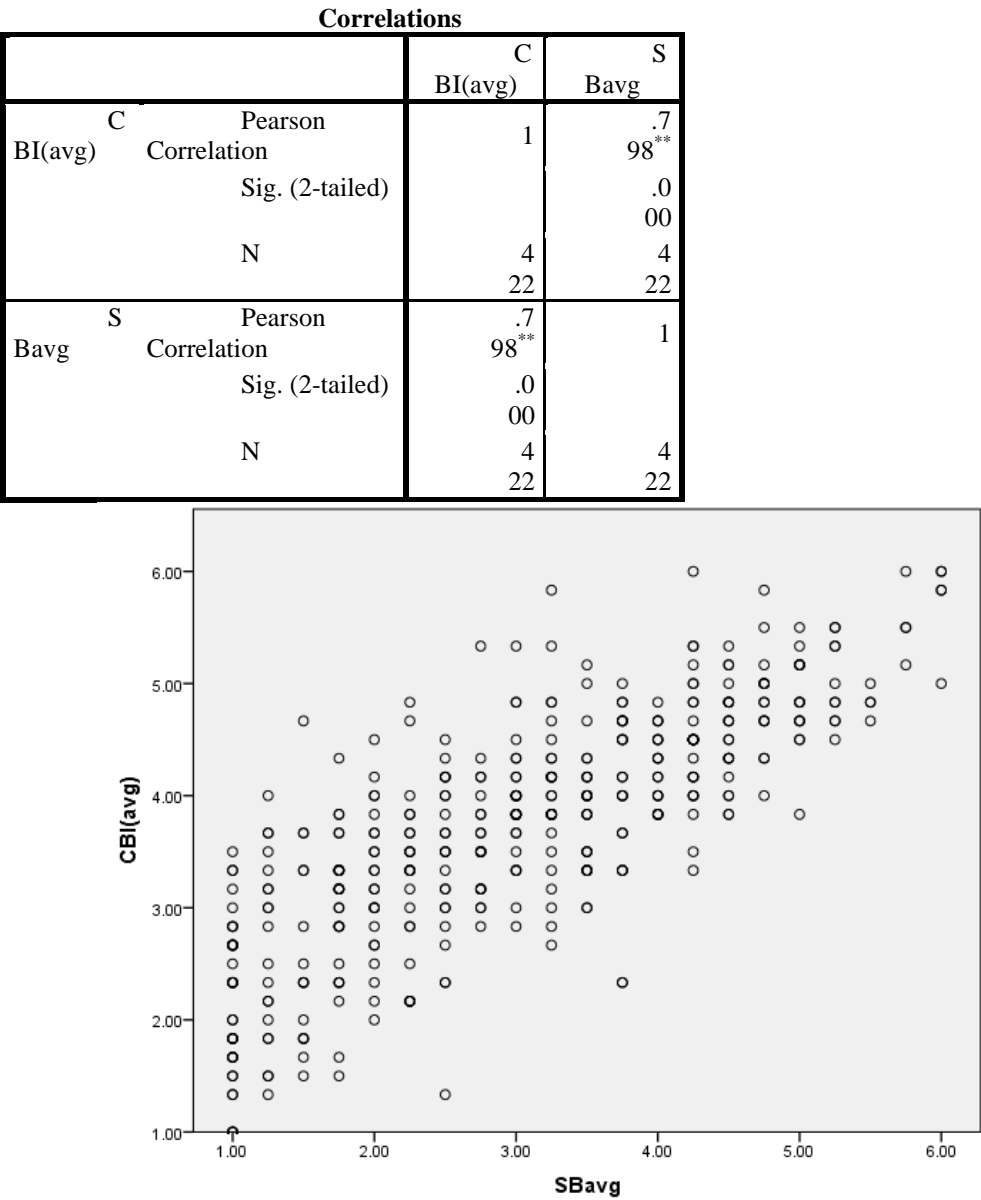


III. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Prestige and Consumer-brand Identification

Correlations		
	C BI(avg)	B Pavg
C BI(avg)	1	.662**
		.000
	4	4
	22	22
B Pavg	.662**	1
	.000	
	4	4
	22	22

