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The influence of founder professionalism on consumer brand cognition: the mediating role of core identity identification

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Abstract. As brand communication shifts from a corporate-centred to a personality-centred approach, founders have increasingly become important brand representatives. However, existing endorsement research has largely focused on celebrities and key opinion leaders, with limited attention to founders and the psychological mechanisms underlying their endorsement effectiveness. Drawing on social identity theory and the trust transfer model, this study examines the effects of founder professionalism on consumer brand cognition and purchase intention, with core identity identification proposed as a mediator. Questionnaires were collected from 80 consumers and analyzed using Manifest Variable Path Analysis (MVPA). The results indicate that founder professionalism positively predicts brand cognition (β = 0.833, p < 0.001) and core identity identification (β = 0.607, p < 0.001). However, core identity identification does not significantly affect brand cognition (β = −0.078, p = 0.366), and its mediating effect is unsupported. Instead, core identity identification directly enhances purchase intention (β = 0.322, p < 0.001),while brand cognition also positively predicts purchase intention (β = 0.535, p < 0.001). These findings support a dual-path model: professionalism influences consumer responses in parallel via a cognitive path (Prof → BrandCog → BuyInt) and an emotional path (Prof → CoreID → BuyInt). Emotional identification directly drives purchasing behaviour without the mediation of brand cognition. This study provides theoretical and practical insights for refining the brand endorsement literature and managing corporate founder intellectual property.

Keywords: founder endorsement, professionalism, core identity identification, brand cognition, purchase intention

1. Introduction

In recent years, as brand communication has shifted from a "corporate-centred" to a "personality-centred" approach, the significance of founders as brand personifications has increased considerably [1]. The "founder IP" phenomenon—exemplified by figures such as Lei Jun (Xiaomi), Elon Musk (Tesla/SpaceX), and Luo Yonghao (Smartisan/Jiao Ge Peng You)—serves as an example of personal charisma being transformed into brand equity [1]. However, existing endorsement research has predominantly focused on two categories of subjects—celebrities and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) [2, 3]—whilst attention to founders as a distinct group

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of endorsers remains very limited. More importantly, the deeply integrated relationship between founders and their brands endows their endorsement behaviour with the dual characteristics of authenticity and sustainability [4]; consequently, founder endorsements serve as a crucial context for the transfer of consumer trust.

Although founder endorsements have become increasingly prevalent in commercial practice, the academic community has yet to determine the boundaries of their effectiveness. Among characteristics such as professionalism, attractiveness, and credibility, which factor truly drives brand cognition? Does its mechanism operate through rational cognition (trust transfer) or emotional identification (social identification)? Existing research has largely focused on externally hired celebrities and KOLs, overlooking the unique nature of founders as "brand-native personalities", resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying founder endorsements.

To address this gap, this study seeks to answer the following question: How does founder professionalism influence consumer brand cognition and purchase intention through core identity identification? On this basis, this study constructs a chain model comprising "professionalism → core identity identification → brand cognition → purchase intention", and seeks to verify the existence of a dual-path model, thereby providing guidance for refining the brand endorsement literature and corporate founder IP management.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis derivation

2.1. Characteristics of founder endorsement

Founder endorsement involves the founder's image, reputation, and traits directly and fully representing the brand; consequently, it differs clearly and fundamentally from celebrity endorsements: founders are generally regarded as the brand's "gene carriers". Therefore, this study examines three core characteristics of founders: professionalism, attractiveness, and trustworthiness [2]. Professionalism refers to the founder's perceived knowledge, skills, and experience in a specific field [5]. Their industry background and technical expertise constitute the most difficult-to-imitate sources of differentiation [6]. Attractiveness refers to the sensory and emotional appeal that a founder's outward appearance, charisma, and lifestyle exert on consumers. Trustworthiness refers to consumers' overall perception of a founder's honesty, integrity, and reliability.

In contrast to the excessive focus on attractiveness and trustworthiness in celebrity/KOL endorsement research, founders—as the brand's "gene carriers"—possess industry backgrounds and technical expertise that constitute the most difficult-to-imitate sources of differentiation [6]. More importantly, as a core manifestation of the competence dimension, professionalism can simultaneously trigger consumers' cognitive processing (trust transfer) and emotional resonance (social identification), providing an ideal entry point for testing the "cognitive–emotional" dual-path mechanism. Therefore, this study focuses on professionalism and systematically examines its mechanisms of influence on brand cognition and purchase intention.

2.2. Social identity theory and the trust transfer model

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory posits that individuals gain self-esteem and self-definition by categorising themselves within a specific group and identifying with that group [7]. In a founder-endorsement context, as the brand's "original persona", the founder's professional image readily serves as a projection of the consumer's ideal self, thereby evoking a sense of emotional belonging to the "in-group" (i.e., the group of consumers who identify with the founder). This mechanism explains how professionalism influences purchase intention through core identity identification (H2, H6).

