

Brand Image as a Function of Self-Image and Self-Brand Connection

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Abstract *This study investigates how brand image relates to self-image and how brand consumption contributes to the construction of self. Most of the research on brand image refers to brand attitudes. Day (1970) considers attitudes "a central integrating feature" in marketing theory and advertising evaluation. Gardner (1985, p.197) studied differences in brand attitudes as they relate to advertisements, finding attitude toward an advertisement affects attitude toward the advertised brand as much under a brand evaluation set as under a non-brand evaluation set. The present study goes beyond Gardner's research to show why such attitudes exist as they relate to brand consumption and self-image. Erickson and Johansson (1985) also investigated product evaluations, with an analysis of surveyed beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding fashion brands. They concluded that price is not a significant determinant of overall attitude. This study inquires whether brand attitudes and beliefs correlate with purchase behavior in the form of self-brand connection.*

Keywords *Brand Image Self-image congruence, clothing, consumption, socialization agents, brands, self-brand connection, Consumer-brand relationship*

Introduction

Mitchell (1986) showed that different attitudes toward brands may exist even though peoples' product attribute beliefs are the same. Brands (and the values attached to them) have become central to consumer identities and are used to develop and express the self (Baudrillard, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). In recent years, the brand has proliferated and seems to have replaced the product itself (Salzer-Morling & Strannegard, 2004). Consumers have formed "self-brand connection" based on the congruency between the individual's "self-image" and the "brand-image" (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The cultural discourses attached to brands (McCracken, 1993) have allowed consumers to communicate their personality, age, class, wealth, and status by simply selecting a particular brand (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004); the brand has

become a social communication tool. A recent study by Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) shows how “consumers use specific brands as a narrative text to communicate who they are” (p.633). The strength of the consumer-brand relationship is reflected in the fact that it is now being investigated within the framework of interpersonal relationships (Sung & Choi, 2010). Furthermore, Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008) found that brand exposure can influence behavior; individuals primed with the “Apple” brand, tended to display more creative motivations. It is for this reason that researchers argue that citizenship has become a product of consumption (Lash & Urry, 1994) and brands now function as “A Passport to Global Citizenship” (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008). In this sense, the perception that marketers are “cultural engineers,” may not be far from the truth (Holt, 2002), therefore it is important to understand not only how attitudes are formed, but why they are formed. This research studies whether brand attitudes are formed with respect to self-image. Marsh & Barnes (1985) point out that, although “thousands of studies have included measures of self-concept, most of these emphasize other theoretical constructs and interest in self-concept comes from its assumed relevance to those other constructs.” The current study tests the relevance of self-image to brand image and brand-self connection.

It is a generally accepted that consumers often buy products for reasons other than the product's functional performance. Instead, they base their purchase decisions on the symbolic or social significance of the product. Although marketers generally assume that products are used by consumers for need satisfaction, symbolic interactionism theory suggests that products are also used for impression management, i.e., products have symbolic meanings and product ownership/use serves as a form of symbolic communication between consumer and observer (Solomon, 1983). While the symbolic significance of a product is often considered during the purchase decision, consumers may be more conscious of the psychological and social value. For example, McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts (1991) affirm that consumers consciously and deliberately use products to ease the transition from marriage to divorce. Work by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) indicates a similar compensating behavior occurs during the transition from student to employee. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that whenever consumers are uncertain about their life roles, they search for and use products to relieve at least some aspects of their anxiety. For example, Tucker (1954, p.139) suggests there has long been an implicit concept that consumers can be defined in terms of either the products they acquire or use or in terms of the meanings, products have for them or their attitudes toward products. Nevertheless, other aspects of the brand are

relevant, such as the economic value at the consumer or even the distribution strategy as part of the brand management (Pinzaru 2009, 78, 89-90).

