

THE DYNAMICS OF PRODUCT VARIANTS IN SUSTAINING BRAND IDENTITY AND EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a literature review on the role of product variant exploration in maintaining brand relevance. It addresses two main issues: the tension between innovation and brand identity purity, and the challenge of building emotional bonds amidst changing consumer behavior. The analysis is structured into two parts. First, it examines how product variants influence consumer perception of brand identity clarity, finding that alignment with core values reinforces identity while excessive divergence risks dilution. Second, it explores how variants foster relevant emotional connections by enabling personal expression, becoming part of consumer rituals, and accumulating shared memories. The study concludes that effective variant management requires a strategic balance between exploration and identity preservation. Product variants are not merely tools for market expansion but critical instruments for sustaining a dynamic and meaningful dialogue between the brand and its consumers. Theoretical implications suggest expanding brand equity frameworks to include dynamic meaning-making, while practical implications emphasize disciplined portfolio evaluation and the importance of involving loyal consumers in the innovation process.

Key Words : Brand Identity; Brand Relevance; Consumer-Brand Relationship; Emotional Bonding; Line Extension; Product Portfolio; Product Variant

INTRODUCTION

Modern markets exhibit a highly dynamic competitive landscape. Brands that once thrived with a single flagship product now face sustainability challenges. Every organization must manage sustainability as a strategic issue (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021). Consumers continuously seek novelty, while new competitors emerge with fresher offerings. In this situation, a brand's ability to maintain its relevance in consumers' minds becomes the primary determinant of business survival (Boyko *et al.*, 2024). Business strategy consists of structured decisions and actions designed to leverage organizational core competencies in realizing adaptive, sustainable competitive advantage (Ali & Darmawan, 2023). Inability to adapt often leads to market share erosion and ultimately fading from public memory. Companies are demanded not only to rely on past advantages but to actively rebuild their brand value continuously (Chakraborty, 2023).

One strategic response to market demands is through product variant development. This practice involves extending product lines by adding variations to existing products, such as new flavors, sizes, formulas, or packaging designs (Saparbaiuly, 2025). Product variations can enhance business appeal (Margareta & Darmawan, 2025). The objective is to refresh consumer perceptions of the brand and attract broader market segments. A brand that consistently introduces new variants demonstrates vitality and capacity to understand changing tastes. This action creates dynamics that keep consumers anticipating subsequent innovations, while simultaneously signaling to the market that the brand is not stagnant and continuously evolves with the times (Jain, 2025).

However, beneath its positive potential, product variant exploration strategy harbors complexities requiring careful

consideration. Companies face dilemmas between maintaining established brand identity purity and the need to innovate (Jusuf *et al.*, 2023). Each new variant launched potentially shifts consumer perceptions about what the brand actually represents. If new variants stray too far from core image, the risk of brand dilution becomes real. Consumers may become confused about brand positioning, and loyalty built over many years can erode (Vuković *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, line expansion steps must be carefully planned, ensuring each new variant strengthens rather than blurs brand essence.

Phenomena in contemporary consumer markets demonstrate that variant exploration is not merely a short-term tactic to increase sales. Moreover, this practice has become an integral part of long-term brand management strategy. In packaged goods markets, for instance, we witness how beverage brands periodically launch limited edition flavor variants to create excitement. In the beauty industry, cosmetic brands expand their foundation color lines for greater inclusivity, while simultaneously reinforcing modern, caring brand images (Mohit *et al.*, 2024). These strategies enable brands to remain relevant in the eyes of new consumer generations without having to abandon the heritage that built their reputations.

Fundamental questions then arise: how exactly do product variant exploration mechanisms maintain brand relevance? Is it sufficient to merely add variations, or are there deeper dimensions requiring management? This process involves balancing exploration (creating new things) and exploitation (leveraging existing brand assets). Successful brands are those capable of navigating this tension, creating new variants that feel fresh yet remain authentic to brand promise. This literature study will deeply examine these dynamics, tracing thoughts developed among academics and practitioners regarding how product variants become instruments for keeping brand pulses beating in consumer hearts.

