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# Understanding the origin and evolution of affinity as a multidisciplinary concept: A conceptual approach to consumer affinity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The use of the term affinity has been gradually spreading in several disciplines from multiple viewpoints. Among all these approaches, the concept of consumer affinity, which explains how consumers' positive dispositions toward a particular foreign country affect their purchase decisions of products from that origin, has recently emerged in the marketing discipline. In addition to the scarcity of theoretical and empirical studies on this concept, the marketing literature lacks a systematic review detailing the origin, evolution, and relevance of this notion and the remaining gaps to be investigated in this field. This research aims to examine the complex nature of consumer affinity and the difficulties that arise in its analysis at a conceptual and methodological level to examine its nature, characteristics, dimensionality, and relationship with other variables. To this end, through a systematic review using the PRISMA protocol, this research provides an integrated framework of the existing literature, analyzing the etymological origin and conceptual foundations of consumer affinity, its publication trajectory and the main contributions to its study. Finally, this paper provides a roadmap for future research based on the convergences, inconsistencies, and knowledge gaps identified in the literature.

**Keywords:** Consumer affinity, emotional feelings, foreign products, international marketing, positive consumer dispositions, PRISMA, systematic review.

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## **Introduction**

The term ‘affinity’ has been widely studied in the literature. Initial discussions were based on the universal philosophical principle of “like attracts like”, and its use has gradually spread in several disciplines and from multiple viewpoints –for example, in the fields of Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Economy, and Business Management, among others–. However, one of the most recent approaches to the concept of affinity has been that which has been developed in the area of Marketing. Thus, in the mid-1980s, interest in affinity and group affiliation emerged as a means of generating effective promotional communications (Macchiette & Roy, 1992). From there, concepts such as ‘affinity marketing,’ ‘cultural affinity,’ ‘emotional affinity’ or ‘perceptual affinity’ have been coined, although one of the most relevant has been ‘consumer affinity,’ a term suggested by Jaffe and Nebenzahl in 2006 to explain how consumers’ positive emotions for a specific foreign country have effects on consumer purchasing decisions (e.g., Ercis & Celik, 2019; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011). Several works have revealed that countries can evoke a variety of affective responses in consumers, including sympathy and attachment (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011) or admiration (Kock et al., 2019). For example, the Francophile community loves French cuisine, culture, and products (Nes et al., 2014). Moreover, this positive emotional feeling toward a country can be a source of competitive advantage, especially if the country has a strong positive association with a product, for example, American movies, Japanese new technologies, Swiss watches, Belgian chocolates, or German cars. In this sense, although some approaches to the concept and measurement of consumer affinity have been provided, the marketing literature lacks a systematic review that shows the origin, evolution, and relevance of this notion and the areas yet to be investigated in this field. Consequently, there is much left to be learned about the conceptualization and measurement of consumer affinity, as recent works have emphasized. In this sense, Cakici and Shukla (2017, p. 356) note that “research has paid little attention to consumer affinity” since, as Riefler (2017, pp. 104-105) highlights, the concept is “rather young” and “a coherent and more holistic picture of marketing-relevant consequences is yet to be developed.” Therefore, “little is known about the influence of positive country affect and devotion on global business” (Terasaki et al., 2021, p. 1). In sum, the recent but growing interest in consumer affinity in the context of foreign products consumption, and the lack of a systematic and updated review of studies focused on this concept, calls for research that provides a comprehensive understanding of this notion outside of other approaches to affinity developed both in Marketing and in other disciplines.

Consumer affinity literature has explored consumer favourable emotions/sentiments toward a focal country and its products and companies (e.g., Asseraf & Shoham, 2017; Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Ercis & Celik, 2019; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2018; Terasaki et al., 2021). However, research devoted to achieving a consistent theoretical framework for this concept has been scarce and insufficient, showing a lack of consensus concerning the conceptual foundations

of this notion. For example, there are different opinions on the purely affective nature of this concept (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Oberecker et al., 2008) or the consideration of a dual cognitive-affective nature (Nes et al., 2014). Furthermore, the literature is not unanimous on the dimensionality of consumer affinity –see, for example, unidimensional (e.g., Moraes & Strehlau, 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2017) versus multidimensional approaches (e.g., Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019)– and the number and characteristics of the dimensions (e.g., Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Kock et al., 2019; Nes et al., 2014). Moreover, there is a lack of agreement on the relationship of affinity with other variables, such as product judgment (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021) or country image (Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019). Therefore, the debate is still open about the definition, nature, and relationship with other variables of consumer affinity in an international consumption context. Additionally, examining consumer affinity is a complex task because it is a multidisciplinary topic, but it is crucial due to its managerial implications, as argued by Oberecker et al. (2008, p. 51): “active management of consumer affinities could be an attractive option for overcoming ethnocentric barriers.” Thus, the development of a positive emotional feeling toward a country and, therefore, toward its products and services, may be leveraged into an increase in sales, visits and investment if it is properly integrated into communication and positioning efforts (Riefler, 2017). Recent studies reveal that in a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, circumstances have catalyzed an increasing consumer preference for local supplies over global distributors and products and, consequently, an anti-globalization sentiment may have been reinforced (e.g., Cambefort, 2020). Therefore, the analysis of consumer affinity is especially important to mitigate this situation, given that a great number of studies on foreign products have mainly focused on the negative attitudes and emotions of consumers (Asseraf & Shoham, 2017).

Against this background, and in response to the need for a better understanding of the theoretical and empirical foundations of this important concept in Marketing, this study aims to provide an updated analysis of the literature on consumer affinity to clarify the origin and conceptualization of this notion, proposing avenues for future research based on a systematic and consolidated review of previous studies. For this purpose, and after a general review of the multiple disciplinary sources for affinity and the conceptual evolution of the term in the field of Marketing, we will use the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009), which provides clear guidelines for systematic reviews and has been applied in multiple studies in Marketing and Social Sciences (e.g., Flaherty et al., 2021; Nikbin et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2020). Thus, guided by the contribution of previous studies, this article will endeavor to shed light on the following research questions (RQ) regarding the concept of affinity and, more specifically, consumer affinity:

RQ1. What is the etymological origin of the term affinity and how has it been studied by different disciplines?

RQ2. What are the most relevant approaches to the study of affinity in the Marketing discipline that explain its meaning and characteristics?

RQ3. What are the publication and citation trends in consumer affinity?

RQ4. What are the main research contributions to the definition, nature, and relationship with other variables of consumer affinity?

RQ5. What directions should future research pursue to advance consumer affinity?

Overall, addressing these research questions allows this study to contribute to the literature in several ways: 1) to learn about the etymological origin and conceptual foundations of the notion of affinity; 2) to delineate the publication trajectory of the concept of consumer affinity; 3) to conduct a critical analysis of the main contributions to the study of consumer affinity; and 4) to develop a roadmap for future research based on the convergences, inconsistencies, and knowledge gaps identified in the literature.

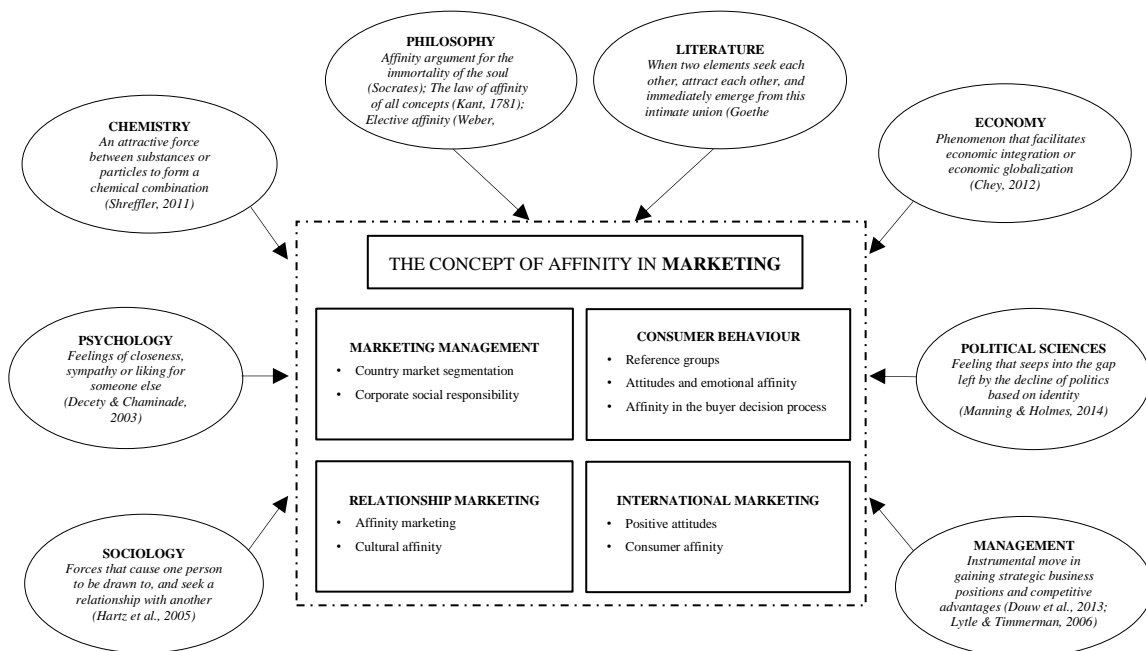
The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we describe the etymological foundations of the notion of affinity based on different disciplinary sources that explain the origin and evolution of this concept. Then, we analyze the influence of these multidisciplinary underpinnings on the conceptualization of the term ‘affinity’ in the Marketing field and, in particular, in four Marketing areas where this notion has been studied. Second, we explore the polysemy and terminology associated with the affinity concept. As a result of this analysis, the main characteristics of this concept are identified. Third, we conduct a systematic review to examine the evolution of consumer affinity research and to discover emerging research topics in this field. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the main theoretical and managerial contributions of this research along with recommendations for future directions of research on consumer affinity.

