# THE ROLE OF BRAND SELF-RELEVANCE IN DEVELOPING BRAND LOYALTY: A STUDY ON THE BRAND LOYALTY FOR HONDA

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the role of brand self-relevance in developing brand loyalty on the automotive brand, Honda. In-depth interviews of 34 Honda owners in Malaysia were conducted. Those interviewed were asked on their feelings, experiences and loyalty towards Honda. The study conceptualised a research model combining Dick and Basu's (1994) customer loyalty framework and Sirgy's (1986) self-congruity theory. Results demonstrated there are two main self-relevance factors influencing consumers' brand loyalty, which are product or brand user image congruity and need for self-expression. Specifically, study showed need of self-expression plays a significant role in influencing brand loyalty to portray consumers' ideal, social and ideal-social self-images. Results also reveal brand self-relevance plays a significant role to both behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty. Results illustrated brand self-relevance plays a more significant role in influencing consumers towards true loyalty than latent, spurious or no loyalty. This study suggests brand managers, advertisers and companies should focus on brand self-relevance in developing brand loyalty strategies to capture brand's target market and retain them for a long duration of time. Findings provide a more specific direction in developing brand communication strategies and marketing plans to create strong and sustainable brand, retaining greater brand loyalty of the customers.

# PERANAN KAITAN DIRI DALAM MEMBENTUK KESETIAAN KEPADA JENAMA: SEBUAH PENYELIDIKAN TERHADAP KESETIAAN JENAMA UNTUK HONDA

**Abstrak**

Kajian ini menilai peranan kaitan diri dalam membentuk kesetiaan terhadap jenama automotif, Honda. Temubual secara mendalam dengan 34 pemilik Honda dijalankan di Malaysia. Responden disoal melalui soalan berkaitan dengan perasaan, pemilihan jenama dan pengalaman menggunakan Honda. Model penyelidikan menggabungkan rangka kerja kesetiaan pengguna Dick dan Basu (1994) dan teori kesepadanan diri Sirgy (1986). Keputusan menunjukkan dua faktor utama kaitan diri yang mempengaruhi kesetiaan jenama pengguna, iaitu kesepadanan produk atau jenama imej pengguna dan keperluan untuk mengekspresikan diri. Secara khususnya, kajian menunjukkan keperluan mengekspresikan diri memain peranan penting mempengaruhi kesetiaan jenama pengguna untuk memaparkan imej diri pengguna yang ideal, sosial atau ideal-sosial. Keputusan menunjukkan kaitan diri juga mempunyai peranan penting ke atas kesetiaan jenama sikap dan tingkah laku. Khususnya, kaitan diri mempunyai peranan lebih penting dalam mempengaruhi pengguna ke arah kesetiaan benar berbanding *latent, spurious* atau tiada kesetiaan. Kajian mencadangkan pengurus jenama, pengiklan dan syarikat perlu memberi keutamaan pada kaitan diri dalam strategi kesetiaan jenama, untuk mendapatkan pengguna sasaran dan mengekalkan mereka pada sesebuah jenama untuk tempoh masa yang panjang. Keputusan kajian menyediakan hala tuju yang lebih khusus dalam membentuk strategi komunikasi jenama dan pelan pemasaran bagi mewujudkan satu jenama yang kukuh dan lestari untuk mengekalkan kesetiaan jenama pelanggan.

***Kata kunci:*** *kaitan diri terhadap jenama, kesetiaan pengguna, teori kesepadanan diri, komunikasi penjenamaan, analisis tema.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's marketplace shows brand choices keep on increasing, where customers tend to switch from one brand to another that offers better benefits and functions, leading to a decline of loyal customers. This is a major concern for companies because the ultimate marketing goals for any business are to create, maintain and improve customer loyalty towards their brands or products (Dick & Basu, 1994). Bennett and Rundle-Thiele (2005) mentioned there are two reasons for decline of brand loyalty. First, due to the rising quality levels of products and services, as quality can no longer clearly differentiate competing brands within the same category. Secondly, brands still position themselves in terms of quality and risk reduction. This approach does not appeal to the modern consumers anymore because loyal customers today are more attracted to brands that express their self-concept, image or personality (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Belk, 1988).

Academics explained that consumers may purchase and become loyal to brands or products because of the desire to develop a particular self-image or self-concept (actual self, ideal self, social self, etc) (Sirgy, 1982; Ross, 1971; Heath & Scott, 1998; Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber & Lee, 2006). A brand is self-relevant when consumers could create, convey and define their self-concepts through the brands they purchase and use (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Belk (1988) further stated that a brand is perceived attractive when it is helpful to a person to express him or herself and the person identifies with the brand.