The first issue underlying the need for this examination is the inherent tension between innovation and brand consistency. In efforts to remain relevant and attract market interest, companies are often driven to introduce various new product variants (Zhao *et al.*, 2020). Psychological factors play roles in determining interest levels (Cahyani & Darmawan, 2025). This drive can originate from market research indicating unaccommodated consumer preferences, or from competitive pressures not to miss trends. However, each diversification step carries risks. The more variants introduced, the greater the potential for brand focus blurring in consumers' eyes (Sinapuelas *et al.*, 2015). Brands initially known for one specific expertise can lose positioning clarity. Consumers may begin questioning what the brand's core identity actually is when confronted with highly diverse product portfolios. This dilemma becomes increasingly complex because its impacts are not immediate. Brand meaning erosion often occurs slowly, only felt when consumer loyalty begins receding and market share is eroded by more focused competitors (Maloles *et al.*, 2023). The need to innovate collides with the necessity to maintain brand promise clarity, creating gray areas difficult for brand managers to navigate. Determining safe boundaries between expanding appeal and maintaining identity purity becomes a question never having single answers. Feelings of security become primary considerations in product selection (Hidayat & Darmawan, 2025).

The second issue relates to changes in increasingly fluid consumer behavior and expectations. Today's consumers are no longer rigidly attached to single brands. They tend to be pragmatic, choosing products most suitable for immediate needs or offering new experiences. Loyalty becomes a scarce commodity. In this landscape, it is not enough for brands to be merely remembered; they must continuously prove their relevance. Product variant exploration becomes one answer for capturing increasingly

fragmented attention (Russell & Schau, 2015). New variants can function as reminders of brand existence, creating fresh interaction moments with consumers. However, modern consumers are also highly sensitive to inauthenticity. They can easily detect if new variants are launched merely as marketing gimmicks without substantial added value. Superficial variants can actually damage brand credibility and accelerate satiation. The challenge lies not only in the frequency of new variant launches but in the brand's ability to present variants genuinely relevant to continuously changing consumer lives, and capable of building new emotional connections without betraying established old bonds (Jusuf *et al.*, 2023).

The study of product variant exploration as a strategy for maintaining brand relevance holds importance because we are in an era where product life cycles are increasingly shorter. Advances in information technology and manufacturing enable competitors to imitate innovations rapidly. Competitive advantage derived from a single flagship product becomes highly temporary (Koschmann & Sheth, 2018). Under such conditions, a brand's ability to continuously renew itself through new variants becomes a more sustainable source of advantage. Brands no longer compete only at the level of functional product attributes but at the level of meaning and continuously renewed emotional relationships. Theoretically understanding how product variants can strengthen or weaken brand meaning becomes crucial. This examination will provide conceptual frameworks for academics and practitioners to analyze these dynamics more systematically, beyond mere intuitive understanding or anecdotal experience.

The complexity of contemporary market landscapes demands nuanced understanding of consumer behavior. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of brand messages (Rajagopal, 2019). They actively seek, filter, and interpret information. They construct

their own narratives about brands through repeated interactions with product portfolios. Each new variant offered becomes part of ongoing dialogue between brands and consumers. Successful variants are those capable of enriching these narratives, while failed variants can create dissonance and disrupt relationships. Amidst floods of choices, consumers tend to return to brands capable of consistently delivering relevant and meaningful experiences. Therefore, examining how variant exploration contributes to forming and maintaining this relevance becomes critically important. The findings of this examination are expected to provide insights into new ways of building and managing brand equity in markets characterized by rapidly changing consumer expectations and intensive competition.

This study aims to conduct theoretical analysis of the role of product variant exploration in efforts to maintain brand relevance. Specifically, this research will examine two critical dimensions. First, to conceptually understand how product line extensions affect consumer perceptions of core brand identity, including potential risks and benefits for brand positioning clarity. Second, to examine mechanisms of how new variants can rebuild or strengthen emotional bonds with consumers, ensuring brands remain resonant with their dynamic values and lifestyles. The theoretical contribution of this research is to enrich brand management scholarship, particularly in understanding the dialectic between product innovation and brand meaning preservation. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as reflective foundations for brand managers in designing product portfolio strategies that not only pursue short-term growth but also maintain brand health and vitality in the long term.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is designed as a literature study with a qualitative approach aiming to build systematic conceptual

understanding. Creswell (2009) asserts that qualitative research is essentially an inquiry process exploring and understanding meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social problems. Aligned with this view, the method used in preparing this article focuses on tracing, organizing, and synthesizing theoretical thoughts developed by experts. The process begins with topic identification, followed by collection of relevant literature, then content analysis to capture argument essences, and concludes with constructing coherent synthesis. This approach enables the author not merely to summarize opinions but also to build relationships among concepts that may not be explicitly visible in each reading source. Thus, this study is expected to generate new, more structured understanding of the dynamics between product variant exploration and brand relevance.