In general, products which have strong communicative properties have high visibility in use and high personalizability (Holman, 1981). Unless a product has visibility in use, observers will not see its purchase, consumption, or disposition, and the product loses its communicative qualities. Likewise, if a product lacks variability (if it is available to everyone and everyone uses it in exactly the same way), no individual differences are implied by its usage. Generally, high variability is attributed to financial or time constraints on consumption and to the consumer's ability to make small but distinct changes in the product or the way it is used. Finally, products have high personalizability if their use brings to mind a stereotypical image of the frequent user. Therefore, non-voluntary product consumption may or may not make a statement about the individual person using the product, though it should always say something about his/her group membership. For example, adolescents start to associate brand images with social status, group affiliations, and personality traits and use them as a means of expressing the transition to adulthood (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Through brands, adolescents "can project a self-image which is often idealized to others" (Chang, 2005, p.887). Dittmar and Pepper (1994) note that adolescents are, overall, a materialistic segment of society, possibly the result of high levels of self-doubt and anomie during the "identity crisis" years (Chang & Arkin, 2002). Moreover, this increased uncertainty and an inclination toward materialism in the teenage years are exploited and possibly perpetuated by marketers as they "raise the bar" for social comparison by showing highly idealized images of "normal life." Adolescents' need for brands is clear; not only are they needed to associate and dissociate from peer groups to gain social acceptance and avoid bullying, but there is evidence to suggest that brands are integral to the formation of a stable concept of self. Piacentini and Mailer (2004) found that even when a brand was not visible to others, teenagers enjoyed wearing it as a means of reinforcing their self-identity.

Solomon and Buchanan (1991) suggest that sometimes products also have symbolic interdependence together; several products transmit a message that each product alone does not. Therefore, ownership and consumption of a particular grouping of products can enhance a consumer's social image or occupational performance the more complete and consistent the set of products owned by the consumer, the higher the probability of successful role performance and improved self-image (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Riesman & Roseborough, 1955; Solomon & Buchanan, 1991; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

According to symbolic interactionist theory, then, anxious and insecure consumers tend to buy highly visible products that are consistent with the image they want to project or the social role they need help mastering (Holman, 1981; Solomon, 1983; Solomon & Buchanan, 1991).

This theory is also consistent with research conducted by Riesman and Roseborough (1955), which indicates a relationship exists between occupation, social class, and consumption of what they call the standard package. This standard package is generally assumed to include socially visible products like clothes, cars, homes, and vacations. Although the term standard implies that this group of products is consistently desired and purchased by households in the middle social strata, Porter (1967) and Riesman and Roseborough (1955) suggest that variations in this package may exist for different occupations. According to Thornton and Nardi (1975), ideas about what is expected (i.e., which products are part of a profession's standard package) often come from their peer group and mass media, especially when the individual lacks experience and therefore confidence in his/her ability to choose the most acceptable products.

Andreasen (1984) and Leigh and Gabel (1992) also note a connection between transition and consumption. Andreasen (1984) suggests that households in transition (undergoing a change in status or lifestyle patterns) are more likely to exhibit brand-preference changes and to be open to intervention by change agents. He calls this concept readiness-to-change and relates it to moving, getting married or divorced, losing or getting a job, and having a first child. In his view, life-status changes produce life-style changes which, in turn, alter consumption patterns.

Solomon (1983) presents a similar view on the relationship between products and social/job roles. In his discussion of product symbolism, Solomon suggests consumption of the right products is less important when role knowledge is high and the consumer has mastered the repertoire of behaviors associated with a social or occupational role. On the other hand, consumption of the right products is very important when the appropriate behavior is either unknown or known only in an idealized sense (i.e., the individual has only a stereotyped view of the role and has not yet had an opportunity to rehearse or experience the appropriate behavior a stage Solomon calls anticipatory role socialization). He suggests role behavior is aided when an individual possesses the material symbols/products associated with that role. This hypothesis was borne out by Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) study of symbolic self-com-

pletion. They found that male MBA students who were least likely to succeed (based on an index of their grades, number of job interviews, and number of job offers) were most likely to look successful. The researchers noted that incomplete students (those with lower grades, fewer job interviews, and fewer job offers) were more likely to wear luxury watches and carry expensive briefcases both associated with successful employment in the business world and therefore part of the businessman's standard package. According to Solomon (1983), these findings suggest that an individual's confidence in his/her ability to meet role demands may determine the degree to which he/she depends on material symbol of convince others of his/her abilities.

Self-brand connections and their importance to adolescents

The use of possessions in the formation and communication of the self has received a considerable amount of attention (Belk, 1988). However, it seems that this extension of the self has developed to incorporate branded possessions specifically. Brands (and the values attached to them) have become central to consumer identities and are used to develop and express the self (Baudrillard, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). In recent years, the brand has proliferated and seems to have replaced the product itself (Salzer-Morling & Stranegard, 2004). Consumers have formed "self-brand connection" based on the congruency between the individual's "self-image" and the "brand-image" (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The cultural discourses attached to brands (McCracken, 1993) have allowed consumers to communicate their personality, age, class, wealth, and status by simply selecting a particular brand (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004); the brand has become a social communication tool. A recent study by Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) shows how "consumers use specific brands as a narrative text to communicate who they are" (p.633).