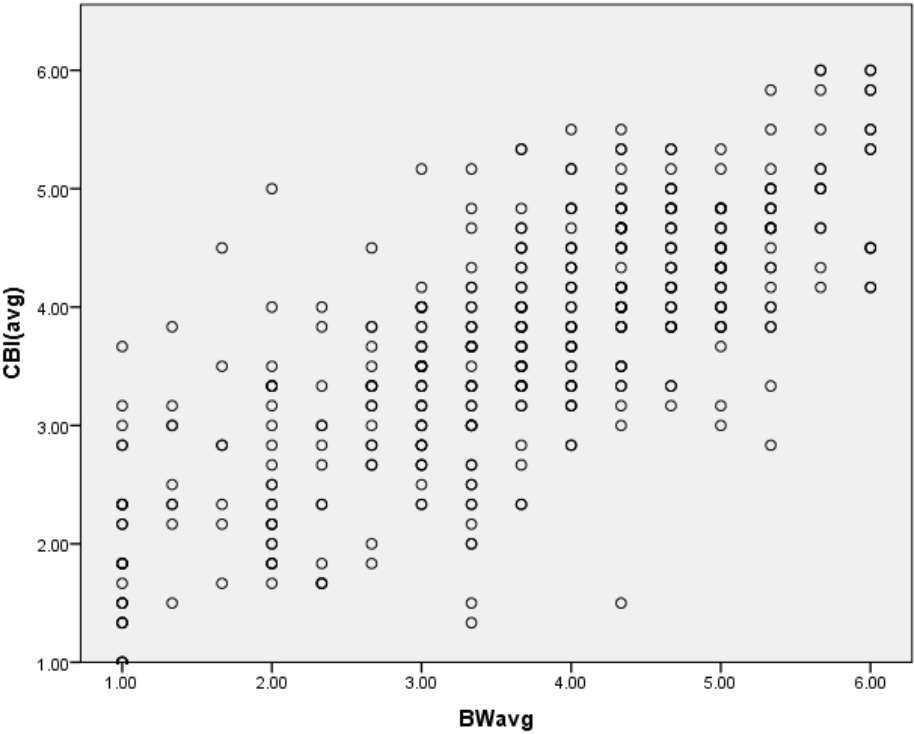


IV. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Social Benefits and Consumer-brand Identification



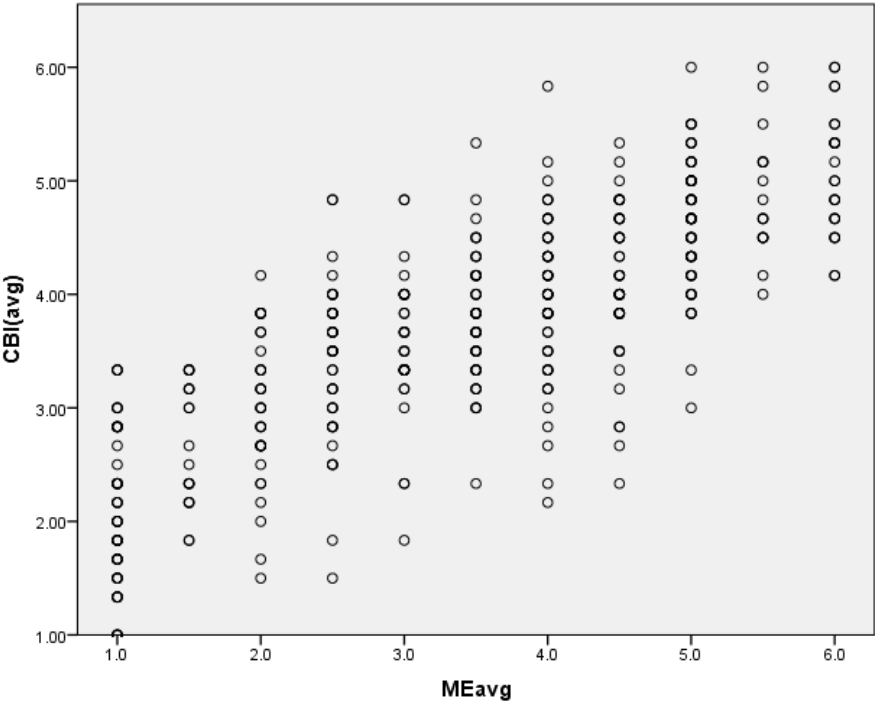
V. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Warmth and Consumer-brand Identification