Sources used in this study originate from diverse academic literature, including marketing management textbooks, reputable scientific journals, and conference proceedings. The literature search process follows procedures outlined by Webster and Watson (2002), emphasizing the importance of systematic approaches to literature review to ensure comprehensive and unbiased coverage. Searches were conducted using electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect, employing relevant keywords including brand relevance, line extension, product variant, and brand identity. Inclusion criteria applied were literature directly discussing relationships between product variant development and brand management, prioritizing works that have undergone peer-review processes. This approach ensures that the theoretical foundation built in this study is robust and academically accountable.

Data analysis in this qualitative literature study model is conducted using thematic analysis techniques. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and

reporting patterns or themes emerging from data. In practice, the author repeatedly reads all collected literature to discover central ideas. These ideas are then grouped into larger themes relevant to research questions. This process is cyclical and reflective, wherein understanding emerging from one literature source can trigger new literature searches to deepen particular themes. Through this approach, the author not only presents summaries from various sources but also constructs integrated, in-depth arguments regarding the role of product variant exploration in maintaining brand relevance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Product Variants and Perceptions of Brand Identity Purity

Product variants are different versions or variations of a core product offered by companies to meet needs or preferences of various market segments. Product variants enable consumers to choose products most aligned with their preferences, styles, or budgets. Each variant can be distinguished through features, design, quality, size, color, or price, yet remains within the same product line. This concept also assists companies in market segmentation strategies, product differentiation, and competitiveness enhancement.

According to Kotler and Keller, product variants represent a strategic approach enabling companies to offer several product versions with different characteristics to reach different market segments, while consistently maintaining brand identity and values. A foundational theory elucidating measurement indicators of product variants originates from the product differentiation and line extension approach in marketing management advanced by Kotler. According to Kotler, product variants are different variations or versions of core products offered to meet needs of different market segments. This concept emphasizes that each variant must possess characteristics distinguishing it from other variants, whether in terms of

features, design, quality, or price, enabling consumers to select products most appropriate to their preferences. Measurement indicators of product variants can be observed from several main aspects. First is the number of variants available within a product line, indicating how many options are offered to consumers. Second is the difference in features or specifications among variants, for instance size, color, materials, or technology employed. Third is the

suitability of variants to market segment needs, namely how well each variant meets preferences and expectations of particular consumer groups. Fourth is price differences among variants, reflecting segmentation strategies and product value offered. Using these indicators, companies can assess the success of product variant development strategies and the product line's capacity to meet diverse consumer needs.

Table 1: Indicators of Lifestyle Based on AIO Theory

No	Lifestyle Indicator	Description
1	Activities	Daily activities of individuals, including hobbies, work, social interactions, and leisure pursuits that reflect behavioral patterns.
2	Interests	Areas of personal interest or preferences such as sports, arts, technology, or health that influence choices and priorities.
3	Opinions	Individual beliefs, views, and attitudes toward social, political, or product-related issues that shape perceptions and decisions.

Every brand that has successfully built widespread recognition is always underpinned by a clear identity. This identity functions as a compass guiding all brand marketing and communication activities. When a company decides to introduce new product variants, this decision directly intersects with the foundation of identity that has been painstakingly constructed. Consumers store cognitive schemas about a brand, namely organized networks of associations in their memory. New variants can strengthen existing associations if designed in harmony with these schemas (Miniard *et al.*, 2018). However, variants that are too different have the potential to create dissonance, forcing consumers to reconcile new information with their old understanding of the brand. This reconciliation process does not always proceed smoothly. If the incongruity is too great, consumers may reject the new variant, or more dangerously, revise their perceptions of the brand's core identity in a more blurred direction.