The strength of the consumer-brand relationship is reflected in the fact that it is now being investigated within the framework of interpersonal relationships (Sung & Choi, 2010). Furthermore, Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008) found that brand exposure can influence behavior; individuals primed with the "Apple" brand, tended to display more creative motivations. As individuals enter adolescence, not only do they understand themselves better, but they also start to understand the concept of the brand (Chaplin & Roedder-John, 2005) and their brand awareness (and interest in brands) increases (Ross & Harradine, 2004). This is because cognitive developments allow the child to understand the complex symbolism of the brand and its intangible

features. Teenagers start to incorporate brands into their self-concepts and use them to define and communicate their sense of self as well as judge others (Achenreiner & Roedder-John, 2003; Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005, 2007). Similarly, brand communities exist whereby users of a particular brand forge feelings of communal solidarity and culture through their shared experiences and interactions (Kozinets, 2001; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). In this sense, brands provide “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984).

Hirschman (2010) has suggested that the very reason for the power and success of brands is that they provide a medium through which humans can focus their evolutionary need to belong and form communal groups. Conversely, by avoiding specific brands (negative symbolic consumption), individuals can dissociate themselves from less desirable peer groups (Yalkin & Elliott, 2006). It is for this reason that Ji (2002) argues, that brands have become “tools through which children grow up, gain competence, pursue the pleasure of life, fulfill their dreams, and become connected with others” (p.383). Furthermore, because the most powerful brands are those that appear in several sociocultural domains and interact regularly the emphasis on interconnecting consumption contexts through brands, is increasing (Diamond et al., 2009).

In the context of adolescence, the “right” brands are those that are attached to an image of “cool,” are popular among the majority of the peer group and considered to be socially acceptable (DelVecchio, 2002; Nancarrow & Nancarrow, 2007). This social acceptance of a brand is formed through a variety of methods ranging from incidental Consumer Brand Encounters (ICBEs; Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand, 2009) to brand placements in media. Schemer, Matthes, Wirth, and Textor (2008) examined the effect of brand placement in music videos and found that depending on whether the actors/artists are liked or disliked, a positive or negative brand evaluation is formed through evaluative conditioning. Furthermore, considering that clothing (Darley, 1999) and sports trainers/sneakers (Hogg, Bruce, & Hill, 1998) are particularly socially and psychologically relevant to teenagers, it is not surprising that these item categories bear specific significance for them. After all, “anything that promises to gain acceptance for the adolescent receives considerable attention, particularly in the area of personal appearance” (Drake & Ford, 1979, p.283).

Concerns about the increasing brand orientation of adolescents are not unfounded. Children and adolescents compare their possessions as a means of assessing personal self-worth and judging the worth of others and this has important social consequences. For example, simply wearing the “wrong

brand” or lacking the “right brand” can lead to negative peer judgments and the perception that the individual is of a lesser quality than one who is wearing the “correct brand” (e.g., Elliott & Leonard, 2004; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; Roper & Shah, 2007). Furthermore, among teenagers, these judgments often result in bullying, social exclusion and reduced feelings of self-worth (Isaksen & Roper, 2008; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Ridge, 2002; Schor, 2004). The ability of brands to portray desirable images of the self to society (Elliott, 1999) means that consumers use brands to fulfill or disguise their inadequacies through “symbolic self-completion” (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Thus, brands also provide “Social Capital” (Bourdieu, 1984). Elliott (1995) found that the unemployed often consume excessively in attempts to restore a damaged sense of self and Chang and Arkin (2002) found that people who are predisposed to feel insecure about themselves, are more likely to look to material goods for comfort. Furthermore, findings by Rucker and Galinsky (2008) confirmed the link between feelings of powerlessness and conspicuous consumption. This suggests that status-signaling products (brands) are used to combat aversive states (such as powerlessness). Thus, considering the confusion and uncertainty experienced in adolescence, in combination with their heightened focus on branded clothing, it becomes clear why consumption, material possessions, and particularly clothing brands play a central role in their lives (Dittmar & Pepper, 1994; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004).

