

## CONSUMER IDENTITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BRAND

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*ABSTRACT: In a consumer culture people no longer consume for merely functional satisfaction, but consumption becomes meaning-based, and brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity. All human behavior is a symbolic action. People are not just choosing the best, the fanciest, or the cheapest brands. They're choosing brands that have the right meaning. Brands are now creating value not just by the products or services they represent, but by the meanings they generate. This meaning is being adopted by consumers to express who they are and what they stand for. Meaning, in fact, may be the most important product a brand creates today.*

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### **Brands, Meaning Transfer, and Self-Brand Connections**

Possessions can be used to satisfy psychological needs, such as actively creating one's self-concept, reinforcing and expressing self-identity, and allowing one to differentiate oneself and assert one's individuality (e.g., Ball and Tasaki 1992; Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Possessions can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties to one's family, community, and/or cultural groups, including brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Consumer researchers have extended some of these possession findings to brands (Escalas and Bettman 2005;). For example, recent research indicates that consumers construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on the congruency between brand-user associations and self-image associations (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Levy (1959) asserted that people do not buy products just for what they do, but also for what the product means; thus, brands can be symbols whose meaning is used to create and define a consumer's self-concept.

McCracken's model of meaning transfer asserts that such meaning originates in the culturally constituted world, moving into goods via the fashion system, word of mouth, reference groups, sub-cultural groups, celebrities, and the media. For example, meanings "get into" a brand through advertising because ads reference the general cultural symbols needed to provide meaning. Similarly, reference group usage of a brand provides meaning via the associations consumers hold regarding that group (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Next, meaning moves from goods to consumers, as consumers construct themselves through their brand choices based on congruency between brand image and self-image. Thus, the meaning and value of a brand is not just its ability to express the self, but also its role in helping consumers create and build their self-identities.

Reference groups can be a critical source of brand meanings. Consumers use others as a source of information for arriving at and evaluating one's beliefs about the world, particularly others who share beliefs and are similar on relevant dimensions. Consumer research on reference groups has demonstrated congruency between group membership and brand usage (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982) and has defined several types of social influence (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982;). Consumers form associations between reference groups and the brands they use and transfer these

meanings from brand to self by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self.

A critical distinction in terms of such self-construction processes is that between the use of brand associations deriving from one's own group (an in-group) versus groups to which one does not belong (an out-group). Consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands associated or consistent with an in-group and reject meanings associated or consistent with an out-group. Consumers form connections to brands that become meaningful through this process; self-brand connections measure the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2005).

If reference groups use and become associated with particular brands (i.e., the brand's image is consistent with or matches the group), such meaning may be appropriated by consumers as they construct their self-identities. For example, if I consider myself to be an intellectual and my member group of intellectuals tends to drive Volvos, I also may choose to drive a Volvo as a symbol of how intellectual I am. As a result, consumers may form self-brand connections to the brands used by reference groups to which they belong.

On the other hand, consumers may avoid associations derived from groups to which they do not belong. When out-group members use a brand, consumers may form associations about the brand that they would not like to have transferred to themselves. Nevertheless, the brand becomes meaningful through the process of avoiding the out-group symbolism in constructing one's possible self. For example, if I am not a member of a sports club (and do not desire to be a member) and see sport's club members wearing Polo clothing, I may specifically choose not to wear Polo clothing in an attempt to distance myself from the sports club symbolism of the Polo brand. Thus, the type of group associated with the brand (in-group versus out-group) will moderate the effect of brand associations on self-brand connections.

Similarly, if a brand is not typically associated with an in-group (e.g., its image is incongruent with the group), this may negatively affect self-brand connections. The same identification processes that lead to a connection with a brand associated with an in-group, lead to rejection of a brand with an image incongruent with the in-group.

On the other hand, if a brand's image does not match an out-group, the prediction is not quite as clear. The lack of match may actually be viewed favorably, based on balance-theory considerations (Heider 1946), thus leading to enhanced self-brand connections. Alternatively, the lack of match may simply be viewed as irrelevant, leading to no effect on self-brand connections.