The clarity of brand identity is closely related to consumers' ability to define what the brand represents. Brands with strong identities, such as German

automotive companies known for precision engineering, or French cosmetic brands associated with luxury, have firm boundaries in the public mind. Product variant exploration for such brands must be conducted with extreme caution. The launch of a cheap car variant by a luxury automotive brand, for example, can erode perceptions of exclusivity that constitute the core of its appeal. Consumers purchasing the product at premium prices feel their investment in social status threatened when the same brand becomes available in more affordable versions. In this situation, new variants not only fail to attract new segments but also have the potential to alienate core consumers who form the business foundation. Perceptions of brand purity erode when the boundaries that have long defined the brand begin to appear blurred (Schmitz *et al.*, 2023).

This identity blurring often goes unrecognized in the short term because its impacts are cumulative (Magnoni & Roux, 2012). A company might launch one new variant slightly different from the core product, and the market responds positively due to novelty. This initial success then encourages the launch of a

second, third, and subsequent variants, each with slight modifications to reach different market niches. Gradually, the product portfolio swells, and consumers begin to find it difficult to identify what the brand's main expertise actually is. A brand initially known as a robusta coffee specialist, for instance, now sells arabica coffee, coffee machines, and even pastries. Each variant individually might make business sense, but collectively they create noise that obscures core identity signals. Consumers lose their bearings, and the brand becomes reduced to merely a label on various products without a strong unifying meaning.

The risk of brand dilution becomes a primary concern in every discussion about line extensions (Keller & Sood, 2003). Dilution occurs when strong associations attached to a brand weaken due to the introduction of inconsistent variants. This process can occur in two forms. First, dilution can occur when new variants introduce attributes contradicting consumer beliefs about the brand. A food brand known for health launches a high-sugar variant, then the "healthy" association becomes tarnished. Second, dilution can occur when new variants are too generic and lack distinctive characteristics, thus failing to strengthen any associations. Such variants merely add "noise" to consumers' cognitive systems without adding value to brand meaning. Consequently, the brand loses its differentiating power in the market, becoming one of many choices without specific meaning. Preserved identity purity actually lies in the brand's ability to reject opportunities that are financially profitable but strategically damaging.

However, consumer perceptions of identity purity are not static. Dynamic brands are capable of developing their identity over time without losing essence. The key lies in the ability to distinguish between core essence that cannot be compromised and more flexible peripheral elements. Core essence is the brand's deepest meaning, the fundamental promise made to

consumers. For a leading technology company, its core essence might be ease of use and intuitive design, not specific products like computers or music players. As long as new variants uphold this essence, the brand can expand into various product categories without losing identity. Consumers will see the product range as different manifestations of the same philosophy. Within this framework, identity purity is not measured by narrowness of product scope but by consistency of core values radiated from each launched variant.

Perceptions of identity purity are also influenced by how consumers categorize brands in their minds. Research in cognitive psychology shows that humans naturally organize information into categories. Brands can be positioned as members of specific product categories, or as unique categories themselves. Brands that become prototypes within a category, such as an adhesive brand whose identity is almost synonymous with glue products, face greater risk when conducting variant exploration. Consumers have very rigid expectations of such brands. Any variant deviating from core function will be considered a violation of the category. Conversely, brands that have been perceived as categories in themselves, such as a sportswear brand whose identity encompasses an active lifestyle broadly, have greater flexibility. Consumers allow such brands to experiment because their identity is defined by a set of abstract values, not by specific products.

The role of marketing communication in shaping perceptions of identity purity is critically important. When a new variant is launched, consumers evaluate not only the product itself but also the narrative accompanying it (John *et al.*, 1998). Careful brands will design communication that explicitly connects the new variant to the brand's heritage and core values. This narrative functions as a cognitive bridge, helping consumers see the common thread between old and new. A coffee brand launching a ready-to-drink iced coffee variant, for example,

can emphasize in its advertising that the same roasting process and equivalent bean quality as its classic products are maintained. Marketing strategies need to attend to product quality consistency (Safira *et al.*, 2025). In this way, consumer perceptions of the brand's coffee expertise remain undisturbed, even strengthened by the brand's ability to deliver the same enjoyment in different formats. Identity purity does not mean rejection of change but rather the ability to articulate continuity amidst change.