### **Origin and Etymology of the Concept of Affinity**

Conceptually, the term ‘affinity’ derives from the Latin *affinitas*, which means “related” or literally “bordering on.” The notion of affinity has its roots in the universal principle of “like attracts like”, where bodies combine with other bodies because of mutual affection (Geoffroy, 1718). The concept of affinity denotes in general the existence of a link that is not simply based on an affective origin for someone or something but can also reflect a commercial, ideological, legal and even chemical origin. For a better and complete understanding of the origin of the term affinity, it is crucial to analyze the different fields that have used this concept. Affinity has been studied in several disciplines such as Philosophy, Chemistry, Literature, Psychology, Sociology, Economy, Political Sciences and Business Management. Especially interesting is the growing use of this concept in the field of Marketing and, in particular, in the area of International Marketing

(e.g., Ercis & Celik, 2019; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Nes et al., 2014; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011). As has been highlighted above, the relatively recent use of the concept of affinity in Marketing, and the limited number of studies that have analyzed its conceptual nature and managerial implications, make the study of affinity in the Marketing field particularly important. Figure 1 depicts these multiple origins, as well as the four main areas in Marketing where this term has been studied (i.e., Marketing Management, Relationship Marketing, Consumer Behavior and International Marketing), including illustrative quotations for each discipline.

**Figure 1.** The concept of affinity: Disciplinary sources and marketing applications



Affinity is a term that has one of its main origins in *Philosophy*, not only to provide an argument for the immortality of the soul –what Socrates called the “affinity argument”– but also to denote a principle or maxim of reason (Howe, 1978) –see the Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant (1781)–. In the “axiom of complete determination”, Kant explains that reason prepares the field of intellect through, among others, a “law of the affinity of all concepts.” Furthermore, under the perspective of the principles of *Chemistry*, affinity has been defined as “an attractive force between substances or particles that causes them to enter into and remain in [chemical] combination” (Shreffler, 2011, p. 844). This definition denotes an attraction or force between elements.

Another discipline that has contributed to the conceptualization of affinity is *Psychology*. According to Moreland and Zajonc (1982), perceived familiarity, perceived similarity and attraction (‘liking’) are associated with one another, blending to create a ‘sense of affinity,’ a

sense that will endear people together psychologically. Thus, attraction appears to be a fundamental factor in the development of affinity (Moreland & Topolinski, 2010). When a person becomes familiar with another, he/she begins to feel attracted to the other person, and that attraction makes the other seem more similar to himself/herself. Consequently, the term affinity involves feelings of closeness or sympathy (or ‘liking’) for someone else (Decety & Chaminade, 2003). Moreover, going beyond this psychological conceptualization, in the field of *Sociology* affinity is considered as a dependency, or liking for someone, or a need for someone (Kramer, 2011). Sociology provides a definition of affinity as the “forces that cause one person (the perceiver) to be drawn to, and seek a relationship with, another (the target) based on the latter’s attributes” (Hartz et al., 2005, p. 636). Thus, from a sociological perspective, when affinity is assumed within a group, social harmony is achieved by the individuals (Vela-McConnell, 1997). In particular, the term “elective affinity” was used by Max Weber in his 1904 publication and subsequent studies based on a combination of its roots in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chemistry, *Literature* –mainly through the work of Goethe (1809) and the expression “inner affinity” in his description of social relations– and Philosophy –through Kant’s usage of affinity in the order of philosophical discourse– to offer a new approach in the field of sociology of culture. Thus, affinity can be idiosyncratic, which depends on the perceiver’s singular experience, opportunities, psychological makeup or psychopathology, as well as normative, which affects a great number of people due to genetic and/or cultural influences (McLeod, 1995). In sum, affinity boosts social relations by nurturing a sense of closeness (Moreland & Beach, 1992).

In the field of *Economy*, the term affinity has been used to clarify certain economic phenomena. For example, Chey (2012) suggests the improvement in economic globalization increases the level of affinity among different countries. In particular, in this discipline, the term ‘intense affinity’ has been coined to explain the family control and regional concentration that reflects imperfect competition between retailers (Morelli, 1997). The notion of affinity has also been analyzed in *Political Sciences*. According to Manning and Holmes (2014, p. 701), affinity is “a feeling that seeps into the gap left by the decline of politics based on identity.” This term helps to understand the ongoing ways in which citizens experience (dis)connection with politics and/or politicians and, consequently, draw emotions into instinctive reflection about politics. Understanding the role of affinity in people’s reflexive engagements with politics requires a new concept of reflexivity related to an emotional register. Consequently, the notion of ‘international affinity’ takes the main place in international relations studies, focused on political science (Maoz et al., 2006).

Regarding the *Management* discipline, the concept of affinity is conceived as an instrumental move toward gaining strategic business positions (Douw et al., 2013), that improves competitive advantage for firms (Lytle & Timmerman, 2006), creates high emotional barriers to exit from the industry and, consequently, increases business success (Harris et al., 1994). There is empirical

evidence that demonstrates the existence of a positive connection between affinity and business activities (see, for example, the study by Chey, 2012, for foreign direct investment; or the work by Martínez, 2019, for emotional affinity toward sustainability). Moreover, on top of being a crucial concept in Management science, the notion of affinity is also essential from the perspective of *Marketing* in general, and particularly in areas such as Marketing Management, Relationship Marketing, Consumer Behavior and International Marketing.

From a managerial point of view, affinity has been recognized as an essential foundation in several key strategic marketing principles such as country market segmentation (Riefler, 2017) and corporate social responsibility (Du et al., 2010). Under the perspective of Relationship Marketing, two concepts have been mainly coined in the literature: ‘affinity marketing,’ which has been described as an “individual’s level of cohesiveness, social bonding, identification, and conformity with the norms and standards of a particular reference group” (Macchiette & Roy, 1992, p. 55); and ‘cultural affinity’ (or ‘cultural liking’), which has been proven to be a key element of perceived psychic distance between trading partners of different national backgrounds (Swift, 1999). Affinity marketing has been considered an enduring strategy for building and supporting customer relationships (Steffes et al., 2008). In turn, cultural affinity has been identified as a relevant factor in the process of buyer-seller interaction (Holden & Burgess, 1994).

In the field of Consumer Behavior, affinity is considered to be “an important predictor of consumer behavior [that] emphasizes the role of (positive) feelings in affecting it” (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011, p. 61). In this area, the concept of affinity has been examined from different perspectives. For example, as a key element in the context of reference groups and the influence they exert on others (Macchiette & Roy, 1991, 1992), or under the notion of ‘emotional affinity’ with a target (e.g., a brand; see Burns & Neisner, 2006), defined as an important variable that affects the quality of the company-customer relationship (Wang & Beise-Zee, 2013). In turn, some authors have emphasized the relevance of the concept of affinity in post-purchase situations, since ‘perceptual affinity’ can be a relevant antecedent of consumers’ word-of-mouth (Gilly et al., 1998) or since customer loyalty can be generated through affinity programs (Uncles et al., 2003). Moreover, positive attitudes have recently been introduced in the International Marketing literature through the concept of ‘consumer affinity’ (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). Consumer affinity has been mainly related to the affective influence in the form of positive feelings toward a specific referent, for example, a country, which is called an ‘affinity country’ (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). Thus, in an international consumption context, consumer affinity is conceptualized as an emotional feeling and defined as “a feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer’s direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer’s decision making associated with products and services originating from the affinity country” (Oberecker et al., 2008, p. 26). Consequently, consumer affinity has been a concept



especially significant for marketers and policymakers at the international level, as it can help to reduce or eliminate the effect of negative attitudes (Asseraf & Shoham, 2017) such as consumer animosity (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007) and consumer ethnocentrism (Balabanis & Siamagka, 2017).

### **Terminology, Polysemy and Defining Characteristics of Affinity in Marketing**

Given the significance of affinity in the field of Marketing in recent years, we will first focus on the analysis of this term in this discipline, investigating the different terminology that has been coined, the multiple meanings used and the main defining characteristics of this notion. Thus, the complex nature of affinity and the difficulties arising in its analysis have resulted in the use of an assorted terminology. Some examples in the Marketing literature show this inconsistency: ‘affinity marketing’ (Koritos et al., 2014), ‘brand affinity’ (Badrinarayanan & Sierra, 2018), ‘consumer affinity’ (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006), ‘institutional affinity’ (Shukla & Cantwell, 2018), ‘affinity group’ (Mekonnen et al., 2008), ‘cultural affinity/liking’ (Chan & Chan, 2011), or ‘affinity programs’ (Bakhtiari et al., 2013), among others. Table 1 shows a review of definitions of affinity that have been provided by both theoretical and empirical studies. Thus, the definition of consumer affinity by Oberecker et al. (2008) has been the most used in the international marketing literature. Moreover, a large majority of the conceptual proposals have been developed under a business-to-consumer (B2C) approach (see the last column in Table 1). Surprisingly, despite the importance of affinity in business-to-business (B2B) contexts (Low & Davenport, 2009; Mowlana & Smith, 1990), the existing research on affinity in B2B environments has been comparatively lower and, consequently, the number of definitions provided in this context has been scarce. On the other hand, affinity definitions are the result of both theoretical and empirical studies (see Table 1), where multiple settings have been analyzed (tourism, culture, ethical consumption, financial services, among others).

To clarify the origin of this terminological richness in the Marketing literature, we propose a classification of terms according to the following criteria: i) the existence of a direct/indirect link; ii) the object of affinity; iii) its perceptual/attitudinal nature; iv) the existence of terms used synonymously; and v) its use associated to different stages of the purchase decision process.

#### **i. The existence of a direct or indirect link between the subject and the object of affinity.**

The term affinity has been construed under two perspectives, that is, the underlying presence of a direct or indirect link (Chen et al., 2009). Direct affinity is considered as a natural liking for or attraction to a person, thing or idea (e.g., ‘consumer affinity,’ see e.g., Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011). Indirect affinity is a close relationship between people or things that have similar qualities, structures, properties or features. The terms ‘cultural affinity’ (Fourie & Santana Gallego, 2013), ‘brand affinity’ (Van Gelder, 2004) and ‘affinity marketing’ (Macchiette & Roy, 1992) have been analyzed in the literature as indirect affinity.