Stewart's trust transfer model posits that once consumers develop trust in a particular entity, this trust is transferred to objects associated with that entity [8]. In founder-endorsement scenarios, consumers develop trust based on the founder's demonstrated professional competence and subsequently transfer this trust to the brand itself, thereby enhancing brand cognition. This mechanism explains how professionalism directly influences brand cognition (H1).

In summary, social identity theory reveals the emotional identification pathway (Prof → CoreID → BuyInt), whilst the trust transfer model reveals the cognitive trust pathway (Prof → BrandCog → BuyInt). Together, these constitute a dual-path theoretical framework for founder endorsement.

2.3. Hypothesis derivation

Based on the above theories, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H1 (Trust Transfer): Founder professionalism positively influences brand cognition (Prof → BrandCog).

H2 (Social Identity): Founder professionalism positively influences consumers' core identity identification (Prof → CoreID).

H3 (Emotional Transfer): Core identity identification positively influences brand cognition (CoreID → BrandCog).

H4 (Mediating Effect): Core identity identification mediates the relationship between founder professionalism and brand cognition.

H5 (Cognitive Behaviour): Brand cognition positively influences purchase intention (BrandCog → BuyInt).

H6 (Emotional Behaviour): Core identity identification positively influences purchase intention (CoreID → BuyInt).

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The sample was sourced from the Credamo platform via an online questionnaire survey conducted between 8 and 10 October 2025. A total of 89 responses were collected; after excluding invalid questionnaires, 80 valid responses were obtained. Of these, 50 were female (62.5%) and 30 were male (37.5%). The age distribution was as follows: 18–25 years, 25 respondents (31.3%); 26–35 years, 41 respondents (51.3%, the highest proportion); 36–45 years, 12 respondents (15.0%); and 46–55 years, 2 respondents (2.5%). The gender distribution shows a slight predominance of women, which may be due to women's greater willingness to respond to such topics; however, this does not affect the overall scoring results. The young and middle-aged group (18–35 years) constituted the core sample of this survey, accounting for a combined 82.6%. This age profile closely aligns with that of the current mainstay of online consumers and active social media users, effectively reflecting genuine attitudes and purchase intentions of the younger consumer demographic towards founder endorsements, thereby providing reliable data support for this study's conclusions.

3.2. Measurement

The study comprises four core constructs (professionalism, core identity identification, brand cognition, and purchase intention), each measured with three items on a 7-point Likert scale.

Professionalism (Prof): Adapted from Ohanian's celebrity expertise scale, comprising three items [5]. Example item: "I believe this founder possesses in-depth professional knowledge within their industry."

Core Identity Identification (CoreID): Adapted from Mael and Ashforth's organisational identification scale, with semantic adjustments to suit the founder endorsement context, comprising three items [9]. Example item: "When someone praises this founder, I feel as though they are praising me."

Brand Cognition (BrandCog): Adapted from Keller's brand knowledge scale, comprising three items [10]. Example item: "I can quicklyassociate the brand with its core characteristics."

Purchase Intention (BuyInt): Adapted from Dodds et al.'s purchase intention scale, comprising three items [11]. Example item: "I am willing to purchase products from the brand endorsed by the founder."

3.3. Analytical methods

Given that the sample size in this study (n = 80) is relatively small, Manifest Variable Path Analysis (MVPA) was employed in place of the traditional latent variable Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). This reduces the reliance of parameter estimation on large samples and allows the Harman test to be used to control for common method bias.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. Reliability, validity and common method bias

Reliability, validity, and common method bias were assessed as follows. First, the Harman test was used to assess common method bias; the results indicated that the variance explained by the first factor was 40.53% (below the 50% threshold), suggesting that the data did not exhibit serious common method bias.

Second, reliability analysis was conducted; as shown in Table 1, Cronbach's α coefficients for each construct ranged from 0.603 to 0.778. The coefficients for "Professionalism" (α = 0.603) and "Core Identity Identification" (α = 0.655) were slightly below the ideal standard of 0.7, but these results can be considered reasonable in the context of exploratory research and a small sample size.

Table 1. Results of the reliability analysis

Concept	Number of Items	α	M	SD
Prof	3	0.603	5.383	0.854
CoreID	3	0.655	5.812	0.843
BrandCog	3	0.778	5.688	0.877
BuyInt	3	0.771	5.562	0.915

Table 2. Matrix of correlation coefficients between variables

Variable	Prof	CoreID	BrandCog
CoreID	0.607	1	
BrandCog	0.786	0.428	1
BuyInt	0.612	0.550	0.672

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between the variables. The results show that professionalism (Prof) was most strongly correlated with brand cognition (BrandCog; r = 0.786, p < 0.01) and moderately correlated with purchase intention (BuyInt; r = 0.612, p < 0.01). The correlation between core identity identification (CoreID) and purchase intention (r = 0.550) was higher than that between CoreID and brand cognition (r = 0.428), preliminarily suggesting that the affective path may operate independently of the cognitive path. All correlation coefficients were positive and significant, providing a foundation for subsequent path analysis. It is worth noting that all correlation coefficients were below the multicollinearity threshold of 0.85, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues among the variables.