Consumer perceptions are also influenced by perceived fit between new variants and parent brands (Jun-ying *et al.*, 2007). This fit can be assessed across various dimensions, such as product similarity, technological similarity, or consumer segment similarity. The higher the perceived fit, the easier it is for consumers to accept new variants as legitimate members of the brand family. New instant noodle flavors from a famous instant noodle brand will be immediately accepted because category fit is perfect. However, when the same brand launches an instant rice variant, the fit level decreases, and consumers begin questioning the legitimacy of such a move. Perceptions of identity purity are maintained when companies operate within boundaries of acceptable consumer fit. Exceeding these boundaries requires much larger marketing investments to build credibility and educate the market, with uncertain success rates.

Success in maintaining perceptions of identity purity also depends on execution consistency across all marketing mix elements (Mohit *et al.*, 2024). New variants might have high conceptual fit with parent brands, but if their packaging, price, or distribution channels differ markedly, consumers may experience confusion. A casual clothing brand launching a formal wear variant must ensure that stores selling it, or at least in-store displays, reflect the brand's familiar aesthetic. If this formal variant is sold in luxury boutiques with very different service, consumers might think it is an

entirely different brand. Service security affects consumer trust levels (Rahayu & Darmawan, 2025). Consistency of experience at every touchpoint reinforces the message that this new variant is another expression of the same entity. Inconsistency, no matter how small, can send confusing signals and gradually blur brand identity in consumers' eyes.

Another interesting phenomenon is how consumers use product variants to express their self-identity (Schmitz *et al.*, 2023). Brands often become symbols helping individuals define who they are and how they wish to be seen by others. In this context, product variants provide more precise instruments for self-expression. A consumer loyal to a particular sports shoe brand might choose the variant used by their favorite athlete to show affiliation, while another consumer chooses a limited edition variant with artist collaboration design to signal their aesthetic taste. For brands, providing variations enabling such self-expression can deepen emotional bonds. However, there is risk when different variants begin attracting consumer segments with conflicting values. Brands can become trapped in efforts to please everyone, and ultimately lose the cohesive identity that attracted consumers in the first place.

There are also differences in identity purity perceptions between consumers with different loyalty levels (Rahman & Areni, 2014). Loyal consumers, often called brand loyalists, tend to have more rigid definitions of brand identity. They feel emotional ownership of the brand and are often resistant to change. For them, every new variant has the potential to threaten the purity of the brand they love. Conversely, less loyal consumers or new consumers are more open to variant exploration because their brand associations have not yet crystallized. The challenge for brand managers is balancing expectations of these two groups. Ignoring loyal consumers to pursue new consumers is a recipe for long-term disaster. A wise strategy involves engaging loyal consumers in the

variant launch process, for instance through exclusive product testing programs, so they feel part of brand evolution, not merely spectators forced to accept change.

Analysis of these dynamics reveals that perceptions of brand identity purity are not a monolithic concept (Grimm & Wagner, 2021). It is a social construction continuously negotiated between brands and their consumers. Product variants act as propositions in this negotiation. Each new variant poses a question to consumers: is this still worthy of being called part of you? Consumer responses, reflected in their acceptance or rejection, gradually reshape brand identity boundaries. Sensitive brands will read these signals and adjust their strategies. They understand that identity purity is not about maintaining the status quo but about ensuring that every evolutionary step receives implicit market approval. In this sense, product variant exploration becomes a critical feedback mechanism, enabling brands to recalibrate their positions in real-time according to consumer pulse.

A brand's ability to maintain perceptions of identity purity amidst intensive variant exploration depends on long-term strategic vision (Orth & Rose, 2017). Companies obsessed with quarterly sales targets tend to take shortcuts, launching whatever variants appear profitable without considering impacts on brand equity. Conversely, companies viewing brands as strategic assets will evaluate every variant opportunity through an identity lens. They ask difficult questions: will this variant strengthen what we stand for? Will this variant help consumers understand us better? With this discipline, they build coherent product portfolios where every variant, however different, contributes to one grand narrative. Consumer perceptions of such brand identity purity are actually strengthened by product diversity, because consumers see the philosophical common thread uniting all these variants.