- ii. **The object of affinity.** Affinity represents feelings toward a specific object that is perceived by the consumer. Indeed, this object can be mental or physical. For instance, some notions that have been used in the literature are ‘affinity toward nature’ (Schmuck et al., 2017), ‘brand affinity’ (Ferguson & Goldman, 2010), ‘affinity toward diversity’ (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2009), and ‘affinity toward the local region’ (Suri & Thakor, 2013). But affinity can be developed not only toward “something” but also toward “someone” (Leigh & Choi, 2007). In this line, Hensen et al. (2016) highlight that ‘affinity toward future generations’ implies that “an individual feels empathic toward and connected with future others” (p. 390).
- iii. **The discrepancy between the perceptual/attitudinal nature of affinity.** Affinity varies across individuals depending on the perception of the object toward which the affinity is developed. As a result of this perceptual nature, the notions of ‘perceived affinity’ (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), ‘self-brand affinity perception’ (Chang, 2008) or ‘perceptual affinity’ (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008) have been coined in the literature. However, the concept of affinity has been analyzed in some studies as a positive attitude toward an object (see Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, and Oberecker et al., 2008, in a country of origin context), using the term ‘consumer affinity.’ These studies propose that consumers can be segmented according to their attitude toward imports in general and the specific originating country. Subsequently, consumer affinity has been considered as “emotional feelings” that are directed toward a specific referent (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011). It should be recognized that the terms emotions and attitudes have frequently been used inconsistently in the literature.
- iv. **A variety of ways of expressing the term affinity.** The term affinity has been used interchangeably with ‘liking’ (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2009; Swift, 1999). Moreover, some sources also equate these terms with ‘empathy’ (Conway & Swift, 2000). However, the term ‘empathy’ refers to the ability to see a situation from someone else’s point of view but does not strictly imply that one likes a subject and/or object.
- v. **Connotations in the purchase process.** Some studies have analyzed affinity from a post-purchase perspective (see, for example, the concept of ‘affinity programs’ as a specific type of loyalty program proposed by Uncles et al., 2003), but others postulate an influence on consumer decision-making based on this prior affinity (e.g., Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013; Schmuck et al., 2017; 2018). For consumer affinity, this pre- and post-purchase distinction is very clear. Thus, Javornik and Mandelli (2012) argue that ‘customer affinity’ is referred to the post-purchase behavior in a consumption experience. However, the majority of studies consider ‘consumer affinity’ as an overall assessment in the pre-purchase stage of the purchase decision process (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Oberecker et al., 2008).

**Table 1.** Review and classification of the affinity definitions

Year	Author(s)	Definition	Term used	Type of analysis (Setting)	Context (B2B or B2C <sup>1</sup> )
1990	Mowlana & Smith	<i>"Plans based on an agreement reached between a bank card issuer and an organization which will market the card to its members"</i> (p. 320)	Affinity marketing	Theoretical	B2B
1991	Macchiette & Roy	<i>"A unique exchange process, in which value-expressive products and service are marketed to reference groups with cohesiveness, common interests, and/or values, usually in return for the groups' endorsement, as marketing leverage to its individual members of constituency"</i> (p. 35)	Affinity marketing	Theoretical	B2C
1992	Macchiette & Roy	<i>"An individual's level of cohesiveness, social bonding, identification and conformity to the norms and standards of a particular reference group"</i> (p. 48)	Affinity	Theoretical	B2C
1994	Holden & Burgess	<i>"Cultural affinity is an important determinant of firms' ability to estimate the needs and requirements of the other party."</i> (p. 33)	Cultural affinity	Empirical (Foreign culture)	B2C
1994	Phillips et al.	<i>"The degree to which rules, customs and communications or foreign culture resemble the usual way of doing business in the home culture"</i> (pp. 16-17)	Cultural affinity	Empirical (Chinese companies)	B2B
1998	Worthington & Horne	<i>"An example of a triadic relationship, which is still evolving and internationally comparable and yet offers a researchable test of the validity of the relationship marketing paradigm"</i> (p. 39)	Affinity credit cards	Theoretical	B2C
2000	Mintel	<i>"Involving customers who already have sympathy to one brand being sold another service, by another organization, with the endorsement of the affinity organization and using its channels of communication"</i> (p. 102)	Affinity marketing	Empirical (Credit card)	B2B
2003	Uncles et al.	<i>"Affinity programs are specific type of loyalty program. They are designed to enhance the emotional bond between customer and brand"</i> (p. 311)	Affinity program	Theoretical	B2C
2004	Bawa	<i>"Love relationship with other countries"</i> (p. 43)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Indian products)	B2C
2004	Laing et al.	<i>"The concept of affinity marketing is an 'affinity relationship' between the consumer and the affinity cause or organization, which impinges on consumer judgment and decision making"</i> (p. 216)	Affinity marketing	Empirical (Financial service)	B2C
2008	Oberecker et al.	<i>"Consumer affinity is a feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer's direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer's decision making associated with products and services originating from the affinity country"</i> (p. 26)	Consumer affinity	Theoretical and empirical (Country of origin)	B2C
2009	Corral-Verdugo et al.	<i>"A tendency to prefer diversity and variations in bio-physical and socio-cultural living scenarios"</i> (p. 36)	Affinity toward diversity	Empirical (Environmentally friendly behavior)	B2C
2009	Low & Davenport	<i>"As the means to grow ethical consumption"</i> (p. 102)	Affinity marketing	Theoretical (Ethical consumption)	B2B
2011	Chan & Chan	<i>"Affinity with a culture familiar to one's ethnic origin is seen to provide sources of comfort and confidence"</i> (p. 274)	Feeling of cultural affinity	Empirical (Wealth management services of Taiwanese banks)	B2C
2012	Wongtada et al.	<i>"An individual-level affinity might be expressed as a person's favourite vacation destination, based on previous experience, whereas national-level affinity might be affinity for a country shared with many others and based on information from the mass media or social networks"</i> (pp. 5-6)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Foreign products)	B2C

**Table 1.** Review and classification of the affinity definitions (*cont.*)

Year	Author(s)	Definition	Term used	Type of analysis (Setting)	Context (B2B or B2C <sup>1</sup> )
2013	Fourie & Santana-Gallego	“Cultural affinity is the propensity of tourists to travel to regions with a shared cultural identity” ... “the propensity to travel to regions that share some cultural similarities” (p. 411, p. 417)	Cultural affinity	Empirical (Tourism patterns)	B2C
2014	Nes et al.	“Consumer affinity is a feeling of liking and fondness for a specific foreign country regarding its culture and landscape and/or its music and entertainment, the people and their lifestyle, and its governmental policies” (pp. 777-778)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Country of origin)	B2C
2016	Hensen et al.	“Affinity with future generations (AFGs) is defined as the extent to which an individual feels empathic toward and connected with future others” (p. 390)	Affinity with future generations	Empirical (Intergenerational view on consumer environmental stewardship)	B2C
2017	Cakici & Shukla	“Consumer affinity is reflected through positive emotions and attachment to the affinity country” (p. 357)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Fashion luxury goods)	B2C
2017	Asseraf & Shoham	“Affinity for a country enhances demand for products from that country” (p. 383)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Foreign products, destination brands and tourism)	B2C
2017	Schmuck et al.	“Overall affinity toward nature may form a motivational basis of environmental responsible behaviour” (p. 424)	Affinity toward nature	Empirical (Green products)	B2C
2017	Halim & Zulkarnain	“Consumer affinity understood as a positive feeling directed to a reference and produce an action of consumption behaviour” (p. 16)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Japanese culture and language)	B2C
2018	Guo et al.	“Positive attitude toward a specific foreign country” ... “is a conflicting attitude in cross-cultural contexts” (p. 689)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Chinese consumers)	B2C
2018	Schmuck et al.	“An affective persuasive mechanism that appeals to consumers’ affinity for nature, which not only positively influences their evaluations of ads and brands but also influences their attitudes toward ads and brands more strongly than perceived greenwashing” (p. 127)	Consumers’ emotional affinity toward nature	Empirical (Greenwashing claims)	B2C
2018	Skagerlund et al.	“It is clear that affinity with, and attitude toward, numbers are closely tied to attaining financial literacy” (p. 22)	Affinity	Empirical (Financial literacy)	B2C
2021	Fazli-Salehi et al.	“Country affinity is overall an affection-based construct, it is capable of generating perceived cognitive notions of the products and brands associated with a nation” (p. 744)	Country affinity	Empirical (Domestic and foreign TV brands)	B2C
2021	Rabêlo-Neto et al.	“Affinity toward country is evidenced by culture, arts, history, gastronomy, family and its ancestors, travel, and politics of the countries” (p. 337)	Consumer affinity	Empirical (Brazilian cultural products)	B2C
2022	Josiassen et al.	“A feeling of sympathy, admiration, and attachment toward a specific foreign destination, as a potential driver of tourism-related outcomes” (p. 302)	Tourism affinity	Empirical (Tourism)	B2C

Note: <sup>1</sup>B2B: Business-to-business; B2C: Business-to-consumer.

## **Evolution of the Concept of Consumer Affinity: A Systematic Literature Review**

After the analysis of the origin, terminology, polysemy and defining characteristics of affinity in the field of Marketing, we will provide an overview of the research history of the particular concept of ‘consumer affinity,’ identifying both established and emerging research streams. For this purpose, we will conduct a systematic review of the literature in which we will collect, analyze and synthesize previous works of the last 25 years (1997-2022).

### *Method*

The systematic literature review is a consistent, widely accepted, methodology that improves the quality of the review process and outcomes by employing a transparent and reproducible procedure for gathering, synthesizing and appraising the contribution of previous studies on a particular topic (Makrides et al., 2021; Pati & Lorusso, 2018; Siddaway et al., 2019). For this purpose, the current research adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) proposed by Moher et al. (2009), which suggests four phases for the literature review: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (see Figure 2). This protocol was initially designed in the field of healthcare science but it has been subsequently used in business and marketing studies (e.g., Flaherty et al., 2021; Nikbin et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2020). We also followed the systematic literature review procedure outlined in the works by Donthu and others (e.g., Donthu et al., 2021a; 2021b). In addition, we used Harzing’s Publish or Perish bibliometrics software (Harzing, 2021) to analyze the level of influence of the articles (total citations and citations per year) and VOSviewer software to establish the co-occurrence networks linked to significant words from a body of scientific literature (e.g., Van & Waltman, 2017).