Finding out the relationship between self-relevance and brand loyalty gives better understanding on how a brand with a consumer's self-concept (i.e. actual, ideal, social and ideal-social) can influence him or her to be loyal to a brand, whether attitudinally or behaviourally. As companies and academicians realise the necessity to create sustainable competitive advantage to influence customers' purchasing decisions and retain customers' loyalty, the role of self-relevance is seen important in brand communication strategies. Creating a strong brand with self-relevant attributes distinguish one brand from another, garnering purchase decisions and greater brand loyalty. Through this effort, it will subsequently capture more mind share and market share to reap in greater Return on Investments (ROI) for brand owners.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to provide an understanding on how the self-relevance of a brand influences cutomers' brand loyalty. The research objectives include understanding the relationship between self-relevance of an automobile brand and customers' brand loyalty; explaining how a brands's self-relevance affects behavioural and attitudinal brand loyalty; and explaining how a brand's self-relevance influences customers' levels of brand loyalty (i.e. true, latent, spurious and no loyalty) that emerge through the influence of self-relevance. Specifically, this study focuses on the influence of brand self-relevance of an automobile brand on brand loyalty.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Dick and Basu's Model of Consumer Loyalty*

Brand loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future, causing repetitive same-brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviours (Dick & Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1999). In their framework, Dick and Basu (1994) viewed loyalty as an attitude-behaviour relationship, considering both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of a customer towards a brand.

Behavioural loyalty are loyal customers that repeat purchase a certain brand due to its low price or brand convenience, without any emotional bond with the brand, measured through purchase patterns, proportion purchase, purchase sequence and probability of purchase (Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Attitudinal loyalty is when customers are committed to the brand due to emotional factors (positive feelings or beliefs towards a brand) or predisposition. These attitudes may be measured by asking how much people say they like the brand, feel committed to it, will recommend it to others and have positive beliefs and feelings about it – relative to competing brands (Dick & Basu, 1994). Customers are segmented on whether they are behaviourally or attitudinally loyal or both simultaneously. Behavioural and attitudinal loyalty can also be interrelated with each other. When a loyal customer is both emotionally committed to a brand (attitudinally) and repeat purchase the brand for a long duration of time (behaviourally), this customer is truly loyal to that particular brand.

Dick and Basu (1994) also mentioned that there are three main attitudinal antecedents, namely cognitive, affective and conative. In contrast to Oliver's (1999) model, Dick and Basu's (1994) model showed that all of these antecedents have a concurrent influence on the relative attitude formation. No predefined sequence of attitudinal antecedents is needed. Oliver (1999) argues that a consumer's attitude has a sequential pattern or process of cognition, affect and conation, leading to action loyalty.

Dick and Basu's (1994) consumer loyalty framework also includes the distinction of high and low stages of relative attitude and repeat patronage. The authors segregated between high and low stages of attitudinal and behavioural loyalty with respect to other influencing factors such as social norms or situational influences. On the other hand, Oliver (1999) does not make any distinction of high or low attitudinal loyalty status combined with high or low repeat buying behaviour. The difference between high or low attitudinal loyalty and high or low behavioural loyalty is important in distinguishing the different types of brand loyalty namely true, latent, spurious and no loyalty.

Dick and Basu (1994) claim that true loyalty, has both strong and high attitudinal

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attachment (attitudinal loyalty) and high repeat patronage (behavioural loyalty). It is when customers have positive feelings towards the brand, deeply committed to rebuy the brand consistently in the future and causes repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing despite situational influences and marketing efforts to cause switching behaviour (Dick & Basu, 1994). Latent loyalty demonstrate low repeat patronage (behavioural loyalty), although customers hold a strong or high attitudinal commitment (attitudinal loyalty) to a particular brand. The low behavioural loyalty may be due to price, accessibility or distribution of the brand.

Spurious loyalty are individuals with low relative attitude accompanied by high repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994). Although this type of consumer is not emotionally attached to a brand, he or she might still purchase the same brand in the future because of habitual buying, economic incentives, convenience and maybe because of lack alternative brands. For example, this type of loyalty applies to people who have to drive a certain car brand as a company car or a car given by their family to use daily. Spuriously loyal consumers does not have an alternative brand to choose from and cannot benefit a brand as these customers do not truly identify with the brand. They focuses or care about discount sales of buying products at low prices. No loyalty is when customers have no ties with the brand, possessing low relative attitudes combined with low repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994). For example, a consumer may have a bad brand experience with a national car brand and became antagonistic against the brand due to bad brand experience. The consumer would therefore never want to repurchase the brand again.