Correlations		
	C BI(avg)	B Wavg
C BI(avg)		
Pearson Correlation	1	.751**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	422	422
B Wavg		
Pearson Correlation	.751**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	422	422



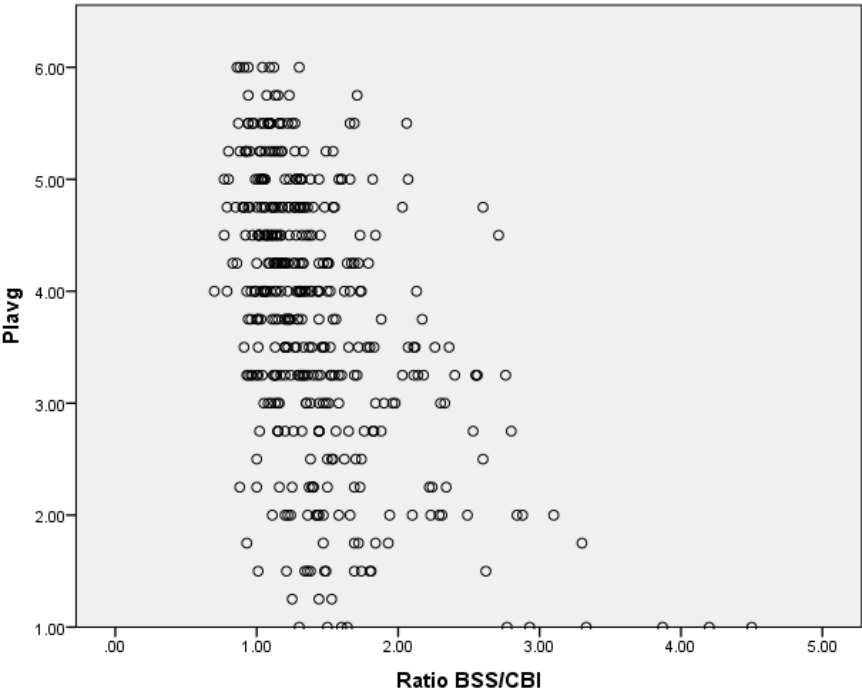
VI. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Warmth and Consumer-brand Identification

Correlations		
	C BI(avg)	M Eavg
C BI(avg)		
Pearson Correlation	1	.797**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
N	422	422
M Eavg		
Pearson Correlation	.797**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	422	422



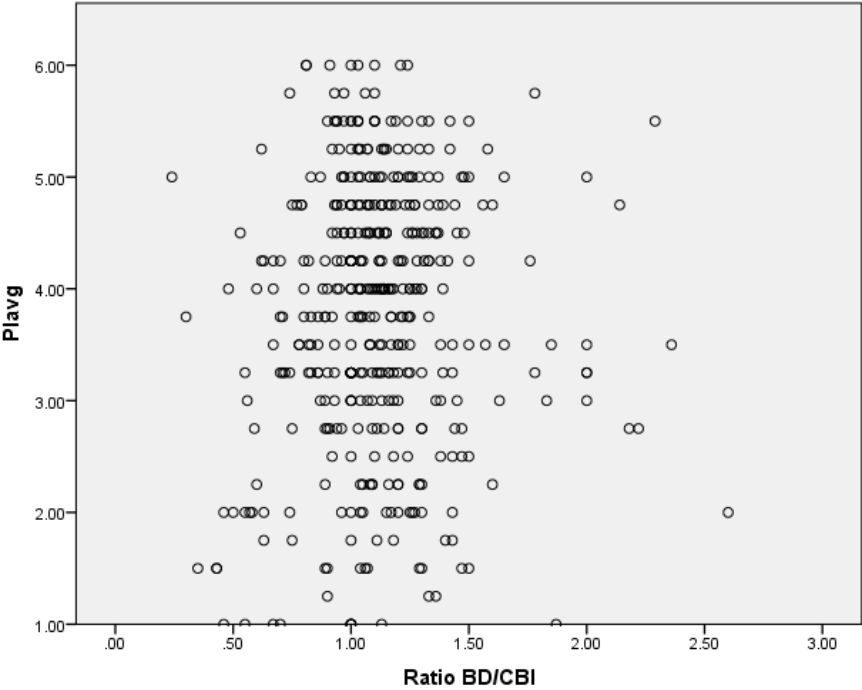
VII. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand-self Similarity - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement

Correlations			
		Ratio BSS/CBI	P Iavg
Ratio BSS/CBI	Pearson Correlation	1	.481**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	422
PIavg	Pearson Correlation	-.481**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	422



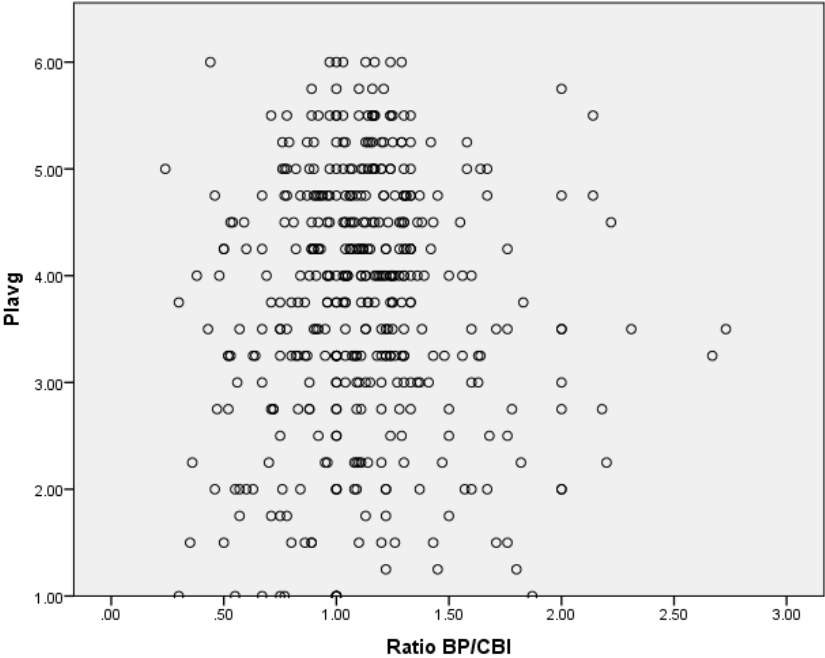
IIX. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Distinctiveness - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement

Correlations			
		P Iavg	Ratio BD/CBI
Plavg	Pearson	1	.062
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.202
	N	422	
Ratio BD/CBI	Pearson	.062	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.202	
	N	422	



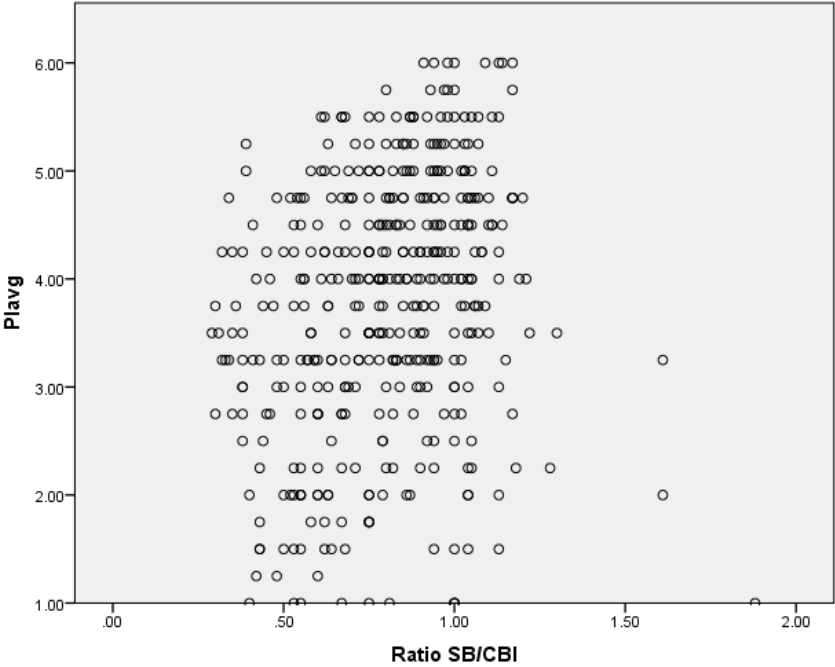
IX. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Prestige - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement

Correlations			
		P	Ratio
		Iavg	BP/CBI
Plavg	Pearson	1	.015
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.757
	N	4	422
Ratio BP/CBI	Pearson	.0	1
	Correlation	15	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.7	
	N	57	422
		4	
		22	

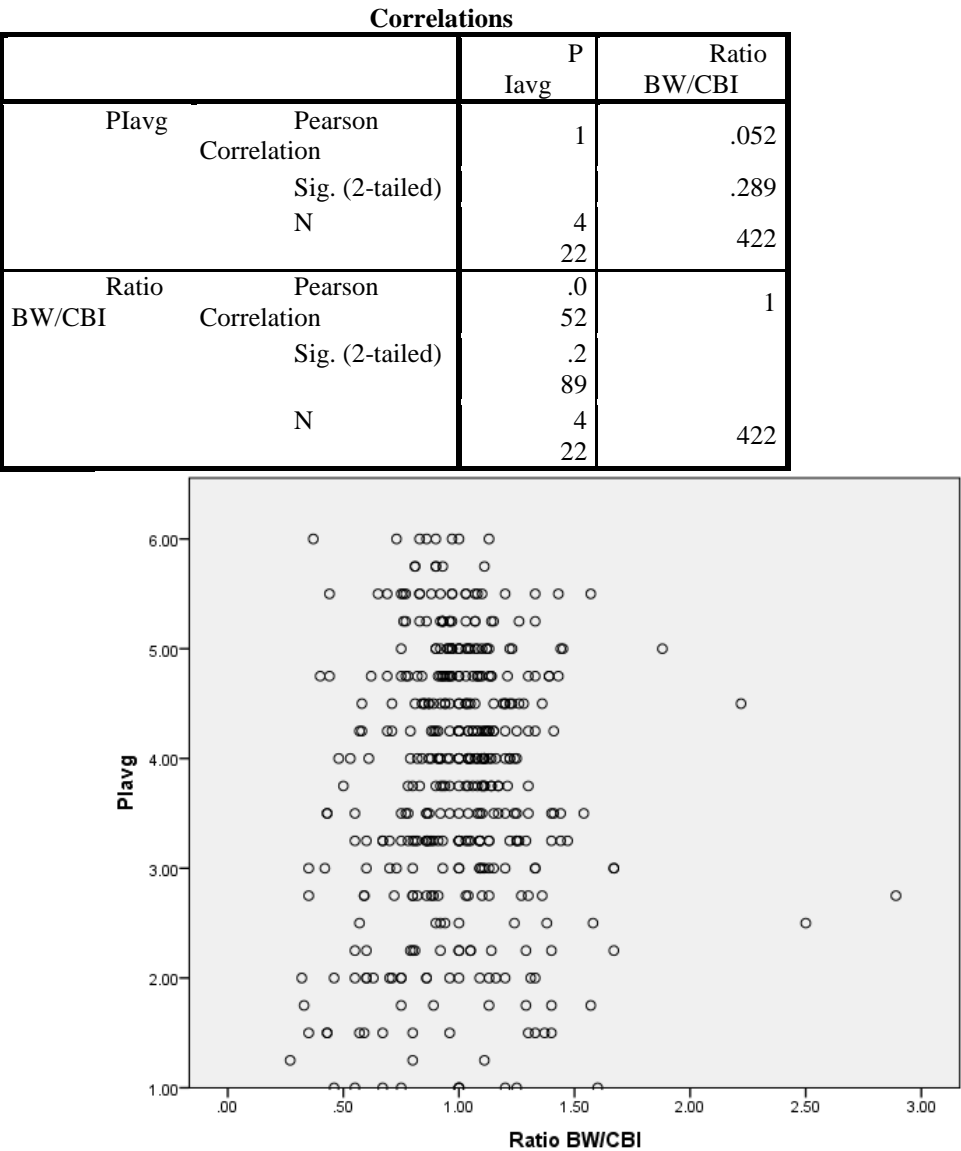


X. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Social Benefits - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement

Correlations			
		P	Ratio
		Iavg	SB/CBI
Plavg	Pearson	1	.231**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	
Ratio SB/CBI	Pearson	.231**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	

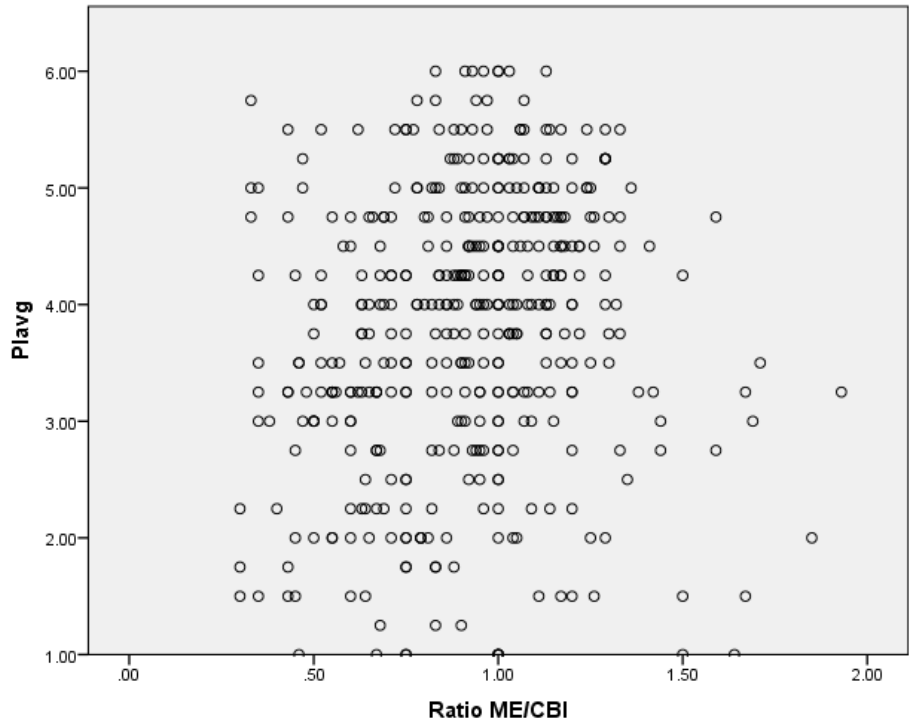


XI. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Brand Warmth - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement



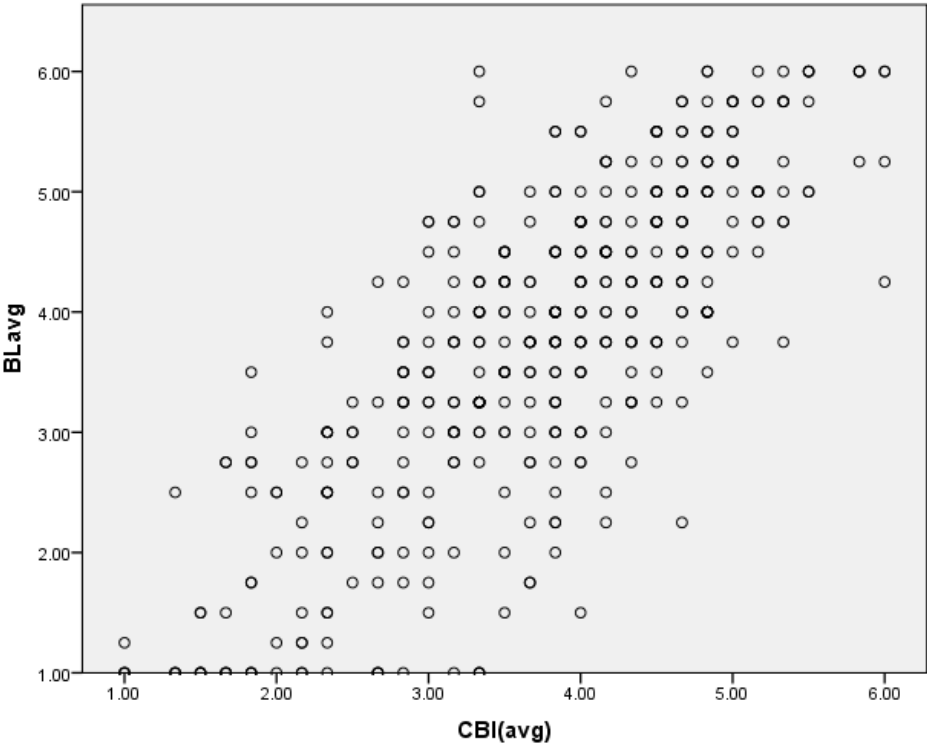
XII. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Memorable Brand Experiences - Consumer-brand Identification Ratio and Product Category Involvement