Variant Exploration in Building Relevant Emotional Bonds

Emotional bonds between consumers and brands are formed through accumulation of consistent positive experiences. These experiences are not limited to direct product interactions but encompass the entire range of moments when consumers come into contact with brands. New product variants have the potential to create new layers of experience enriching this relationship. When a consumer who has long used shampoo from a particular brand tries the newly launched hair loss treatment variant, they are not merely purchasing a functional product. They are extending their conversation with the brand, demonstrating that the brand understands their new life stage. Personally relevant variants send signals that the brand grows together with consumers, accompanying them through various life phases. Good cooperation can enhance productivity (Darmawan, 2013). The ability to deliver appropriate solutions at the right time is what transforms transactional relationships into enduring emotional bonds.

Modern consumers crave personalization in their interactions with brands. They want to feel understood as individuals with unique needs, not merely as part of homogeneous mass markets (Barros *et al.*, 2020). Product variant exploration provides means for personalization at scale. Instead of offering one product for everyone, brands can present a range of choices enabling consumers to find the perfect match for their personal preferences. Consumer preferences evolve alongside changes in social environments (Putri & Darmawan, 2025). In the cosmetics industry, for example, expansion of foundation shade ranges allows consumers with various skin tones to find perfect matches. This action communicates a powerful message: the brand sees and values its consumer diversity. This inclusivity message evokes positive emotional responses, fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty difficult for competitors offering generic products to imitate.

The variant selection process itself can become a moment of emotional bond formation. When confronted with variant choices, consumers actively engage in identity determination processes (Wang, 2024). Am I someone who likes strong, bitter coffee, or someone who prefers a touch of sweetness and milk? These decisions, however small, are affirmations about oneself. Brands providing meaningful choices facilitate this self-affirmation process. Each time consumers choose specific variants and feel satisfied, they strengthen associations between the brand and particular aspects of their identity. Over time, brands become part of consumers' personal narratives. The strong morning coffee variant becomes a marker of spirit to start the day, while the lighter afternoon variant becomes a symbol of post-work relaxation moments. Brands become integrated into daily rituals laden with emotional meaning.

Consumption rituals involving specific product variants can create extremely strong emotional bonds (Zhu, 2025). Humans are creatures accustomed to routines, and brands that succeed in becoming part of these routines will secure special places in consumers' hearts (Baltezarević, 2016). Variant exploration enables brands to enter into more rituals or enrich existing ones. A beverage brand launching a sugar-free variant allows calorie-conscious consumers to still enjoy their favorite brand during afternoon relaxation. A snack brand presenting small packaging variants enables consumers to include them in children's school lunches, creating small moments of happiness amidst learning activities. These variants are not merely line extensions but extensions of brand meaning and roles in consumer lives.

The ability of product variants to evoke nostalgic emotions also deserves attention (Vuković *et al.*, 2024). Some brands successfully utilize limited edition variants that bring back formerly popular formulas or packaging (Koschmann & Sheth, 2018). This action triggers waves of fond memories among

consumers who grew up with those products. These nostalgic variants function as time machines, transporting consumers back to simpler, happier times. The emotional bonds formed are not only between consumers and current brands but also between consumers and their past selves. Brands become guardians of collective memory, symbols of continuity in an ever-changing world. This strategy is highly effective for maintaining relevance among aging consumers while simultaneously introducing brand heritage to new generations through packaging that feels authentic and distinct from current market offerings.

Simultaneously, variant exploration also plays a role in attracting new generation consumers who may not yet have emotional bonds with brands (Aurier & Mejía, 2021). Younger generations often seek products reflecting their values, such as sustainability, authenticity, or individual empowerment. Brands launching environmentally friendly packaging variants, for instance, send strong signals to young consumers that they care about the same issues. Collaboration variants with designers or artists popular among younger generations can also serve as bridges for building relevance. Through these variants, brands demonstrate that they are not stuck in the past but continuously learn and adapt to new generation languages and values. This adaptation process is crucial for ensuring that emotional bonds built are not severed with generational consumer turnover.