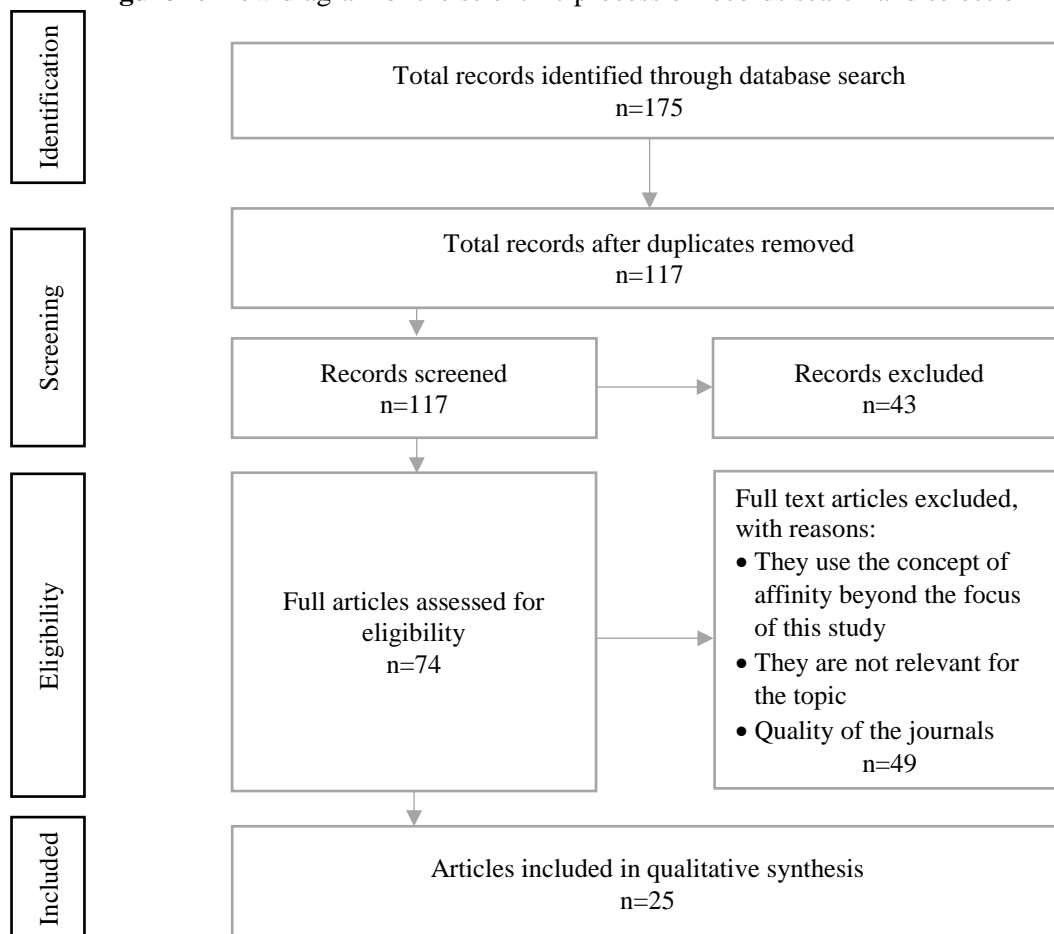
### *Data collection and screening criteria*

The initial phase of the process of analyzing the consumer affinity literature to identify intellectual structure and emerging themes involved a search for potentially relevant articles. In this sense, record *identification* is the first phase of the PRISMA protocol, in which the critical issues are what, how, and where to find this information. To this end, research questions provide the basis of this initial phase and they allowed the definition of five specific broad terms or keywords: “consumer\* affinity,” “feeling\* of affinity,” “countr\* affinity,” “consumer\*-affinity,” and “countr\*-affinity.” The keywords “countr\* affinity” and “countr\*-affinity” were specifically considered as they cover the topic of positive emotional feelings and the consumption of foreign products. The choice of any other keyword would have changed the scope of the review conducted. The electronic search was developed from October 2021 to July 2022 using three databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and Science Direct selecting only the following document types: articles, books, book chapters and conference papers. These electronic databases provide coverage for research publications in the related disciplines. Given our intention to capture all the

relevant literature, the search was not restricted by date. Instead, works published until July 2022, which was the stop point for our study, were included. The total number of studies identified through the database search was 175 (see Figure 2).

In the second phase of *screening*, all identified records were reviewed to exclude duplicate or unrelated items, identifying as many records as possible to avoid missing relevant studies. This process resulted in 117 studies. Subsequently, the remaining full-text records were assessed for *eligibility* to be included in the qualitative synthesis. After the eligibility analysis, we found 74 full-text studies for assessment (Figure 2). Subsequently, the *inclusion* or exclusion criteria were based on the objective of the current study, that is, to explore consumer affinity literature. Additionally, we assessed the impact factor and the quality of the journals where these studies had been published. A practical way to analyze the relevance of articles is through the quality of the journals where these articles have been published. For this purpose, we considered research outlet quality using mainly the Journal Citation Reports (JCR, 2020) classifications of Q1-Q4 quartiles as well as the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR, 2020), due to these rankings having broad and international coverage. Finally, 25 studies were included in the qualitative assessment and synthesis (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Flow diagram of the scientific process of records search and selection



### *Descriptive analysis*

In this section, we synthesized and analyzed the main technical characteristics (e.g., publication trends and the number of citations) and methodological features (e.g., type of paper and research and data collection methods) of the 25 final articles reviewed. Based on this information, we generated a roadmap of consumer affinity research in terms of frequency, density and emerging patterns and preferences, thus identifying possible gaps that might merit further research.

### Publication trends and publication outlets

The tendency of the publications is described through the distribution of the publications over the years and the journal in which more articles on this topic have been published. To provide an adequate overview of the introduction of the concept of consumer affinity within affinity research in the field of Marketing and Business Management, a representation of the 117 articles generated in the screening phase was considered for the period 1997 to 2022. Figure 3 shows the development of this research area. Several indicators provide interesting information about the evolution of these publications focused on the concept of affinity and, more concretely, the novel term ‘consumer affinity’ (or ‘affinity country’). Regarding the number of articles, affinity research output before 2006 was very low, with a sharp increase from 2006, when Jaffe and Nebenzahl introduced the concept of consumer affinity in the Marketing literature followed by the seminal work by Oberecker et al. (2008). This tendency expresses the relevance given to this topic in the last few years and, therefore, the growing awareness and importance of the recent literature. Similarly, the tendency indicates that the publications on this topic will continue to grow –the maximum number of studies was published in the year 2021–, showing the importance of research on consumer affinity as a relevant predictor of consumer behavior (Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017) and its practical utility as a fruitful base for international market segmentation and positioning (Riefler, 2017).

**Figure 3.** Evolution of articles about affinity by year

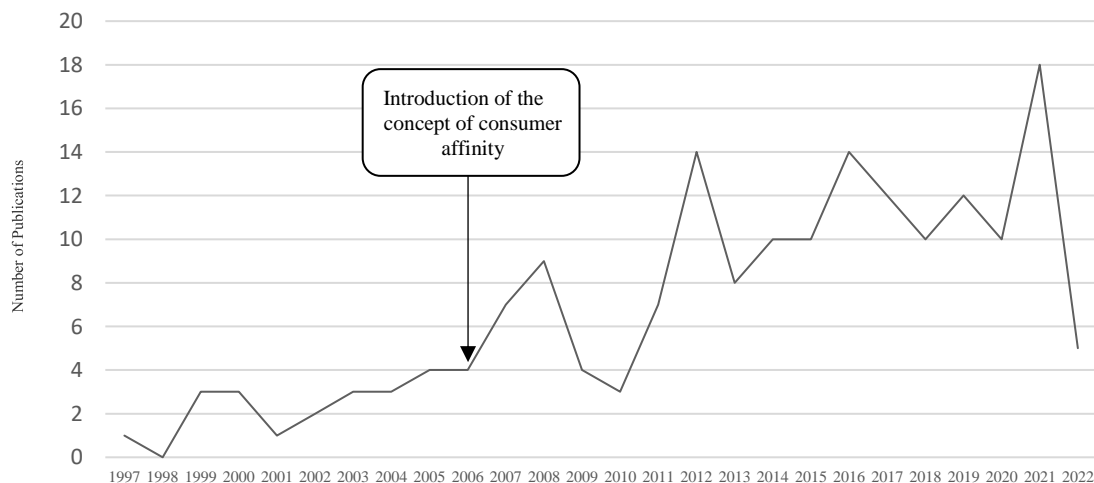


Table 2 provides a detailed description of the different types of publications. An interesting finding is the lack of variety in the typology of publications, as most of them are articles, followed by book chapters and conferences, both in the broader set of publications identified in the screening phase (n=117) and in the narrow set of publications related to consumer affinity (n=25). Table 3 shows the number and percentages of articles by journal rank (JCR and SJR). It is important to notice that 50% of consumer affinity articles have been published in high-impact journals (Q1 and Q2 in JCR). This shows that despite consumer affinity being an under-researched area, there has been a growing interest in this topic with studies of high quality. Regarding the country of publication in the consumer affinity research, more than 50% belong to the United States of America, followed by the United Kingdom and Austria.

**Table 2.** Publication type on consumer affinity

Publication type	Screening phase		Inclusion phase	
	Frequency	% (N=117)	Frequency	% (N=25)
Article	103	88.0	22	88.0
Book	2	1.7	0	0
Book Chapter	3	2.6	1	4.0
Conference Paper	5	4.3	2	8.0
Conference Review	1	0.8	0	0
Review	3	2.6	0	0

**Table 3.** Articles of consumer affinity by journal rank

Journal rank		Screening phase		Inclusion phase	
		Frequency	% (N=103)	Frequency	% (N=22)
JCR	Q1	41	39.8	7	31.8
	Q2	24	23.3	4	18.2
	Q3	11	10.7	4	18.2
	Q4	14	13.6	3	13.6
SJR	Q1	5	4.8	0	-
	Q2	4	3.9	1	4.5
	Q3	3	2.9	3	13.6
	Q4	1	0.9	0	-

Source: Journal rank based on Journal Citation Reports (2021) and Scimago Journal Rank (2021).

Table 4 shows the top publications for consumer affinity research (n=25) in terms of total citations (per year). The top eight articles accounted for 73.6% of total citations of all 25 papers. Thus, a small number of articles have been highly influential, concentrating almost half of the total citations. Table 4 illustrates that the work by Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) has been the most influential in the consumer affinity literature, followed by Oberecker et al. (2008) and Bartsch et al. (2016), with this top three accounting for 62% of all citations. This reflects that the most relevant publications have not been the oldest ones but in fact seminal works with pioneer proposals about the concept of affinity in the Marketing area. Therefore, it is evident that the analysis of affinity for consumers is a novel and salient topic that is gaining interest from academics and practitioners. Although the trend has been upward, the low number of existing articles stands out, indicating that it is an incipient variable. The increase in the percentage of affinity articles in top-tier journals is noteworthy as is the increasing influence of consumer



affinity articles. This trend indicates there is a research need for the future of consumer affinity research.