### Brand Self-relevance
Self-relevance is when consumers create, convey and define their self-concepts through the brands that they purchase and use (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Through the brand self-relevance or match between the car model's or product image and the consumer's self-concept (whether actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self), the man chose to prefer the brand than other competitors in the market.

## Self-congruity theory
Sirgy (1982) developed self-congruity theory based on the assumption that consumers prefer brands they associate with a set of personality traits congruent with their own. Self-congruity is defined as the match between a brand image and an individual's self-concept (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Self-concept is the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object with a product or brand (Sirgy, 1985; Rosenberg, 1979). Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986) postulates that people select to purchase and use products and services that have a user image consistent with their own self-image. By doing so, consumers get to reinforce their own personal identity or their own view of

themselves (i.e. self-concept) (Sirgy, Lee, Johar & Tidwell, 2008).

Self-congruity has four dimensions, namely actual, ideal, social and ideal social self-congruity (Sirgy, 1985). These dimensions refer to the degree of congruence between a typical brand-user image and different four dimensions of self-image. Actual self-congruity is the fit between how people actually see themselves in relation to the image of people who purchase the product or brand. Ideal self-congruity refers to how people like to see themselves. Social-self congruity is the fit between how people believe they are seen by others in relation to the product or brand user image. Ideal social-self congruity is the fit between how people would like to be seen by others in relation to the product or brand user image (Sirgy & Su, 2000)

Four self-congruity effects are induced by corresponding four types of self expression motives: self-consistency, self-esteem, social-consistency and social-approval motives (Sirgy, Johar, Samli & Clairborne, 1991). This self-congruity process is mostly guided by the need for self-consistency – where people are motivated to hold a set of beliefs about themselves (a self-concept) and act in ways (such as purchase and use products or services) to reinforce their self-concepts (Sirgy *et al* 2008). The need for self-consistency is a self-concept motive that motivates people to behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves – actual self.

Self-congruity involving ideal self has different self-concept motive, namely self-esteem motive (Sirgy, 1986). Consumers are motivated to purchase and repurchase brands with a user image that is consistent with their ideal self (Sirgy *et al* 2008). Consumers who are motivated to remain loyal to brands with user images consistent with their social self (the image they think they present to others), the self-concept is related to social self-congruity, namely social consistency motive. In other words, people are motivated to engage in behaviours that satisfy the need for social consistency (Sirgy, 1986). Consumers tend to buy a product that reflects how they believe others see them. Consumers will engage in further behaviours that reinforce his or her social image of being that kind of person satisfies the need for social consistency.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research uses the existing brand loyalty framework by Dick and Basu (1994). However, the framework does not consider in the effects of brand self-relevance in brand loyalty. Therefore, the theoretical basis for the research model was developed from several sources namely the Dick and Basu's (1994) brand loyalty model and the self congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986).

Several factors are proposed to influence brand loyalty including a brand's self-relevance and a consumer's self-expressive needs. The model exhibited in Figure 1.1 depicts the theoretical framework of this research.
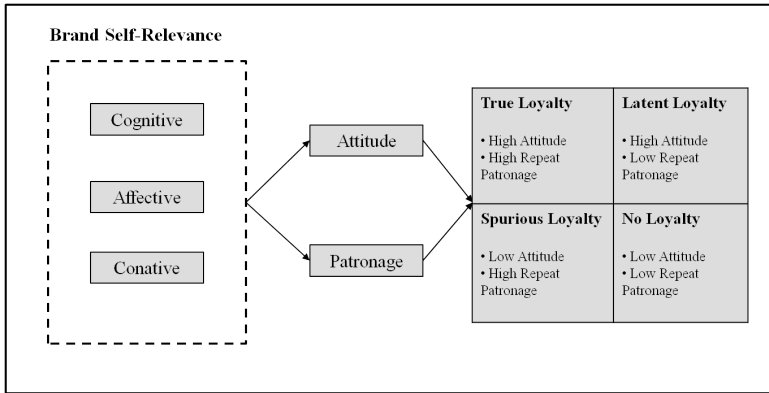
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**Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework**