### **The Role of Self-Concept**

Brands become linked to the self when a brand is able to help consumers achieve goals that are motivated by the self. For example, brands can be used to meet self-expression needs, publicly or privately; can serve as tools for social integration or to connect us to the past; and may act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem, allow one to differentiate oneself and express individuality, and help people through life transitions.

Social cognition research on the self has developed a variety of theoretical constructs to explain the complex nature of self-knowledge and self-related behavior. The self is conceptualized as consisting of multiple aspects (Linville 1989), including social roles and personality traits, the most important of which are schematic self-aspects (Markus 1977), and possible selves, that is, individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming.

### **Independent versus Interdependent Aspects of Self**

Although the self-concept often is considered to be distinct from other people's self-concepts,

recent cross-cultural evidence suggests that individuals' mental representations of self may depend on social aspects of self such as relationships with others and membership in social groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Such research indicates that on average, Westerners tend to focus on the personal self, thinking of themselves in terms of unique personal traits and attributes and de-emphasizing others (independent self-construal), whereas Easterners tend to focus on the social self and how the self is related to other people (interdependent self-construal; Markus and Kitayama 1991). For example, research shows that more individualistic cultures are characterized by more focus on the private self and less emphasis on the collective self, with increased emphasis on the collective self for less individualistic cultures.

These two aspects of self can coexist within the individual (Aaker and Lee 2001; Brewer and Gardner 1996) and can vary across ethno-cultural background within Western society. That is, individuals may have both independent and interdependent aspects of self but may differ in the relative strength of those aspects on a chronic basis, leading to individual differences in self-construal that can be assessed.

For example, compared to Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, whites will be relatively more independent and less interdependent in their self-construals (Aaker and Schmitt 2001).

These differences are important, because independent self-construals can lead to motivations different from interdependent self-construals. Independent self-construal goals include both independence (i.e., self-determination), and differentiation (i.e., distinctiveness), whereas interdependent self-construal goals focus on aspects of self shared with some subset of others, enhancing maintenance of relationships (Aaker and Schmitt 2001).

By considering different facets of the independent self (Kampmeier and Simon 2001), we can make more detailed predictions about the combined influence of independent versus interdependent self-construal, ingroup versus outgroup, and whether a brand matches or does not match the image of a group. The most clear predictions relate to the case of outgroup brand associations.

Kampmeier and Simon (2001) show that when the focus is on a comparison to an outgroup, the differentiation aspect of the individual self is emphasized. Thus, for more independent individuals, comparison to the outgroup should lead to a heightened need to differentiate from the outgroup to create a unique self-concept.

On the other hand, people with more interdependent self-construals should be more immune to outgroup brand associations, as their primary motivation stems from forming relationships within the ingroup. This implies that a brand associated with the outgroup should lead to lower self-brand connections for more independent individuals than for more interdependent individuals. There is not a clear argument for differential effects for the ingroup related to degree of independence versus interdependence.

## **Brand Symbolism**

The basic premise is that consumers appropriate the meaning of brands as they construct their self-identities, particularly brand meaning that arises from reference group use and non-use of brands. However, some brands are better able than others to communicate something about the person using them. For example, prior consumer research proposes that publicly consumed (vs. privately consumed) and luxury (vs. necessity) products are better able to convey symbolic meaning about an individual (Bearden and Etzel 1982). Additionally, a brand that is very popular and used by many different types of people (e.g., a Honda Accord automobile) may not communicate specific associations about the person who uses it.

Consumers will be more likely to form self-brand connections to symbolic brands with appropriate associations as they construct their self-identities than with brands that do not

communicate much about the self-identity of the user. Conversely, consumers will be more likely to reject forming a self-brand connection with symbolic brands with inappropriate associations than with non-symbolic brands.

### **Brands and consumer divergence**

Kids often want to separate themselves from their parents and jocks want to separate themselves from geeks. Shanghai residents avoid purchasing Volkswagen Santanas because they are a favorite first car among the suburban nouveaux riches (Wonacott 2004). People often diverge from others in their choices, adopting tastes that distinguish them from other people and abandoning tastes if too many people, or the “wrong” types of people, adopt them.