Table 4 also reveals a strong preference for journals within the field of Marketing and International Business as the primary outlets for consumer affinity research. Thus, the three most cited articles are early studies on the topic which were published in the *Journal of International Marketing*. Therefore, publications on consumer affinity appear to concentrate on a relatively small number of journals. Considering the potential and interdisciplinary nature of this research area, more high-quality articles about consumer affinity should be published in top-tier international business journals as well as in other journals from a variety of disciplines, such as information management, strategy, and sectoral studies. Such interdisciplinary investigation could bring a new understanding of the determinants and effects of consumer affinity and how feelings of affinity can be effectively targeted by firms, thus expanding the boundaries of this research area.

**Table 4.** Top publications on consumer affinity (2006-2022)

Rank based on citations (h)	TC	Citations per year	Title	Journal	Author/s (Year)
1	120	10.91	“Consumers’ emotional bonds with foreign countries: does consumer affinity affect behavioral intentions?”	Journal of International Marketing	Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, (2011)
2	104	7.43	“The consumer affinity construct: conceptualization, qualitative investigation, and research agenda”	Journal of International Marketing	Oberecker et al. (2008)
3	83	13.83	“A taxonomy and review of positive consumer dispositions toward foreign countries and globalization”	Journal of International Marketing	Bartsch et al. (2016)
4	41	5.13	“Consumer affinity for foreign countries: construct development, buying behavior consequences and animosity contrasts”	International Business Review	Nes et al. (2014)
5	28	5.60	“Country-of-origin misclassification awareness and consumers’ behavioral intentions: moderating roles of consumer affinity, animosity, and product knowledge”	International Marketing Review	Cakici, & Shukla (2017)
6	25	5.00	“Old country passions: an international examination of country image, animosity, and affinity among ethnic consumers”	Journal of International Marketing	Papadopoulos et al. (2017)
7	18	3.60	“Destination branding: the role of consumer affinity”	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	Asseraf & Shoham (2017)
8	16	5.33	“Toward a universal account of country-induced predispositions: integrative framework and measurement of country-of-origin images and country emotions”	Journal of International Marketing	Kock et al. (2019)

Note: TC= Total citations in Web of Science and Scopus on the search date.

### Procedure trends

Additionally, in order to identify the most relevant topics in the literature on consumer affinity, the network of relationships between keywords was analyzed (according to their co-occurrence). Thus, we used the articles’ keywords to infer the underlying themes of the papers. This is a common method that has been utilized, for example, by Donthu et al. (2021a; 2021b) and Lu et

al. (2016). First, we conducted an initial analysis of the 117 articles generated in the screening phase to provide a more general overview of what has been investigated in relation to consumer affinity. In a second step, for a more specific analysis, we focused on the 25 articles from the inclusion phase, despite this being a limited number of articles. Thus, the 117 articles were associated with 52 keywords; from which a final list of 27 keywords was derived. Research themes were determined through the co-occurrence of keywords using cluster analysis. Table 5 shows five keywords' clusters. They conceptually have a logical purpose and interpretable themes. Cluster 1 includes a group of articles focused on the use of affinity to examine the various reasons that may shape consumers' relationships with food (e.g., Boizot-Szantai et al., 2017; De Böer & Schösler, 2016). Cluster 2 revolves around country image formation based on consumer culture and their attitude toward a particular foreign country (e.g., Gineikiene et al., 2017; Josiassen, 2011; Lu et al., 2016). Cluster 3 involves studies that delve into international marketing, market segmentation and the globalization in manufacturing and distributing foreign products and/or brands (e.g., Cleveland et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2008). Cluster 4 comprises the study of the lack of feeling in the emotional responses and the role of emotions. Examples are the works by Badrinarayanan and Sierra (2018) and Manning and Holmes (2014). Cluster 5 involves the analysis of the impact of destination image and brand origin over tourism behavior (e.g., Mathijssen, 2019; Tavares et al., 2018).

**Table 5.** Clusters of keywords in the affinity literature

Theme (cluster of keywords)	Keywords	Total 1997-2022 (N=117)	
		Frequency	%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Cluster 1</i></li> <li><i>Consumer behavior, consumer attitude, food preferences</i></li> </ul>	Consumer/Consumer attitude	23	19.66%
	Consumer behavior		
	Decision making		
	Economics		
	Food preferences		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Cluster 2</i></li> <li><i>Culture, animosity, ethnocentrism and country image</i></li> </ul>	Food, organic	41	35.04%
	Acculturation/Culture/Cultural affinity		
	Affinity/ Affinity toward a country/Country affinity		
	Brand affinity/Brand attachment/ Animosity		
	Consumer/ Consumer products		
	Ethnocentrism		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Cluster 3</i></li> <li><i>COO international marketing and globalization</i></li> </ul>	Cosmopolitanism	20	17.09%
	Country image/Image		
	Buying behavior/Choice behavior/Consumer choice		
	COO/COO effect/Cross-country connectedness		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Cluster 4</i></li> <li><i>Emotions and psychological aspect</i></li> </ul>	Globalization	19	16.23%
	International marketing		
	Emotions/Emotional attachments/Consumer emotion/ Consumer Dispositions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Cluster 5</i></li> <li><i>Brand attitude, destination image and tourism</i></li> </ul>	Empathy	14	11.96%
	Psychological aspects/psychology		
	Cause-related marketing/Cause marketing		
	Brand attitude/Brand advocacy		
	Consumption behavior		
	Retailing		
Shopping activity			
Travel behavior/Tourist behavior/Tourism/Destination image			

In a second step, by examining the 25 articles focused on consumer affinity, a final list of 10 keywords was found, which were classified into two clusters. The first theme, Cluster 1, corresponds to the term's affinity country, country image, foreign country, international marketing literature, product, and risk. This theme has become more popular over time, as shown by the articles by Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) and Kock et al. (2019). The second theme, Cluster 2, was associated with the following terms: brand, consumer ethnocentrism, country of origin, and purchase intention. Examples of research on this theme include papers by Guo et al. (2018) and Fazli-Salehi et al. (2020).

*Paper type and methods used*

Table 6 shows theoretical and empirical papers of the entire consumer affinity sample (n=25). Empirical article approaches were largely adopted, representing 84% (n=21). Related to methods employed in the empirical papers, the majority (n=19) are classified as empirically quantitative, whereas only two papers adopted a qualitative approach. For quantitative studies, surveys were the main mode of data collection, while qualitative studies used interviews as the main method of data collection. These results highlight the need for theory-building studies to provide a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon under consideration, as well as contributions and solid theoretical frameworks to trigger the development of this research stream on different grounds.

**Table 6.** Paper type and research methods for consumer affinity publications

Paper type	Research methods		Frequency	%
Theoretical publications			4	16
Empirical publications	Qualitative	Interviews (Personal–In depth and focus group)	2	8
	Quantitative	Surveys	13	52
		Experiments	6	24
<b>Total</b>			25	100

*Defining characteristics of consumer affinity*

Finally, the analysis of the research generated in the inclusion phase reveals the existence of some disagreement aspects in the conceptualization of the notion of affinity, which indicates the need to establish the main defining characteristics that explain the nature of this concept. Based on two seminal studies (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006; Oberecker et al., 2008) and our systematic review of the different affinity conceptual proposals, we will explain the defining characteristics of affinity:

- i. Affinity is a **subjective** concept. Affinity is based on emotional bonds developed toward a specific referent or object. Therefore, it affects how a subject (a person) interacts with an object (Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014).
- ii. Affinity is **interactive** due to it implying an interaction between a subject (e.g., a consumer) and a specific referent or object (e.g., a country, product, brand, organization, etc.; see for example, Bartsch et al., 2016). Bernard and Zarrouk-Karoui (2014) suggest,

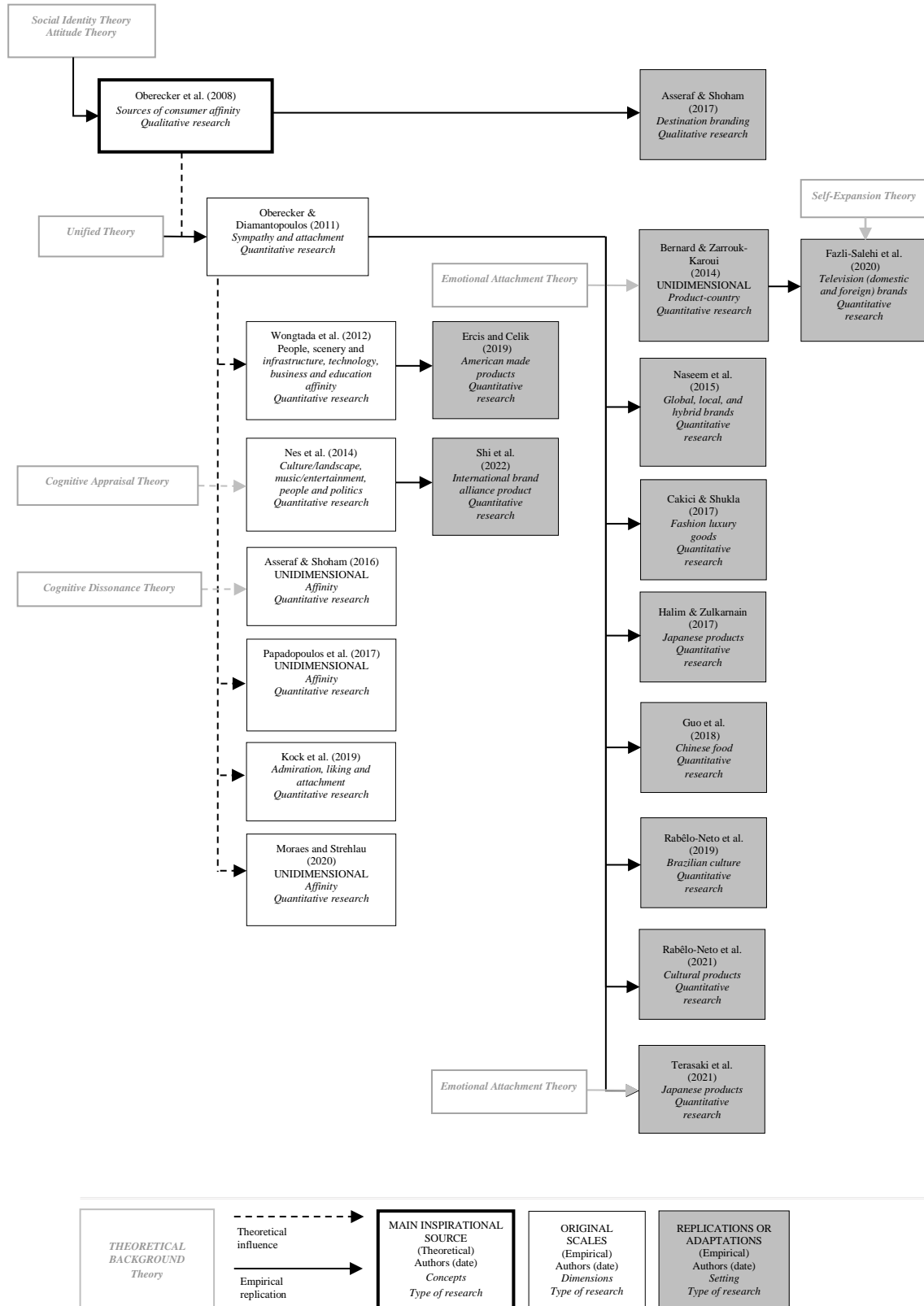
from an interactionist point of view, that affinity depends on both the object's characteristics and the subject's appreciation of those characteristics. It fits into the logic of the Theory of Emotional Attachment of Bowlby (1979) as the attachment or the affinity to an object affects both the interactions between the individual and the specific referent (brand, country, country-brand, see e.g., Terasaki et al., 2021).