As seen in the model, the theoretical framework posits that brand self-relevance influences brand loyalty in the relative attitude formation process of cognitive, affective and conative. The framework shows that consumers may perceive a brand to be relevant to their self depending on the self-expression motive that they have. Self-expression motives consist of self-consistency, self-esteem, social-consistency and social approval (Sirgy *et al* 1991). According to Sirgy, Johar, Samli and Clairborne (1991), self-consistency is when consumers are motivated to purchase and repurchase brands (brand loyalty) with user image that is consistent with their actual self. Self-esteem is when consumers are motivated to purchase and repurchase brands with product or user image that is consistent with their ideal self (Sirgy *et al* 2008) and by purchasing the brand, it may help the consumer to attain that ideal self, and doing so boosts the person's sense of self-esteem (Sirgy *et al* 2008). Social-consistency motive is when consumers tend to buy and rebuy a product that reflects how they believe others see them (social self). Social approval is when consumers buy and rebuy a product that has brand user images consistent with their ideal social self (Sirgy *et al* 1991). If a consumer's self-expression motive and product or brand user image is congruent, it will result in purchase and repurchase of the brand to express their self-images (actual, ideal, social, ideal social).

The model shows that brand self-relevance influences customer brand loyalty attitudinally, behaviourally or both. Consumers are likely to develop high or favourable attitude towards the brand if the cognitive process shows information of self-relevant attributes (product or brand user image or brand personality). It is where consumers will see whether the brand portrays the brand personality or brand user image that they perceive to be associated with their self-images. When the consumers express feelings such as emotions, moods, primary affect and satisfaction toward a brand, affective attitude can be identified (Dick & Basu, 1994). Lastly, conative antecedents are those related to behaviour dispositions

toward the brand. This includes switching costs, sunk costs and expectation (Dick & Basu, 1994).

To identify which type of loyalty a consumer falls into, the consumer will be assessed through his or her relative attitude and repeat patronage (behaviour). When a consumer stated that he or she perceives a brand to be relevant to his or her self-image with high commitment (attitude) attachment and high repeat patronage for a certain brand, true loyalty can be identified (Dick & Basu, 1994). Consumers with latent loyalty perceive a brand to be relevant to his or her self-image but portray low repeat patronage even though they may hold high attitudinal commitment towards a brand (Dick & Basu, 1994). Spurious loyalty is consumers with low brand self-relevance, low relative attitude and high repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994). No loyalty are consumers who have no ties with the brand, where they perceive that a brand has no association or relevance towards their self, consisting of low relative attitude and low repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994).

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative in-depth interviews with Honda customers were conducted to explore on the influence of brand self-relevance on brand loyalty. Consumers attach symbolic meanings to automobiles and positive ownership experience with a brand of vehicle leads to a positive influence on consumer loyalty that is on the psychological bias of a consumer to the brand of vehicle, resulting the repurchase of the brand when he or she re-enters the market (Grubb and Hupp (1968), Birdwell (1968), Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978, & Sirgy 1982, 1985).

The focal brand, Honda, was determined in a preliminary testing where respondents were asked to identify the top automobile brands in Malaysia that were commonly purchased. Honda was the most mentioned in the pre-test as the top automotive brand in Malaysia and a brand that the respondents would most likely to purchase or aspire to purchase. According to the Malaysian Automotive Association (2012), Honda was ranked at fourth place as the top car brands in Malaysia with a total of 44,483 units sold. Moreover, the Malaysian Automotive Association also indicated that Honda was ranked at number two as the top ten foreign car brands in Malaysia in 2009.

Participants were Honda owners of more than five months to understand the attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of the customers. A total of 34 respondents were recruited at service workshops and also through personal invitations (researcher's social circle of friends and families) from the researcher. The number of samples collected is reasonably sufficient to fulfil the objectives of the study due to the saturated responses in the analysis. This research utilised 12 open-ended question guidelines and divided into brand experiences; perception, loyalty and brand self-relevance of the customers. The data collected were then analysed by using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns

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(themes) within data.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### *Consumers' Perceptions on the Self-relevance of Honda*
Consumers' brand experiences become more meaningful when they can relate the brand to their self. Self-relevance can be seen through the relative attitude process of cognition (the brand belief that the brand is perceived congruent with the consumers' self-concept). The findings suggest that consumers perceive Honda to be self-relevant through product or brand user image congruity and self-expressive benefits.

## *Product or brand user image congruity*
Product or brand user image congruity refers to the relationship between a buyer's self image and the perceived image of the user (Sirgy *et al,* 1997). The results support suggestions from Sirgy's (1982; 1986) self-congruity theory that states consumers compare their self-concept with the product or brand user image of a product. Findings show there were three dimensions to product or brand user image congruity, namely, brand image, brand personality and brand popularity.