Status equilibration theory and conspicuous consumption

The transition from student to employee is assumed to involve both a change in role and a change in product consumption. In addition, this transition will probably also include a change in status. Status generally refers to economic or social position within a group; in fact, most definitions of status imply that it involves the position of an individual relative to others. Frequently, status judgments use some job-based criterion such as income, occupation, or job-title (Barber & Lobel, 1952; Belk, 1985; Hyman, 1942). Because the most frequently studied relationship between status and product consumption revolves around conspicuous consumption, status equilibration theory and conspicuous consumption will also be reviewed here. Using Thorstein Veblen's (1934) theory of the leisure class as his guide, Mason (1981, pp.17-31) suggests conspicuous consumption is a necessary activity for individuals seeking higher personal status and prestige within a community. When the goal is to gain recognition and acceptance from an aspirational group, an individual's conspicuous consumption will center on products which convey

an image consistent with the image of that group. Products which are highly visible and identifiable frequently have high social or status-increasing value (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991).

An individual belongs to many different social groups and the importance of membership in a particular group varies from time to time and from situation to situation. Despite the large number of possible reference groups, an individual probably uses a relatively small number of reference groups to judge his/her own status since only one or two specific groups are relevant for any particular situation. However, some researchers have noted a phenomenon called status conversion. In their view, status is contagious; high position in one social group produces high position in another (Porter, 1967). As a result, an individual usually occupies equivalent positions in all relevant social groups and exists in a state of status equilibration.

If an individual's status is judged relative to other members of a group, then the individual's position in the group, his/her performance in this position, and his/her ability to perform are also judged. When group expectations are out of line with the individual's ability to perform, the individual experiences a type of dissonance or status inconsistency which provides one possible explanation for conspicuous consumption (Barber & Lobel, 1952; Faller, 1954; Kimberly, 1966; Porter, 1967). According to Kimberly (1966), an individual experiencing status disequilibrium will try to reduce his/her discomfort by a) raising his/her salary, b) appearing to raise his/her salary, or c) withdrawing from the group. Although the first choice is very attractive, it is often not practical. While an individual's salary tends to increase with time, the disequilibrium status is felt in the present. Much as he/she might want to immediately raise his/her salary, he/she probably does not have that kind of job control. The third option, withdrawing from the group, is certainly a viable one. However, it is the second option that explains conspicuous consumption.

According to Kimberly (1966), conspicuous consumption can be used to change the public evaluation of one's economic status without changing one's income. This re-evaluation can be engineered by allocating more financial resources to those things which are publicly visible and reducing expenditures on less publicly consumed items. Others will most likely perceive this redistribution of resources as an increase in economic well-being. Hence, it has the same effect as increasing salary – it relieves the strains of status disequilibrium. Barber and Lobel (1952), Faller (1954), and Landon (1974) look at this issue from slightly different perspectives but come to approximately the same

conclusions as Kimberly (1966). Barber and Lobel (1952) examine the connection between women's fashions and social class and note a trickle-down pattern with women copying the fashion behavior of those just above them in the social class system. Faller (1954) expands on their trickle-down effect, noting that status-symbol consumption gives the illusion of success to those who fail to achieve actual success. Landon (1974) found that consumers sometimes express their ideal self-image (who they want to be) rather than their actual self-image when they buy products, particularly highly visible products. Together, these researchers suggest some sort of status disequilibrium precedes consumption, further indicating that role transition and product consumption are strongly correlated.

Method

Self-brand connection is the topic of a large body of research. Jacoby (1978) addressed brand-character consumers by asking if they behave or process information differently than loyal consumers. Jacoby's work looked at: a) the distinguishing characteristics of specific brand purchasers, b) the purchase and usage related behaviors, c) the psychological reasons underlying purchase behavior, and d) the factors likely to induce an amount of brand switching. Using Jacoby's terminology (1978, p.112), self-brand connection can be thought of as a purchase behavior that finds a basis in terms of internally stored structures of information: brand-related beliefs, states of affect, material possessions and behavioral intentions. Jacoby does not show where those beliefs or states of affect originate. This study does so, by investigating how these beliefs relate to actual purchase behavior, not just intentions.