- iii. Affinity is considered as an **attitude** toward a specific referent or subject (e.g., a focal foreign country and its products). In the country of origin context, Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) propose that consumers can be segmented along two dimensions: according to their attitude toward i) imports in general, and ii) the specific originating country.
- iv. There is no clear pattern about the **cognitive and/or affective nature** of affinity. Some researchers have suggested that affinity is purely an affective concept (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Oberecker et al., 2008) toward a specific referent that might affect behavioral consequences (conations; for example, intentions to consume or buy products, brands, and/or services), while others consider the dual cognitive-affective nature of consumer affinity (e.g., Nes et al., 2014). In this sense, Wongtada et al. (2012), Nes et al. (2014), and Papadopoulos et al. (2017) agree that emotions are anchored in cognitive elements. However, the majority of studies have considered affinity as a feeling of liking (positive disposition), not as an attitude that also involves cognitive mechanisms. Consequently, the cognitive-affective nature is more a feature of other concepts such as image or empathy (Cuff et al., 2016), but not a representative characteristic of consumer affinity (Bartsch et al., 2016; Serrano-Arcos et al., 2022). It is the reason why affinity refers to positive feelings toward a specific referent (e.g., affinity country) and results in specific actions of consumer behavior in a business context; affinity translates favorable emotions toward a referent instead of moods or a general affect. Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) conceptualized consumer affinity as an “emotional feeling,” which affects positively toward a specific referent or subject (e.g., a specific foreign country and its products/brands). In addition, affinity has been also defined as a positive attitude toward a specific referent (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). In this context, the terms ‘emotions’ and ‘attitudes’ have frequently been used inconsistently in the literature.
- v. The **idiosyncratic vs normative nature** of consumer affinity. The literature distinguishes between idiosyncratic and normative affinities (Oberecker et al., 2008). Idiosyncratic affinities “depend on the perceiver’s unique experience, psychology” (Hartz et al., 2005, p. 636) and, consequently, are manifested at the individual level. On the other hand, normative affinities depend on cultural influences and “affect large numbers of people” (Hartz et al., 2005, p. 636). Therefore, they are manifested at the national level (e.g., Peng-Er, 2004; Razov, 2004).

- vi. Affinity can be based on a **direct experience** (e.g., vacations abroad; for example, see Asseraf & Shoham, 2017; Oberecker et al., 2008) and/or an **indirect experience** (e.g., social media contents based on the experiences of others; see Asseraf & Shoham, 2017; Oberecker et al., 2008).
- vii. Affinity tends to be **stable**, but affinity feelings are **not irrevocable**. Oberecker et al. (2008) highlighted that, although attitudes tend to be stable over time, favorable feelings might be altered under specific circumstances (e.g., specific events, shift in values, etc.).
- viii. Affinity is a **higher-order construct**. There is a discrepancy in the literature between considering consumer affinity as one-dimensional or multidimensional (see Figure 4). Most researchers agree on the multidimensionality of consumer affinity (e.g., Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Guo et al., 2018; Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017; Naseem et al., 2015), while some authors have stood up for a one-dimensional approach (e.g., Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2017). However, a multidimensional approach to the concept of affinity provides a more complex and rich representation of this phenomenon. It is also necessary to clarify the uni- or multi-dimensionality of the concept of affinity and to distinguish between sources (macro/micro drivers) and dimensions. After the empirical study of Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), new conceptual proposals arise to model affinity (e.g., Nes et al., 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2017; Wongtada et al., 2012) along with several adaptations/replications (i.e., Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Guo et al., 2018; Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017; Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019). According to the multidimensional conceptualizations of consumer affinity (see Figure 4), the pioneer empirical study of Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) assumed that consumer affinity was based on soft (sympathy) and intense (attachment) positive emotions toward a specific referent (foreign country), and many subsequent investigations were built exclusively on these two dimensions (e.g., Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Guo et al., 2018; Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017; Naseem et al., 2015; Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019; Terasaki et al., 2021). Additionally, most studies have provided a multidimensional approach to this concept, mostly founded on the seminal work by Oberecker et al. (2008). Five multidimensional proposals have been identified in the literature, which has been inspired directly (i.e., Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011) or indirectly (i.e., Kock et al., 2019, Nes et al., 2014; Wongtada et al., 2012) by the theoretical work by Oberecker et al. (2008). Another concern is that the literature offers no consensus on the number or nature of the relevant dimensions involved. Despite Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) being in favour of a bi-dimensional construct for affinity, the measures of other authors consider it as a one-dimensional notion (e.g., Bernard & Zarrouk, 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2017). The dimensionality proposed by Oberecker

and Diamantopoulos (2011) has been the most widely accepted and validated in the literature.

**Figure 4.** Measurement of consumer affinity. A diachronic analysis



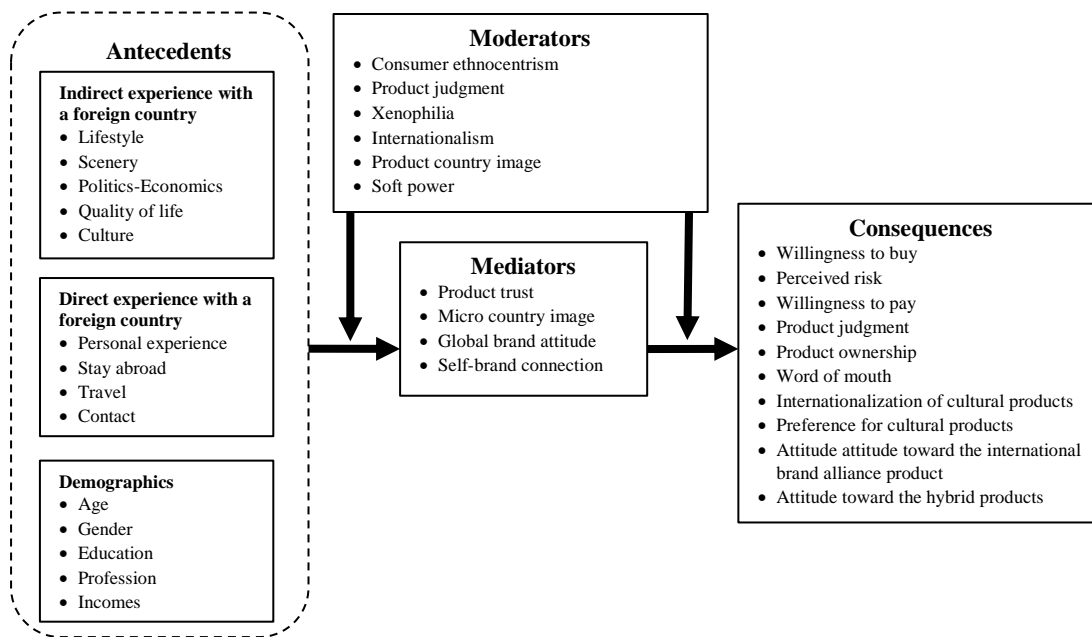
### Relationship with other variables

The review of the remaining 25 papers about consumer affinity allows us to identify and classify the antecedents of this notion into three groups (see Figure 5). The first group is composed of the indirect experience of the consumer with a particular foreign country (including contextual or situational drivers). Lifestyle has been analyzed as one of the most relevant antecedents of consumer affinity, followed by the scenery (e.g., the beauty of nature). However, there are divergences in the literature with the rest of the drivers (culture, politics-economics –collective memory–, and quality of life) due to some researchers not having found empirical support and others having considered these factors as important antecedents for inducing consumer affinity (investigated by Asseraf & Shoham, 2017; Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Oberecker et al., 2008). The second group consisted of factors related to the direct experience of the consumer with a particular foreign country, such as personal experience, stays abroad, travel, and contact antecedents of consumer affinity (e.g., Oberecker et al., 2008; Toffoli et al., 2015). The third group included demographic variables as control variables, such as age, gender or education (e.g., Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Oberecker et al., 2008; Wongtada et al., 2012).

Regarding the mediating effect of some variables in consumer affinity models, only product trust (Guo et al., 2018) and product-country image (Nes et al., 2014) have been analyzed as mediators in the relationship between consumer affinity and willingness to buy, and self-brand connection in the relationship between consumer affinity and product quality judgment (Ercis & Celi, 2019). The global brand attitude (Naseem et al., 2015) has been proposed but not empirically tested as a mediator in the relationship between consumer affinity and purchase intention. With regard to the moderation effect, we found that the majority of variables have only been proposed conceptually, such as product judgment, xenophilia, and internationalism (Oberecker et al., 2008). Only the study by Guo et al. (2018) found a moderating effect of ethnocentrism in the relationship between consumer affinity and product trust. Bernard and Zarrouk-Karoui (2014) found that the product-country image did not act as a moderator in consumer affinity models.