### *Brand Image*
The findings illustrate that consumers perceive Honda to be relevant to their self-concepts when they can identify Honda's brand image to their own self-image (cognitive process) by evaluating whether the image of Honda, such as "luxurious", "prestige" or "high status or class" is congruent with the person's image of him or herself. A person who views the image of Honda to be congruent with his or her self-image would be able to use it to symbolise their actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-images to the society.

Results are in line with Graeff's (1996) findings that suggested the more similar a consumer's self-image is with the brand's image, the more favourable or positive the evaluation and preference towards the brand. The congruity of the brand image with consumers' self-concepts helps to create trust and confidence towards Honda. Consumers perceived Honda to be relevant to their self-concepts because the brand explicit image of luxuriousness, prestige, higher status and high class. These brand images symbolise consumers' socio-economic status or career path as well as portraying their ideal, social or ideal-social self-images. The consumers also believed that the brand images of Honda helped them to be perceived as established, successful, wealthy or high class people.

### *Brand Personality*
Brand personality refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). In other words, consumers prefer brands that have the same personality characteristics as their own personality (cognitive process).

Specifically, results showed that consumers perceived Honda to be relevant to their self-concepts in expressing their actual self-image to symbolise they are classy and high status, portray a European-like personality or to reflect their personality as a leader in their working organisation. For consumers who wanted to be known as classy, European and a leader, they would most likely choose Honda automobiles as their means of transportation.

### *Brand Popularity*

Findings demonstrated consumers chose Honda because the brand is popular in the international and Asian automotive market. Findings support Ross' (1971) proposition that product conspicuousness moderates the relationship between the type of self-concept and preference behaviour. Consumers stated that by driving popular brand such as Honda, the brand reputation brings prestige and status to a consumer's lifestyle (cognitive process). Consumers who view Honda's brand popularity and reputation to be relevant with his or her self-image would then be able to project their ideal, social or ideal-social self-image. The results coincide with Ross' (1971) and Sirgy's (1982) findings that ideal self-concept and/or ideal-social self-concepts are more closely related to product preference for conspicuous products than actual self-concept, whereas the actual self-concept was expected to be more closely related to preference for inconspicuous products than ideal self-concept and/or ideal-social self-concept.

It can be stipulated that consumers perceive a brand to be relevant to their self-concepts when they view that particular brand can reflect their self-images or self-concept (cognitive process). Through the positive congruity or match between the product or brand user image and consumers' actual, ideal, social and/ or ideal-social self-images, consumers are more likely to prefer or purchase that particular brand. Consumers' repurchase of Honda automobiles is the indicator of behavioural brand loyalty.

### *Self-expressive benefit*

The findings also reveal that consumers perceive a brand is useful in expressing the self. Brand consumption serves as a vehicle of self-expression (Aaker, 1996) and consumers choose brands perceptually consistent with their own self-concept (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982). Among the factors that arise in expressing influential meanings on consumers' self-concepts are personality, identity, aspirations, achievements and reference group.

### *Personality*

The findings indicate that among the reasons customers view Honda as a platform to self-expression is because the brand matches to their respective personalities in expressing their actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-image (cognitive process). The cognitive processing helps consumers to perceive whether owning or driving Honda can help them portray their personality of sporty, rugged,

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wealthy, laid back, student, young, hip, trendy, executives, businessmen, family man or motorsports person. A consumer who views Honda to be congruent with his or her self-image would be able to use it to symbolise his or her actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-concepts to fulfil their self-consistency motive, self-esteem need, social consistency or social approval motive. The findings also state that Honda's self-expressive benefit also gives a greater impression to a consumer's self-image. A consumer's image can be enhanced or upgraded to a higher status in terms of socio-economic status and lifestyle.

### Identity

The findings indicate that consumers perceive Honda to represent a socially desirable identity that helps them to project a desirable image (cognitive process). The cognitive processing entails the consumer evaluating whether Honda helps them to fulfil their need for social consistency (social self-image) and social approval (ideal-social self-image) to express desirable identities such as high ranking executives, salespersons and business person. A person who views Honda to be congruent with his or her self-image would be able to use it to gain better business opportunities because they view the brand's reputation helps them to gain trust and confidence from their clients.