Consumers also form emotional bonds with brands through communities. Product variants can become catalysts for forming fan communities sharing common interests (Neacșu, 2025). Where trust becomes an important factor in shaping interest (Nahar *et al.*, 2025). Unique flavor variants sold only for limited times, for example, can trigger hunting behavior among collectors. Online forums fill with discussions about where to find these variants, how they taste, and predictions about what variants

will emerge next. Digital platforms enable companies to reach consumers more quickly and broadly (Infante & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Within these communities, consumers are bonded not only with brands but also with fellow enthusiasts. Brands become social adhesives, unifying elements facilitating interaction and friendship. Emotional bonds formed in this communal context are often stronger and more durable because they are reinforced by social validation. When a brand can create such an ecosystem through its variant strategy, it has built defensive fortifications difficult for competitors to penetrate.

Surprise and excitement are other powerful emotions that can be triggered by variant exploration (Dewayani *et al.*, 2024). Unexpected new variant launches, especially if involving collaborations with unconventional brands or figures, can create waves of excitement in markets (Yaneva, 2024). Consumers anticipate launch moments, hunt for products, and share their experiences on social media. These moments inject new energy into brand-consumer relationships that might be beginning to feel monotonous. Limited edition variants create urgency and exclusivity. Possessing products available only for short periods or in limited quantities provides distinct emotional satisfaction. Customer satisfaction plays a role in creating long-term relationships (Auliyah & Darmawan, 2025). Consumers feel special because they are part of small groups successfully obtaining them. This feeling of specialness directly increases brand value in their eyes, strengthening preferences and loyalty.

However, not all variants succeed in evoking positive emotional responses. Variants designed carelessly, without deep research into what consumers truly want, can actually generate disappointment. Consumers who have placed hopes in brands feel betrayed when new variants prove disappointing (Handique & Sarkar, 2024). These negative experiences can contaminate their overall brand perceptions. A snack

brand launching strange, unpleasant new flavor variants, for example, might cause consumers to question the brand's research and development capabilities. Disappointment with one variant has the potential to spread to other previously favored variants. Therefore, maintaining quality standards and relevance in every launched variant is non-negotiable for sustaining positive emotional bonds. Product quality is determined by reliable, valuable product design as the primary foundation (Hariani *et al.*, 2021). Perceptions of service quality can determine sustainability of use (Fahriza & Darmawan, 2025).

Authenticity becomes a key word in efforts to build emotional bonds through product variants (Handique & Sarkar, 2024). Modern consumers are highly trained to detect inauthenticity. They can distinguish between variants born from genuine desire to serve consumers and variants born solely from desire to chase trends. Variants feeling opportunistic and insincere will be rejected, even if product quality is good. A clothing brand suddenly launching variants with activism slogans without having a track record of real action will be accused of purpose-washing. Consumer reactions can be severe, including boycotts and negative social media campaigns. Building emotional bonds requires consistency between words and actions. Product variants must be natural extensions of values brands have long championed, not merely attachments for fleeting sympathy.

There is a temporal dimension in emotional bond formation through variants. Brand-consumer relationships develop over time through series of interactions (Wang, 2024). Each new variant launched is a new chapter in this long narrative. Consumers who have passed through various life phases with a brand will accumulate memories associated with specific variants. The first variant they bought with their own hard-earned money. The variant they consumed while celebrating graduation. The variant that accompanied them

during all-night project work. This collection of memories forms emotional fabric making consumers reluctant to switch to other brands, because switching would mean leaving behind part of their personal history. Brands that succeed in accompanying consumers through time with relevant variants at each stage will reap loyalty transcending rational considerations.

Consumer involvement in variant development processes can significantly strengthen emotional bonds (Wang, 2024). Some clever brands invite loyal consumers to provide input about what variants they would like to see, or even choose among several variant options under development. This practice transforms consumers from passive recipients into active participants. They feel they have a stake in strategic brand decisions, which in turn increases emotional ownership. When variants they proposed or selected are finally launched and succeed, the pride felt is enormous. This moment becomes the peak of co-creation experiences strengthening bonds between consumers and brands. Such participation also generates valuable data for brands about most loyal consumer preferences, enabling more targeted subsequent variant planning.