Our analysis identified several consequences of consumer affinity. The most important outcome variable is the willingness to buy (e.g., Banovic et al., 2022; Ercis & Celik, 2019; Guo et al., 2018; Kock et al., 2019). Other important outcomes are perceived risk (Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017; Oberecker et al., 2008), willingness to pay (Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014), word of mouth (Eguchi & Yamashita, 2016), the internationalization of cultural products (Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019), product judgment (e.g., Ercis & Celik, 2019; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2020), product ownership (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016) and preference for the cultural products (Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2021). Recently, two key outcomes have been studied: the attitude toward the international brand alliance product (Shi et al., 2022) and the attitude toward the hybrid products (Banovic et al., 2022).

**Figure 5. Integrative framework of consumer affinity**



### **Discussion, future research directions, and implications**

The systematic review of the literature on consumer affinity conducted in this paper has shone a light on the most relevant research in this field from a multidisciplinary perspective and has revealed the main existing patterns from a theoretical and conceptual point of view, as well as in relation to the scope of the research, descriptive characteristics and methodological approaches, thus providing a more complete and more integrated picture of this topic. Based on the findings of this review, we provide a roadmap for future academic work with the aim of providing a stronger theoretical and empirical development and grounding and better contextualized understanding. This agenda may provide a foundation on which future researchers can build and make substantial contributions to consumer affinity research in accordance with the theory, methodology, context, and other implications for future research.

Over the past 25 years, affinity-related research has grown extensively. As part of this growth in research interest, the scope of the notion of affinity has broadened significantly, spanning several disciplines and explaining in particular a certain range of consumer behaviors. Thus, the common factor of the multiple conceptual approaches that have emerged from the notion of affinity is the strong attraction that it reflects between two parties (e.g., Hensen et al., 2016; Schmuck et al., 2017). However, the disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, Management, and Marketing have used the terms ‘sense of affinity,’ ‘feelings of closeness,’ ‘feelings of sympathy (liking)’ interchangeably (see e.g., Kramer, 2011). In particular, four main branches have been identified in the analysis of this notion in the field of Marketing (i.e., Marketing Management, Relationship Marketing, Consumer Behavior, and International Marketing). Consequently, multiple terms and definitions have been coined in the Marketing literature (e.g., affinity



marketing, cultural marketing, emotional affinity, and consumer affinity), but one of the most interesting and, at the same time, less studied has been the concept of ‘consumer affinity’ (Oberecker et al., 2008). The analysis of the publication trends suggests a high increase in the attractiveness of research on consumer affinity (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2020; Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2021) despite its recent appearance as a new form of the consumer’s affective response (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). From this seminal work, and despite the significant growth that the topic has had in the last years, the low number of existing articles stands out, showing that affinity is an incipient research field (Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Riefler, 2017; Terasaki et al., 2021).

Our analysis has identified Bartsch et al. (2016), Oberecker et al. (2008) and Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) as the most prominent authors involved in consumer affinity research. These authors form the core of researchers that drives consumer affinity related knowledge. However, the share of publications by other authors on this topic has increased over the last years, emphasizing the relevance of the concept of consumer affinity not only from an academic but also from a business management perspective (Riefler, 2017). Specifically, our analysis underlines the increasing relevance of consumer affinity for applied research, spanning consumer psychology and marketing, as well as culture and country of origin.

As potential areas of research in the field of consumer affinity, Table 7 outlines the main research streams that promise to expand future knowledge on this notion.

**Table 7.** Prospective agenda for future research

<b>Future research directions</b>
<i>Theory</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debate about the affective versus cognitive-affective nature of consumer affinity</li> <li>• Examine the psychological and sociological bases underlying consumer affinity to establish exactly whether it is defined on the basis of socialization differences, innate differences, or a combination of both</li> <li>• Analyze the self-brand connection in both home and foreign products/brands, comparing the Social Identity Theory with the Self-Expansion Theory</li> <li>• Articulate Emotion-Congruent Theory to explain consumer affinity</li> <li>• Examine other theories: Attitude Theory, Cognitive Appraisal Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Emotional Attachment Theory, to challenge arguments</li> <li>• Establish discriminant validity with related terms (e.g., xenophilia, consumer cosmopolitanism, place attachment)</li> <li>• Extend existing research on consumer affinity antecedents (e.g., Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, cultural similarity, etc.)</li> <li>• Extend existing research on consequences (e.g., intended/actual behavior, perceived value, brand perceptions)</li> <li>• Expand on prior research by analyzing mediators (e.g., global brand attitude, self-brand connection, and product-country image)</li> <li>• Expand on prior research by analyzing moderators (e.g., perception of quality and perceived risk).</li> <li>• What psychographic variables might induce consumer affinity (at an individual level)?</li> <li>• Conduct further adaptation/replication studies to validate previous findings</li> <li>• Consider the different types of “affinities” that consumers develop and behavioral differences (in terms of segmenting and targeting consumer segments)</li> </ul>

**Table 7.** Prospective agenda for future research (*cont.*)

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*Methodology*

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- Examine current consumer affinity content in detail
- Conduct further qualitative studies
- Carry out a mixed-method approach
- Use alternative research designs (e.g., experimental studies)
- Use consumer samples

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*Context*

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- Replication/adaptation of existing studies and extent research findings by using an even wider range of categories (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian products)
- Develop a comparative approach concerning international marketing strategies and identify different types of products/services/brands
- Comparison between feelings of affinity in different countries
- Expand geographical coverage in under-investigated areas (e.g., differentiating emerging countries from developed countries)
- Explore affinity feelings in B2B markets

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*Other future research areas*

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- How economic, social, environmental, political-economic, food safety and/or image crises can impact consumer affinity (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, recent conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and affinity toward Ukrainian products, etc.)?
- Analyze consumer responses toward foreign brands and implications for international marketers
- Develop international marketing strategies analyzing the various emotional feelings of consumers to implement specific actions
- Analyze consumer affinity in multiple settings (e.g., food, industrial, tourism, among others)

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*Theory.* As this systematic review has shown, several challenges emerge when reviewing the literature on consumer affinity. First, regarding the conceptualization of consumer affinity, much room remains for future improvement in our understanding of the definition and nature of this notion, since one of the major challenges is the prevailing conceptual confusion (see Figure 6).

One primary source of controversy is whether consumer affinity is an attitude, a perception, an emotional feeling, or a context-specific state. Moreover, consumer affinity is often described and defined as a positive consumer disposition but analyzed as an emotional feeling and attitude. This confusion may be partly responsible for the striking paucity of research studies on the topic. Although the definition provided by Oberecker et al. (2008) considering consumer affinity as "... a feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country" (p. 26) is an accepted definition in most studies, the concept of consumer affinity remains elusive with diverse connotations (affective versus cognitive-affective). The debate is still open regarding whether affinity is often anchored in cognitive considerations (e.g., Nes et al., 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2017; Wongtada et al., 2012) or the majority opinion that affinity is a feeling of liking (positive disposition), not an attitude that also involves cognitive mechanisms (e.g., Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Jaffe & Nebenzal, 2006). Consequently, the dual cognitive-affective nature is more a feature of other concepts such as image, perceived value, or empathy (Cuff et al., 2016), but not a differentiating characteristic of affinity feelings (Bartsch et al., 2016). Because affinity refers to positive feelings toward a specific referent (e.g., affinity country) and results in specific actions of consumer behavior in a business context, affinity translates favorable emotions toward a referent rather than moods or a general

affect. In addition, the nomological validity of this construct based on emotions, feelings, positive dispositions, or attachment has been previously revealed (e.g., Kock et al., 2019; Nes et al., 2014; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Papadopoulos et al., 2017). In this sense, we believe that consumer affinity has an affective nature as shown by the cross-fertilisation between Social Psychology and Marketing in the analysis of this notion, since the psychological roots of the term ‘affinity’ demonstrate that it implies feelings of closeness, sympathy, or liking for someone or something (e.g., Decety & Chaminade, 2003). However, there is still a need for empirical studies that explore and analyze this topic. After analyzing the influential theoretical approaches and the subsequent developments in the conceptualization of affinity, we argue that this concept reflects a positive consumer disposition toward a specific referent, and it is characterized by an affective, subjective, experiential, induced, revocable, and reciprocal nature, being a higher-level construct. Verifying the prior views of the scholarly community (e.g., Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006; Oberecker et al., 2008), we underscore the importance of acquiring a thorough understanding of the psychological and sociological roots behind consumer affinity to demarcate exactly whether it is a product of socialization differences, innate differences or a combination of both.

Given the existence of multiple conceptualizations, which hinder the specification of consumer affinity’s conceptual nature, the deficiency in the use of clear theoretical foundations in consumer affinity research comes as no surprise. MacKenzie (2003, p. 325) argues that “without well-developed construct definitions, it is impossible to develop a coherent theory because constructs are the building blocks of theory”. From our review, we observe that the theoretical discourse on consumer affinity draws heavily on the socio-psychological perspective. Specifically, literature provides one strong theoretical base for the relationship between consumer affinity and product-related outcome variables, namely Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982). To analyze the role of affinity in consumer behavior toward certain foreign goods and examine its positive consequences in the purchase-decision process, it is more appropriate to use the Social Identity Theory and the Unified Theory, which argue a distinction between group loyalties (in-group vs. out-group) toward country-related concepts, considering the possible inclusion of an out-group as part of one’s in-group (Druckman, 1994). While consumer affinity is theoretically anchored to Social Identity Theory, some researchers have used arguments from, Attitude Theory (e.g., Kock et al., 2019), Cognitive Appraisal Theory (e.g., Nes et al., 2014), Cognitive Dissonance Theory (e.g., Cakici & Shukla, 2017), and Emotional Attachment Theory (e.g., Halim & Zulkarnain, 2017) to explain consumer affinity’s direct impact on consumers’ product-related decisions. However, the use of the latter theories involves cognitive elements (which can be misleading as they are very similar to the country image and country attitude). In particular, an interesting and recent perspective to understanding consumer affinity is through the Emotion-Congruent Theory (Kim et al., 2010) which argues that individuals positively assess a referent when it is in concordance with their emotional bond with such object/subject (Septianto et al., 2020). Another recent

approach is the use of the Self-Expansion Theory to explain “global branding and nation sentiments’ (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2020, p. 745). Thus, since there is no agreement in the literature about the theoretical foundations of the concept of consumer affinity, further studies are needed to achieve a theoretical development of the mechanisms that explain this notion. Another concern that we consider relevant to advancing this current is the analysis of discriminant validity with related terms such as xenophilia, internationalism, product-country image (e.g., Oberecker et al., 2008) and consumer cosmopolitanism (e.g., Makrides et al., 2021). A recent term, i.e., ‘place attachment’, also needs to be examined for its conceptual delimitation with consumer affinity, as this notion is associated with a positive attachment toward a place (e.g., Chan & Ilicic, 2019).