### Aspirations

The results also reveal that consumers perceive Honda to be relevant to their self as a way to fulfil their self-goals in life (cognitive process). The results show that these consumers have positive feelings towards the brand even before purchasing the brand through their relative attitude of the affective processing. Consumers then purchase Honda in realising their dream or aspiration in owning Honda automobiles (conative process). The conative process is when the consumer has the intention of purchasing a Honda automobile despite any situational factors such as changes in price, leading to the purchase of the brand. The findings show that consumers have always aimed to purchase a Honda to portray their achievement in life. These consumers believe that by purchasing Honda, the brand help to symbolise their ideal, social or ideal-social self-images to the society. To them, Honda automobiles are indicators of their success and identity.

### Achievement

Consumers also perceived Honda is attractive and relevant to their self-concepts because Honda helps them to express their achievements to the society (cognitive process). The cognitive processing involves the consumer evaluate that possessing and using Honda is congruent to the person's image of him or herself to symbolise their success in life, increment of wealth or high income disposal. The results also show that consumers who perceived Honda to be relevant to their self-concept in expressing their achievements in life usually aim to portray either their social or ideal-social image.

### *Reference Groups*

Lastly, consumers perceive that a brand is relevant to their self-concepts because it identifies them to a certain group in the society (cognitive process). The cognitive processing involves the consumer evaluating whether possessing and driving a Honda helps to associate the person's image of him or herself with a certain reference group. Reference groups are defined as social groups that are important to a consumer and against which he or she compares himself or herself with (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). A person who views Honda to be congruent with his or her self-image would be able to use it to symbolise his or her social identification with a certain group, such as kinship, "being a Chinese businessman", "being youngsters" and "being motorsports enthusiasts". With the social identification, consumers are more confident to trust Honda in terms of its brand image, quality and performance.

The findings reveal that the need for consumers' self-expression plays a significant role in influencing consumers' association with a certain brand. More importantly, brand self-relevance plays a bigger role in expressing the ideal, social and ideal-social self than the actual self-image because Honda is a conspicuous brand. Therefore, this research corroborates the notion that consumers perceive a brand to be relevant to the self-concepts on the basis of its symbolic meanings. They prefer a brand that has personalities and image compatible with their perceptions of self. Besides, the findings also confirm that brand self-relevance does play a significant role in brand purchasing.

### *Influence of Self-relevance on Brand Loyalty*

As presented in the research's theoretical framework, brand self-relevance was proposed to influence consumers' attitude through the cognitive, affective and conative of attitude objects (in this research, a brand), which in turn affects brand loyalty. The findings reveal that brand self-relevance do have a significant role or positive influence on consumers' brand loyalty. Results indicated that respondents are loyal to the same brand behaviourally, attitudinally or both simultaneously when they perceive the brand to be relevant to their self-concepts through product or brand user image congruity and the need for self-expression. These two self-congruity attributes are the key factors in maintaining long-term relationships between the consumer and the brand.

### *Product or brand user image congruity*

Loyal consumers repurchase the same brand when they felt that the brand is congruent to their self-concept through a brand's product or brand user image. The findings showed that self-relevance occurs when the cognitive process reveals information of relevant attributes through Honda's product or brand user image. A brand with strong brand image, brand personality and brand popularity becomes a vehicle for consumers to represent themselves to the society. Powerful

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brand-self connections are developed when the brand image, brand personality and brand popularity match with customers' self-concepts such as actual, ideal, social and ideal-social self-images.

The results illustrate consumers perceived Honda's brand image projects exclusivity and prestige. The cognitive processing consists the consumer evaluating whether the image of Honda, such as "luxurious", "prestige" or "high status or class" is congruent with the person's image of him or herself. A person who views the image of Honda to be congruent with his or her self-image would be able to use it to symbolise their actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-images to the society. Consumers gain confidence (a cognitive antecedent) when they believe the brand exudes good impression and prestige.

Consumers portray deep commitment and love towards the brand when their affective processing indicates positive feelings towards Honda. They will become committed to the brand (attitudinal loyalty), leading to the conative processing of the relative attitude. The conative process is where consumers has the intention of repurchasing Honda when the person sees that the brand is congruent to his or her self-images. The consumer then repurchase the brand (an indicator of behavioural loyalty).

Moreover, consumers also view Honda's brand personality to be relevant to their self when it matches their personalities. According to the findings, the cognitive processing lets the consumer assess whether the brand's personality of Honda, such as "rugged", "sporty", "exclusive", "luxurious" or "motorsports" is considered congruent with the person's self-image to project their own personality. When a consumer's cognitive processing indicates that the person and Honda share the same personality characteristics, the consumer will then develop positive feelings towards the brand. The favourable feelings towards the brand are formed by being committed to the brand (attitudinal loyalty) through the affective processing of the relative attitude. Afterwards, the consumer then has the intention of repurchasing the brand through their conative processing of the relative attitude and repurchase the brand for a long duration of time (behavioural loyalty).