The role of packaging and aesthetics in evoking emotions cannot be ignored. Humans respond emotionally to visual beauty (Zhu, 2025). Product variants with beautifully designed packaging, with appropriate color, typography, and material choices, can evoke feelings of pleasure and admiration even before products are used. The moment of opening packaging, often called the unboxing experience, has become an important ritual in the social media era. Special edition variants with artistic packaging are often purchased not only for contents but also for packaging worthy of display or collection. In this regard, product variants function as aesthetic objects providing emotional satisfaction through visual beauty and sensory experiences. Brands capable of

delivering such experiences enrich relationship dimensions with consumers, transcending product utilitarian functions.

Product variant exploration is a strategic means for building and maintaining relevant emotional bonds. Variants are not merely tools for expanding market share or increasing purchase frequency. In a deeper perspective, variants are vehicles for brands to dialogue with consumers, demonstrate understanding of their changing needs, and accompany their life journeys. Emotionally successful variants are those capable of touching consumer personal aspects: their identities, their rituals, their memories, and their aspirations. Brands understanding this will not launch variants haphazardly. Each launch is a calculated step in the long dance of relationship building. Ultimately, variant portfolios managed with clear emotional vision will reflect the depth and richness of relationships between brands and their consumer communities. Brands are no longer merely product providers but friends growing together, celebrating joys and sorrows, through every variant they create.

CONSLUSION

This literature study has deeply examined the role of product variant exploration as a strategy for maintaining brand relevance. From the analysis conducted, it was found that product variants operate on two critical interrelated dimensions. In the first dimension, product variants directly influence consumer perceptions of brand identity purity and focus. Variants aligned with core values and brand essence can strengthen brand positions in consumer minds, while variants deviating too far risk blurring identity and eroding established brand equity. This identity clarity does not mean rejection of change but rather the ability to maintain philosophical common threads amidst offering diversity. In the second dimension, product variants become important instruments for building and maintaining

emotional bonds with consumers. Personally relevant variants enable consumers to express self-identity, form new rituals, and accumulate memories with brands. These emotional bonds are strengthened when variants are created authentically, involve consumer participation, and present aesthetic experiences that touch hearts. These two dimensions together explain how product variant exploration, if managed with clear strategic vision, can keep brands relevant and meaningful amidst continuously changing market dynamics. The findings in this study carry several important implications for brand management in the contemporary era. The theoretical implication is the need for expansion of conceptual frameworks for understanding brand equity. Hitherto, brand equity has often been measured from existing associations and past loyalty. This study shows that brand equity must also be understood as a dynamic capacity to continuously build new meaning through product variants without losing coherence. For practitioners, the main implication is the need for strategic discipline in product portfolio development. Every decision to launch new variants must be evaluated not only from short-term financial projections but also from impacts on brand identity health and depth of emotional relationships with consumers. Companies need to build evaluation mechanisms capable of capturing subtle signals about changes in consumer perceptions, whether through periodic market research or monitoring social media conversations. Another implication is the importance of building organizational culture valuing identity consistency. Innovation that ignores brand heritage is a form of luxury no brand wishing to endure can afford. Conversely, innovation that respects heritage and involves consumer communities will become a source of sustainable competitive strength.

Based on the conclusions and implications outlined, several

suggestions can be offered for further study development and practice. For academics, it is recommended to conduct quantitative empirical studies testing relationships between product variant diversity, identity purity perceptions, and consumer emotional bond strength. Valid and reliable measurement scales need to be developed to quantify concepts discussed qualitatively in this study. Cross-industry comparative research would also be highly valuable for understanding whether identified mechanisms apply universally or vary depending on product and consumer characteristics. For practitioners, the main suggestion is to adopt balanced portfolio approaches. Resource allocation for new variant exploration must be balanced with investment in maintaining and communicating core brand identity. Practitioners are also advised to build systems for continuous dialogue with most loyal consumers, involving them in variant development processes, and making them ambassadors explaining to other consumers the common threads uniting all brand variants. Finally, it is important for decision-makers to realize that not all market opportunities are worth pursuing. The ability to say no to financially profitable but strategically damaging opportunities is a sign of true brand management maturity.

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