Prior research demonstrates that consumers have a drive to differentiate themselves from others (Snyder and Fromkin 1980; also see Ariely and Levav 2000) and these individual-drive theories have focused mostly on stable individual differences in needs for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001) or the consequences of temporary situations that lead individuals to feel undifferentiated. They suggest that individuals with higher needs for uniqueness prefer more unique products (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001) or that when situational pressures make individuals feel overly similar, people seek ways of achieving a sense of difference (Snyder and Fromkin 1980).

But across individuals and independent of temporary situational pressures, people tend to diverge more in certain product domains than others. Prior work on individual drives for differentiation tells us a lot about who is more likely to prefer unique products or when people might be more likely to prefer them. But these approaches have less to say about where people diverge, or why across individuals people diverge more in certain domains. Why might people diverge more in certain domains of social life and what does this tell us about the mechanisms that motivate divergence?

### **Individual drives for differentiation**

Scholars across the social sciences have argued that people have a drive to be different (Brewer 1991). The most well-cited drive approach in consumer behavior and psychology, the uniqueness literature (Fromkin 1970; Snyder and Fromkin 1980), contends that individuals experience a negative emotional reaction when they feel overly similar to others.

Uniqueness research has focused on temporary situational pressures and stable individual differences. When people are temporarily made to feel overly similar to others, they behave in ways that allow them to feel different (e.g., being creative, Fromkin 1968, or misremembering levels of similarity). People with higher stable needs for uniqueness also prefer greater differentiation from others on a more consistent basis (Snyder and Fromkin 1977; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001) and individuals care more about being unique in domains they find personally important (Campbell 1986). A car enthusiast, for instance, should care more about having a unique roadster than a coin collector.

These approaches, however, are mostly silent on the issue of why divergence would vary by domain. Personal importance, for example, suggests that coin-collectors and bottle-cap collectors both care more about being unique in their own particular personally important hobby domains, but it cannot explain why sports and theater and cooking enthusiasts would all prefer more distinction in their hairstyles and music choices as opposed to their dish soap and power tools.

Similarly if individuals prefer to diverge more in certain domains, this cannot be explained by a universal drive for difference, by stable individual differences in this drive, or by temporary fluctuations in this drive. The fact that divergence happens more often in certain domains—across individuals—suggests that something beyond just internal drives may be causing divergence.

## **Divergence to avoid signaling undesired identities**

People often diverge to ensure that others make desired identity inferences about them. Rather than focusing on internal drives, this social approach focuses on the reception of meaning.

Peoples' tastes—the products they buy, attitudes they profess, and preferences they hold—can act as signals of identity, communicating useful information to others (Wernerfelt 1990).

People buy products not only for what they do, but also what they symbolize (Levy 1959). Consumers use products to construct and express desired identities (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; 2005) and people infer aspects about others (e.g., identities and other preferences) based on their purchase decisions (Calder and Burnkrant 1977;). Tastes can act as markers of social groups (Douglas and Isherwood 1978) and signal a user's other preferences (Solomon 1988; Solomon and Assael 1987). One might posit that a Volvo driver is a Democrat and that a long-haired blonde guy who says “gnarly” is a surfer.

Tastes can signal identity, but the particular identity that people infer from another's choice depends on the set of people that share the taste. Building on McCracken's theory of meaning movement, tastes communicate identity through their association with the groups, or “types” of individuals that use them (also see Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). If lots of tough people ride Harley motorcycles, then Harleys may come to signal a rugged identity. But adoption by outsiders can change this signal; if suburban accountants start riding Harleys in an attempt to seem tough, the meaning of the taste may change, either becoming diluted and losing its meaning or signaling different characteristics altogether (wannabe tough guys).

Similarly, tastes that are held by a majority will not provide clear signals of any one particular identity. Not only will majority tastes not signal any group identity cleanly, but if holding a majority taste does communicate an identity, the identity signaled may be that one is a “conformist.”

Wearing an indie band t-shirt before the band makes it big may signal hipster status, but wearing the same shirt once everyone owns it may signal that the person just follows trends (Thornton 1996) which may produce negative social impressions (see Pronin, Berger, and Molouki forthcoming).

By converging together and choosing the same thing in a given domain, similar individuals can imbue a taste with meaning, leading it to signal desired characteristics (e.g., group membership). But if that taste is also held or adopted by outsiders, it may lose its ability to signal desired characteristics effectively.