4.2. Model fit and path testing

Table 3. Model fit indices for the structural equation model

Statistic	χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
value	0.009	1	0.926	1.000	1.035	0.000

Model fit indices showed that χ^2 = 0.009, CFI = 1.000, and RMSEA = 0.000, indicating an excellent fit between the model and the data (Table 3).

The path analysis results (see Table 4) are as follows. Professionalism had a very strong positive predictive effect on brand cognition (β = 0.833, p < 0.001). Hypothesis H1 was strongly supported, indicating that the founder's professional image is a core factor driving consumer brand cognition. At the same time, professionalism significantly and positively predicted core identity identification (β = 0.607, p < 0.001), confirming Hypothesis H2 and suggesting that professionalism effectively evokes a sense of emotional belonging among consumers. However, the path coefficient of core identity identification on brand cognition was negative and not significant (β = −0.078, p = 0.366), and Hypothesis H3 was not supported. This unexpected finding suggests that consumers' emotional identification with the founder does not translate into enhanced brand cognition; the emotional and cognitive pathways may operate in parallel rather than in series in the context of founder endorsement. Furthermore, both brand cognition (β = 0.535, p < 0.001) and core identity identification (β = 0.322, p < 0.001) significantly and positively predicted purchase intention, confirming Hypotheses H5 and H6.

Table 4. Analysis results of path coefficients

Path relationships	Unstandardised coefficient (B)	Standard error (SE)	Z-value	Standardised coefficient β	Results
CoreID ~ Prof	0.5997	0.0878	6.833***	0.6070	Supports H2
BrandCog ~ CoreID	-0.0814	0.0900	-0.905	-0.0783	H3 not supported
BrandCog ~ Prof	0.8559	0.0889	9.626***	0.8333	Support for H1
BuyInt ~ BrandCog	0.5581	0.0878	6.354***	0.5349	Supports H5
BuyInt ~ CoreID	0.3490	0.0913	3.821***	0.3217	Supports H6

4.3. Testing of mediating effects

Bootstrap method results reveal a clear conclusion regarding the mediating effect of core identity identification: the mediating effect value was −0.049 (SE = 0.054, p = 0.370), and the corresponding 95% confidence interval included zero; therefore, H4 was rejected. Thus, core identity identification does not play a significant mediating role between professionalism and brand cognition. Table 5 presents the Bootstrap method results (5,000 samples) for the mediating effect test. The indirect effect of core identity identification was −0.049 (SE = 0.054), with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.155, 0.057], which included zero, and p = 0.370 > 0.05, indicating that the mediating effect was not significant; Hypothesis H4 was rejected.

Table 5. Test of the mediating effect of core identification ($N = 5{,}000$)

Effect Type	Estimate (ab)	SE	Z-value	p-value
Indirect effect	-0.0488	0.0544	-0.8967	0.3699

5. Conclusion

The main findings of this study are as follows: (1) Strong predictive power of professionalism: The results clearly demonstrate that founder professionalism has a direct positive effect ($\beta = 0.833$) on brand cognition, thereby supporting the trust transfer model (H1). (2) Independence of the affective pathway: Founder professionalism significantly enhances consumers' core identity identification ($\beta = 0.607$), but this sense of identity does not translate into improved brand cognition; rather, it directly drives purchase intention ($\beta = 0.322$). (3) Proposal of the dual-path model: Based on these findings, this study proposes a dual-path model: Cognitive path (main path): Professionalism → Brand Cognition → Purchase Intention. Emotional pathway (parallel pathway): Professionalism → Core Identity Identification → Purchase Intention. This provides a theoretically rigorous argument that professionalism in founder endorsements is the fundamental driver of brand cognition, leading to the "direct effect" of core identity identification: emotional identification need not be mediated by brand cognition but can directly facilitate purchasing behaviour.

Showcase professional background: As founders aim to build brand cognition, they should first present their industry experience and technical background comprehensively. Craft the brand's persona: Since professional statements alone cannot directly drive purchases, it is essential to convey them in a personalised manner to establish an emotional connection. Synergy of dual approaches: Marketing strategies should combine "rational persuasion" (demonstrating professionalism) with "emotional resonance" (evoking identification) to jointly influence purchase intention.

This study has the following limitations. First, the sample size is small (n = 80), resulting in limited statistical power; consequently, certain effect sizes could not be reliably detected. Second, as cross-sectional data were used, it is not appropriate to draw direct inferences regarding dynamic changes in causal relationships. Third, the reliability of some scales could be improved. Fourth, the current model is a just-identified model; future research should expand it by incorporating moderating variables such as brand type.

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