Adjective checklists have been used throughout clinical and counseling psychology as a tool to assess patients (Horgan, 1986). Hills (1984) used an adjective checklist as a self-description instrument and related four scales of the list to individual differences in group-solving behavior. Marsh and Barnes (1985) point out that, although "thousands of studies have included measures of self-concept, most of these emphasize other theoretical constructs and interest in self-concept comes from its assumed relevance to those other constructs." The current study tests the relevance of self-image to brand image and brand connection. Zinkhan and Fornell (1985) discuss the importance of descriptive test instruments, capturing the wide range of cognitive and emotional reactions consumers give in response to advertisements. Mehrotra, VanAuken, and Lonial, 1981 tested a 22-item adjective checklist and found that 8 of the items were predictive of advertising persuasion. Zinkham and Farnell's study

looked at the extent to which the adjective profiles related to attitude formation and purchase intention. In addition, Weiss and Mendelson (1986) looked at how trait ratings are made and what they mean with respect to the semantic similarity explanation. The adjectives used in this study have been selected for dissimilarity and lack of ambiguity for this very reason.

Subjects

A total of 119 subjects, 72 females and 47 males, ranging from 20 to 25 years of age, completed both phases of this study. Those who completed the study were given 2 tasks over a 2 week period. Subjects were recruited from the Faculty of Management within National University of Political Science and Public Administration Bucharest, which consists of students enrolled in customer behavior courses. Subjects participated in this study as part of their course requirements.

Table 1. List of adjectives used by the respondents to describe themselves

The Adjective Checklist		
Active	Fashion-conscious	Relaxed
Aggressive	Feminine	Resourceful
Aloof	Friendly	Respected
Appreciated	Fulfilled	Sacrificing
Ashamed	Good	Seductive
Assertive	Hearty	Self-indulgent
Attractive	Highly Regarded	Self-reliant
Backward	Impractical	Self-righteous
Bad	Impulsive	Sentimental
Capable	Inferior	Sexy
Career-centered	Influenced	Shy
Carefree	Informed	Spirited
Caring	Insensitive	Sophisticated
Charming	Involved	Stimulating
Compliant	Leader	Strong
Confident	Logical	Thoughtful
Courageous	Loved	Trustworthy
Deliberate	Masculine	Unique
Downscale	Old-fashioned	Unselfish

Dull	Optimistic	Untrustworthy
Emotional	Organized	Upscale
Embarrassed	Physical	Vibrant
Energetic	Practical	Vigorous
Established	Private	Warm
Exciting	Protective	Worried
Family-centered	Reasonable	Reassured

Materials

An adjective checklist with 81 items used by the subjects to first describe themselves was also used to describe the type of person who would buy a particular brand of product. This particular list was developed and used by Horgan (1986) in her investigations of brand character. A type of cluster analysis was used by Horgan to ensure orthogonality of the words used. The words on Horgan's list were found to be reliably associated with four different constructs. Horgan's 82 adjectives were taken from four or five adjective checklists used in the fields of clinical and counseling psychology. The Simmons Personal Survey (TM) was also used as a reference for the creation of this particular checklist. The selected adjectives on the list were found to be relatively unambiguous, tied to a variety of product users, and to have both positive and negative connotations. The adjectives used by Horgan were chosen for this study because of the rigorous testing of the list. The list of adjectives used can be found in Chart 1.

Procedure

Subjects were first asked what brand of clothing they consider the "right brand" to purchase. Then they were asked what brand of clothing in the same product category they consider the "wrong brand" and never purchasing. Next, males were asked what brand of fragrance they consider themselves to be the "right brand", and then which brand of fragrance they would never consider buying. Females were asked what brand of handbag, shoes, or accessories they consider the "right brand". Finally, females were asked for the brand of handbag, shoes, or accessories they would never consider purchasing.

Subjects were next given the adjective checklist and asked to describe themselves. Two weeks later, each subject was given 4 more checklists: one for their

“right brand” fragrance, one for their “wrong brand” fragrance, one for their “right brand” gender-related brand, and one for their “wrong brand” gender-related brand.

Results

The number of matches between the subjects' self-description and the brand/product user description was determined for the 4 categories, for each subject. Second, a t test was performed, comparing the means of all the “right brand” product matches to the “wrong brand” product matches. Third, another t test was done on “right brand” fragrance matches compared to “wrong brand” fragrance matches. Fourth, another t test was done on “right brand” gender-related matches compared to “wrong brand” gender-related product matches. Finally, these same three t tests were run for females only and then for males only. Table 1 reports means and t test results.