Furthermore, consumers are also loyal to Honda due to the brand's popularity. According to the results, consumers perceived Honda to be relevant to their self-concept because the brand popularity project prestige, popularity and success through the relative attitude of cognition antecedents. The cognitive antecedent processing involves the consumer to evaluate whether Honda's brand popularity such as "Honda is one of the popular car models in Malaysia" or "Honda Civic is the car of the year for 2009/2010", is congruent with their image of him or herself. Consumers who view Honda's brand popularity and reputation to be relevant with his or her self-image would then be able to project their ideal, social or ideal-social self-image, leading to their commitment (attitudinal loyalty) and repurchasement (behavioural loyalty) .

## *Need for self-expression*

Brand loyalists also want brands that can fit and express their self-concepts such as actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-images. According to the results, loyal consumers perceived Honda expresses their personalities, identity, aspirations, achievements and social identification with certain reference groups (through the cognition antecedents of relative attitude). The cognitive processing indicates how the consumers perceive Honda to be congruent to his or her self-images by evaluating whether possession and usage of Honda can help them to express their personality, identity, aspiration, achievement and social identification to the society.

The results showed that consumers are attitudinally loyal when their relative attitude of the affective processing shows positive and favourable feelings towards Honda. The affective processing relates to the consumers' level of commitment and love towards Honda when consumers perceived driving a Honda portrays their personality, identity, goal in life, success or social identification. Consumers become behaviourally loyal after their relative attitude of the conative processing indicates their intention of purchasing Honda and actually repurchasing it to fulfil their self-expressive motives of self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency or social approval.

The results illustrate that consumers are attitudinally or behaviourally loyal to Honda when their cognition processing indicates that the brand matches their personalities. Among the personalities that consumers felt associated with are motorsports, sporty, rugged, luxury, young, trendy, executive and high rank professionals.

The findings also show that consumers are behaviourally or attitudinally loyal to Honda when they perceived the brand is representing their identity when their cognition processing indicates that the brand can help them to project wealth and luxuriousness. Owning and repurchasing the brand reflect their desire to gain social prestige and social approval.

Other than that, consumers are also loyal to Honda when their cognition processing perceived that the brand can help them to achieve their life's goals to own a Honda. Consumers' loyalty towards Honda is because consumers associate their self-concepts with the brand's characteristics to project their actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-image.

Consumers are also attitudinally or behaviourally loyal to Honda when their relative attitude of affection and conative processings see the brand as a way to express their achievements in life. The results showed that Honda is perceived favourable (affective process) when they can project success, prestige and wealth to the society. Furthermore, consumers are also loyal to Honda when their cognition, affection and conative processings indicate that the brand is for their social purpose of reflecting social ties with a certain group of people. The results illustrate that consumers feel Honda identifies them to social groups such as managers, motorsports, family members, youngsters, cultural groups and peer

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groups.

Thus, self-relevance makes the relationship between a customer and a brand more valuable through its symbolic meanings. Affective antecedents such as positive emotions, good mood, familiarity and satisfaction arise when Honda is believed to be relevant to the self-concept. Conative processing is when the consumers decide on the eventual responses after considering factors such as switching costs, sunk costs and expectation towards the Honda brand. Through cognitive, affective and conative processes, consumers then decide to purchase and repurchase Honda, thus affecting their level of loyalty to the brand. Overall, the findings demonstrated that brand self-relevance plays a significant role in influencing brand loyalty when consumers want to express their actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-images. Honda became their vehicle of symbolic meanings in representing their self-concepts, whether their personality, identity, aspiration, achievement or social identification. The results also illustrate that Honda is congruent to the ideal, social and ideal-social self-concepts to express consumers' ideal, social and ideal-social self-images. They are motivated to purchase, repurchase and become loyal to Honda in fulfilling their self-concept motives such as self-esteem motive (ideal), social consistency motive (social) and social approval motive (ideal-social).

The findings show that the greater brand self-relevance is for the consumers, the more positive influence it can bring for consumers' brand preference, leading to attitudinal or behavioural brand loyalty. Brand self-relevance influences consumers to believe the brand (cognition), love the brand (affection) and purchase the brand (conative). Without brand self-relevance, consumers would not feel associated with the brand to trust and become loyalists.