Correlations			
		P Iavg	Ratio ME/CBI
Plavg	Pearson Correlation	1	.140**
			.004
		4	422
		22	
Ratio ME/CBI	Pearson Correlation	.140**	1
		.004	
		4	422
		22	



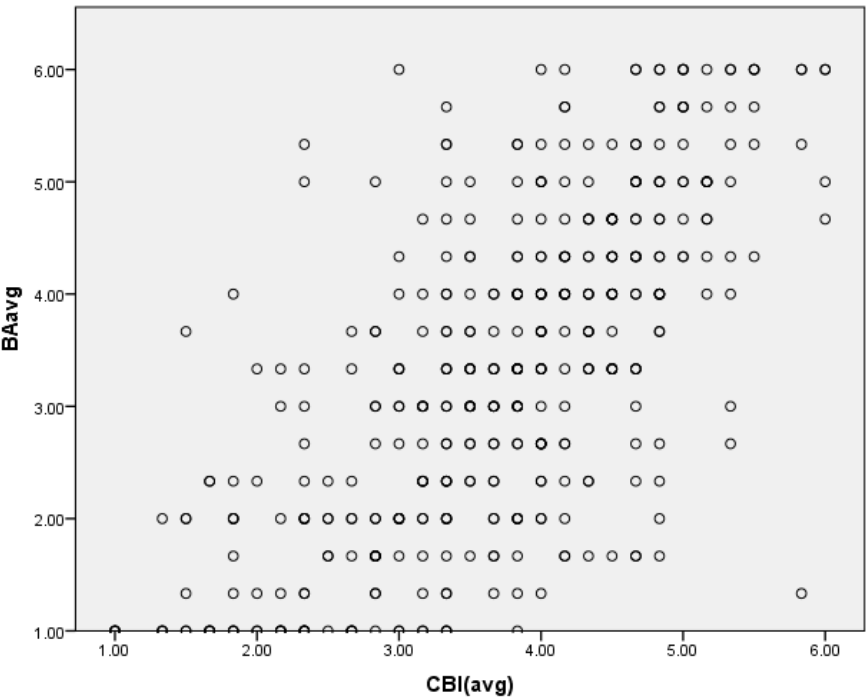
XII. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Consumer-brand Identification and Brand Loyalty

Correlations			
		C BI(avg)	B Lavg
C BI(avg)	Pearson		.76**
	Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	422
B Lavg	Pearson	.76**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	422



XIV. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Consumer-brand Identification and Brand Advocacy

Correlations			
		C BI(avg)	B Aavg
C BI(avg)	Pearson	1	.677**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	422
B Aavg	Pearson	.677**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	422



XV. Correlation Box and Scatterplot: Consumer-brand Identification – Brand Loyalty Ratio and Brand Loyalty Propensity

Correlations			
		Ratio_ BLavg_CBIavg	L Pavg
Ratio_BLav_ CBIavg	Pearson Correlation	1	.214**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	422	422
LPavg	Pearson Correlation	.214**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	422	422