A significant different between “right and “wrong” brands of products, and a high correlation between self and product user rating, were found in all categories. These results seem to support a hypothesis that people use products to enhance self-image.

Table 2. Mean Number of Matches Between Self and Product User Ratings

	Means	Significance of T-test
For all (n = 119) subjects:		
Right Brand Total	44.2	
Wrong Brand Total	15.3	.000
Right Brand Clothing	22.4	
Wrong Brand Clothing	7.2	.000
Right Brand Gender	21.8	
Wrong Brand Gender	8.1	.000
Females only (n = 90):		
Loyal Total	45.1	
Non-loyal Total	15.7	.000

Loyal Brand Beverage	23.0	
Non-loyal Brand Beverage	7.2	.001
Loyal Brand Gender	22.1	
Non-loyal Brand Gender	8.5	.000
Males only (n = 29):		
Loyal Total	41.4	
Non-loyal Total	14.2	.000
Loyal Brand Beverage	20.3	
Non-loyal Brand Beverage	7.1	.000
Loyal Brand Gender	21.1	
Non-loyal Brand Gender	7.2	.001

Discussion

Because the experiment took place over a two-week period, it would seem that extraneous events threaten internal validity. However, self-brand connection is thought to be a stable phenomenon not likely to change over the course of three weeks.

The same time of day and same day of the week was chosen for both phases of the experiment in an attempt to control for any temporal effects that might occur. Group composition effects need to be taken into account as a possible threat to internal validity; it is well known that certain types of people buy certain types of products. Because only certain types of products were tested in this experiment, subjects might also be of certain types. This may produce a group composition effect. Sample attrition occurred, but there was no indication that those who did not complete the study would have been any different from those who did. Since the same adjective checklist was used in the first phase as the second, the experimenter accounted for practice effects and for as sensitization by not doing the two phases too close together in time.

By having at least two weeks between the first and second phases of the experiment, subject recall for both the objective checklist itself and the instruc-

tions given would seem to be greatly reduced. Brand image is a fascinating area of study because of its relevance to the study of consumer psychology and the area of decision-making in general. The study of judgment and decision-making is a rapidly growing field. Consumer decisions are a readily available and easily accessible source for the study of judgment in the field of psychology. This study shows how consumer purchase behavior is related to self-image as well as brand image. Brand attitudes may have a deep psychological basis. To understand the underlying psychological dynamics of brand loyalty and brand attitudes would go beyond current research on this topic in the fields of marketing and business. Results from applications of this research may shed light on advertising evaluations, as well as on advertising itself.

Brand image is also important to study because to date no one has been able to develop a test which could predict, with a high level of certainty, what kinds of people would buy a particular kind of product. This type of information would be invaluable to the business community, especially product planners and product testers. The findings from this experiment have revealed a number of interesting and important aspects about the consumption behaviors and attitudes of teenagers.

The importance of consumption, the “right brands” was striking. It became clear that the “rules” of consumption are detailed in terms of what is “right” and acceptable and if one is able to—and can afford to—follow the rules; it may provide some security, peace of mind, friendships and social acceptance. Not only do fashionable brand clothing and accessories appear to supersede personality and personal preference, but also there are signs that wearing the correct clothing can be considered more important than one’s own behavior. Although the role of fashion brands among peer groups has been previously reported, it was interesting to note that among young segments, self-esteem can be directly impacted by possessing or not possessing specific brands. This was due to the importance of peer approval but also because of the social comparison of possessions and the personal gratification gained from simply owning something “new.” In terms of self-esteem, fashion and branded clothing are a psychologically central aspect in evaluating the self. Respondents seemed to consider material possessions before the more traditional indicators of self-worth, for example, academic performance. It seems that self-esteem has indeed been commodified and as a result, consumption and possessions must be considered when assessing the self-esteem.

Companies spend millions of dollars each year designing products for a particular market segment. Each year those same companies spend millions of dollars to test those products. Many times they find that their target market does not care for their product, and they must spend more money to find out why. Brand character research, leading to a valid predictor of who would buy what product, would save companies a large amount of time and money. In the future, possibilities for continuing this line of research will include validation of the test instrument by using more accurate measures of consumer self-brand connection, beyond self-report, as well as using the checklist to test new products images against self-images to determine who would be more inclined to buy the new products.

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