### The Influence of Brand Self-relevance on the Levels of Brand Loyalty
Past literature indicated that there are four types of brand loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994), namely true, latent, spurious and no loyalty. Findings reveal that the majority of the respondents are truly loyal to the Honda brand (15 respondents from 34 interviewed). Consumers become truly loyal to Honda because they associate themselves (cognition process) with the brand's product and brand user image and through their need for self-expression. Consumers evaluate whether the product or brand user image of Honda such as brand image, brand personality and brand popularity, is congruent with their image of him or herself. Consumers also assess whether the possession and usage of Honda can help them to express their personality, identity, aspiration, achievement and social identification to the society. Results show that consumers are truly loyal to the brand because they are motivated to project their self-images (actual, ideal, social or ideal-social self-images) through the possessions of the Honda automobiles.

### Latent loyalty
From the results, five respondents are categorised as latently loyal consumers.

Consumers become latently loyal when their cognitive processing indicate that the Honda's brand user image is congruent to their self-images to express their personality, identity, aspiration, achievement or social identification to the society. However, due to higher income disposal and their motivation to express higher status and social approval self-images, this type of consumers are less likely to become repeat patrons and move on to another brand. Latent loyalty consumers may express that they are affectionate to Honda (affection process), but are inclined to purchase other brands in the market. It can also be inferred that consumers become latent loyalists because of the decrease in the brand's quality, increase of price and bad customer service.

## *Spurious loyalty*
Findings illustrate spurious loyal consumers are consumers that receive a Honda automobile as a reward from their employers or given by their family to use daily. Spuriously loyal customers perceive Honda to be relevant to their self-concepts when their cognition processing identify themselves with a certain reference group, particularly through kinship, peers or organisations. Results showed that four respondents from the 34 interviewed are categorised as spurious loyalty consumers.

## *No loyalty*
The results stated there are consumers who portray no loyalty towards Honda, where their cognition, affection and conative does not show any relevance towards the brand. A total of 10 respondents perceived Honda is not relevant to their self-concepts, showing low affection for the brand and are more likely to purchase other brands in the future. No loyalty consumers prefer to try different brands to compare with what they used to own or drive. Moreover, consumers stated that when they have higher income disposal or achieved higher socio-economic status, their cognitive processing perceived Honda can no longer express their self-images, leading to low relative attitude and behaviour towards the brand. Consumers also felt the brand is irrelevant and became antagonistic when they had bad experiences such as lousy maintenance services and rude customer services.

In conclusion, the research showed that brand self-relevance does play a vital role in developing brand loyalty. Specifically, findings demonstrated that brand self-relevance plays a bigger role in influencing truly loyal consumers than latent, spurious or no loyalty consumers in fulfilling their self-expressive needs of self-consistency (actual self-images), self-esteem (ideal self-images), social consistency (social self-images) and social approval (ideal-social self-images). Without brand self-relevance, consumers do not feel associated with the brand to trust and become loyalists. The positive self-congruity and feelings towards the brand garner high level of commitment and repeat patronage for attitudinal and behavioural brand loyalty. Thus, this research validates its core objective

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in determining the role of brand self-relevance in brand loyalty. The results provide evidence that self-relevance does play a significant role in influencing consumers' brand loyalty.

## IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From the theoretical perspective, this research contributes an understanding on how brand self-relevance influence brand loyalty development in the relative attitude formation of cognitive, affective and conative. The conceptualised brand self-relevance research model is able to indicate the importance of brand self-relevance in influencing consumers' brand loyalty. Thus, the refinement used in the research model by integrating Dick and Basu's (1994) customer loyalty framework and Sirgy's (1986) self-congruity theory can be used to help other researchers understand how brand self-relevance affects consumers' brand loyalty.

For managerial implications, the results indicated that marketing practitioners should imbue brands with a congruent product-brand user image and self-expression benefits for consumers to feel associated with the brands, contributing to brand loyalty. This study also suggests that brand managers, advertisers and companies should focus on brand self-relevance attributes in their brand loyalty strategies to reinforce the brand's presence and benefits in the minds of the customers. Moreover, brand managers need to recognise the brand relationship of the consumers and the brand as it is an important predictor of brand loyalty. By creating positive and strong emotion and symbolic bond between the consumer and the brand, customers start to perceive the brand to be significant to their self; they view the brand as unique and relevant to their lifestyle and personalities. Overall, the brand makes them feel better about themselves as well as feel good using the brand. This action will then lead to the contribution of customers' brand loyalty. Customer-brand relationship can be fostered through online applications such as becoming members in Facebook and Twitter. The social media today plays a significant role in building relationship with consumers as well as in updating a brand's benefits, news and products.

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