Regarding the nature and dimensionality of consumer affinity, most studies have provided a multidimensional approach to this concept, mostly founded on the seminal work by Oberecker et al. (2008), against some one-dimensional approaches (e.g., Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2017). In this sense, it is possible to identify five multidimensional proposals in the literature, which have been inspired directly (i.e., Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011) or indirectly (i.e., Kock et al., 2019, Nes et al., 2014; Wongtada et al., 2012) by the theoretical work of Oberecker et al. (2008). Recently, Kock et al. (2019) argued that not all countries that are liked are also admired and, therefore, proposed a three-dimensional model that distinguishes dimensions of admiration and liking, keeping the dimension of attachment in the model of Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011). However, while suggesting different ways of understanding consumer affinity as a multidimensional phenomenon, the literature offers no consensus on the number or nature of the relevant dimensions involved. Moreover, the use of single items from affinity dimensions to generate a multi-item scale for one construct (as in Papadopoulos et al., 2017) seems problematic (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2016). Consequently, future studies are needed to determine the number and characteristics of consumer affinity dimensions and their generalized use (or not) in different settings. One of the main issues in measuring consumer affinity, aside from its conceptual and empirical dimensionality, is the differentiation of the positive emotional feelings themselves from the underlying reasons (i.e., their drivers).

Following the logic of antecedents and consequences of consumer affinity, the establishing framework in this systematic review helps to understand the mechanisms that explain consumer affinity and the outcomes that generate this variable. There are considerable dissimilarities regarding the magnitude and directional effects of consumer affinity that exist due to contextual factors. As a result, the inclusion of contextual variables is considered necessary and contributes to a more comprehensive framework. It is necessary to incorporate other factors that can serve as a framework in the future and conduct replication/adaptation to validate previous works. The extant research should be extended according to antecedents (e.g., Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, cultural similarity, macro/micro drivers), outcomes (e.g., willingness to pay, actual

behavior, perceived value, brand perceptions), mediators (e.g., global brand attitude, self-brand connection, and product-country image) and moderators (e.g., perception of quality and perceived risk). Empirical studies have demonstrated the importance of direct and indirect experience with a foreign country for building affinity feelings among consumers (e.g., Asseraf & Shoham, 2017; Bernard & Zarrouk-Karoui, 2014; Oberecker et al., 2008). At an individual level, we call for future works to analyze psychographic variables that may induce consumer affinity since these have not yet been proposed or empirically investigated. Despite the relevance of moderator effects, few studies included in this review have directly tested mediating effects, leading to an incomplete theorization and empirical bias in the results of the hypothesis testing. One exception is the work of Guo et al. (2018), who demonstrated that the relationship between consumer affinity and product trust is stronger in consumers with high levels of ethnocentrism than in those with low levels. Surprisingly, neither perception of quality nor perceived risk has been modelled as mediators, despite their conceptual relevance as such (Oberecker et al., 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze these and other mediations in future research.

*Methodology.* This review reveals some methodological issues that should be addressed in future research. Most international marketing research on consumer affinity has focused on defining this notion and replicating its drivers and outcomes (proposed by Oberecker et al., 2008; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011) rather than examining its actual content in detail. Given the complexity and nuance of evidence in this research area, we consider that more qualitative inquiries are needed. As highlighted by Makrides et al. (2021), this type of analysis provides “rich descriptive accounts of complex mechanisms and can serve as a solid foundation for the development of possible quantitative measures, triggering the development of the domain” (p. 22). Moreover, it is striking that no study included in this review has applied the mixed-method technique of utilizing quantitative and qualitative data, which can provide a more complete and truer picture of this phenomenon (Hanson & Grimmer, 2007). Thus, there is an urgent need for mixed-method studies, as these are expected to significantly add to the literature. The research design used by most of the studies was cross-sectional data with samples of consumers (e.g., Guo et al., 2018; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Papadopoulos et al., 2017; Rabêlo-Neto et al., 2019) and students (e.g., Cakici & Shukla, 2017; Wongtada et al., 2012). We consider that alternative research designs to examine the influence of consumer affinity are necessary (e.g., experimental studies), as well as more consumer samples since students, do not represent the overall population of a country.

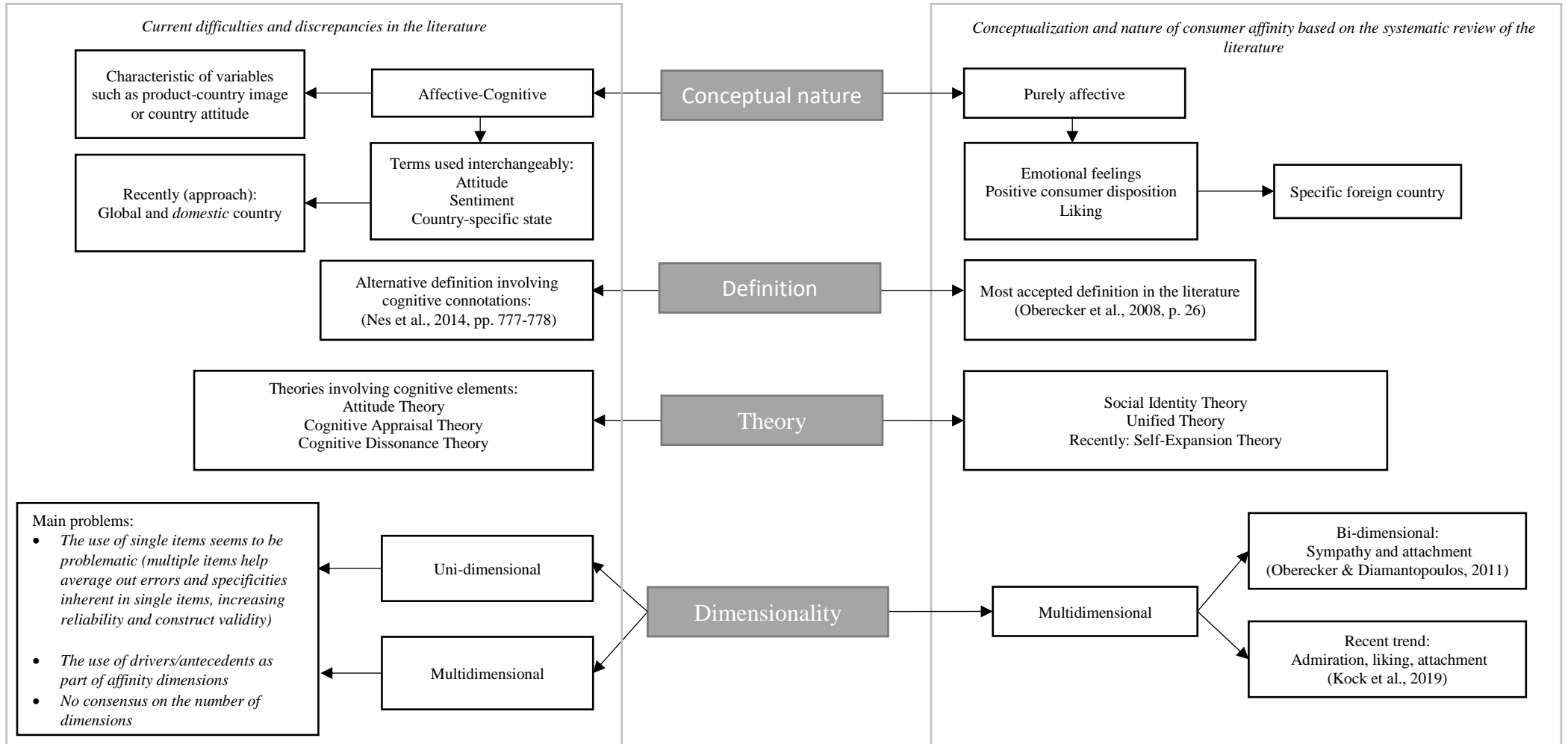
*Context.* Another concern is the influence of consumer affinity between different product categories and distinct brands (Terasaki et al., 2021). Therefore, future research should examine if there is a potential relationship between product type and the degree of the affinity developed by consumers. In addition, it might be interesting to conduct a study on the hedonic and utilitarian categories in products and services. Even though it seems difficult to control the influence of

country of origin in cross-cultural research, future research could also test the robustness of the consumer affinity mechanism in a different category setting. Another interesting point for future research is the scarcity of studies on affinity feelings in B2B markets. Consequently, further developments should explore this context. Finally, consumer affinity has been studied in the context of a positive disposition toward a specific foreign country. However, Fazli-Salehi et al. (2020) explored consumer behavior dynamics in an analysis of the self-brand connection in both domestic and foreign brands. Hence, the debate is open as to whether the affinity should be limited to the influence of a particular foreign country, or can also refer to the home country. In turn, consumer affinity should be studied more deeply in different settings (both positive and negative) such as, for example, tourism, culture, ethical consumption, and image crises, among others. In turn, further studies should expand geographical coverage in under-investigated areas, differentiating emerging countries from developed countries.

*Other future research areas.* It would be interesting to analyze whether and how an economic (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, recent conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and affinity toward Ukrainian products, etc.), social, environmental, and/or image crises, can exert an impact on consumer affinity. In turn, other relevant aspects to investigate are i) the different responses of the consumer to foreign brands and the implications for international marketers (e.g., Naseem et al., 2015), ii) the international marketing strategies analyzing the various emotional feelings of consumers to implement specific actions (e.g., Moraes & Strehlau, 2020), and iii) the effect of feelings of affinity between the producer of services/products and the consumer for multiple settings (e.g., food, industrial, tourism, among others; Toffoli et al., 2015).

In summary, consumer affinity continues to be an emerging variable with a great potential to be exploited, since in this review we have highlighted its important role and relevance in understanding multiple aspects of the consumer's emotional feelings and their purchase decision.

**Figure 6. What is consumer affinity?**



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