Consequently, people may diverge in their choices to distinguish themselves from members of other social groups (Simmel 1904/1957). They may avoid selecting tastes that are held by out-groups or a majority and abandon previously held tastes that are adopted by out-group members. People don't just differentiate themselves from out-groups in whatever idiosyncratic way they happen to choose, indeed to signal identity clearly, people don't want to be the only one holding a given taste. Identity-signaling thus involves both processes of convergence and differentiation. Similar individuals converge together to imbue signals with meaning, but diverge from members of other social groups so they can avoid signaling undesired characteristics (see Berger, Heath, and Ho 2006 for an indepth model).

## **Dissociative Reference Groups**

The reference group literature typically distinguishes between three types of reference groups: membership groups, aspirational groups, and dissociative groups.

Membership reference groups are groups to which an individual currently belongs (e.g., a family, a peer group, one's gender group). This is a type of positive reference group that the individual belongs to, identifies with, is attracted to, and feels psychologically involved with.

Aspirational reference groups are also positive groups that the individual identifies with and is

attracted to, but also that the individual aspires to be member of (e.g., celebrities, a desired social group membership, etc. [e.g., Englis & Solomon, 1995]).

Dissociative (or negative) reference groups are those groups an individual wishes to avoid being associated with and “disidentifies” with (Englis & Solomon, 1995).

Although previous research links self-identity to reference group influence (Whittler & Spira, 2002), in the current studies it is shown that self-presentation concerns play an important role in determining the impact of dissociative influence. Although past research on consumer reference groups has largely examined the role of membership groups on people’s self-reports regarding social influence, the current studies demonstrate that the desire to avoid certain groups can influence consumer evaluations and choice.

Past research consistently demonstrates that membership reference groups can influence people’s intentions, attitudes, and behaviors (Whittler & Spira, 2002). For example, members of one’s own group have been shown to influence:

- exercise intentions (Terry & Hogg, 1996),
- intentions to engage in sun protective behaviors (Terry & Hogg, 1996),
- the persuasiveness of messages (Haslam, McGarty, & Turner, 1996),
- evaluations of products and advertisements (Whittler & Spira, 2002),
- self-reports of product and brand selections (Bearden & Etzel, 1982;),
- as well as reports of information seeking and purchasing decisions (Moschis, 1976).

In addition, researchers have documented a congruency between group membership and brand usage. Research efforts have also focused on the aspirational role of referent others. Similarly, aspirational reference groups have been shown to guide consumer preferences. Most of this research focuses on the role of celebrities or athletes in influencing consumers.

For example, research suggests that celebrities are often effective endorsers when there is a “match-up” between the celebrity and the product and when the celebrity doesn’t endorse too many products.

In addition, identification with admired groups relates to purchase intentions. For example, Madrigal demonstrated that the level of identification with a basketball team was positively related with intentions to purchase a sponsor’s products. In sum, past research has largely focused on consumer social influence via both membership and aspirational reference groups.

Research suggests that there are a number of “possible selves” that an individual has the potential to become in the future (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986) and that these possible selves include undesired selves that we wish to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986;).

Research also indicates that people not only favor ingroups (i.e., membership groups), but also avoid and disparage out-groups (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Marques, Abrams, & Paez, 1998;) and decrease their association with groups that do not confer positive associations. Moreover, research suggests that consumers will avoid products with negative symbolic implications (Banister & Hogg, 2004), exhibit negative attitudes towards lifestyles they wish to, and demonstrate who they are by avoiding particular products (Muniz and Hamer, 2001).

It seems likely then, that the desire to avoid dissociative reference groups will influence consumer preferences. Such a desire to avoid association with dissociative reference groups should be particularly motivational (rather than the desire to avoid out-groups more generally) because a dissociative reference group is a very specific type of out-group.

Although there are some out-groups the individual is not really concerned about, a dissociative reference group is an out-group that the individual is motivated to avoid being associated with. For example, consider a student who views herself as belonging to a particular in-group – “the jocks.” She may consider “the skaters” to be an out-group, but is not concerned about them and would not go out of her way to avoid a product associated with being a skater (e.g., cargo shorts or certain style of shoes).

However, if she considers “nerds” to be a dissociative reference group then she may indeed go

out of her way to avoid a product associated with that group (e.g., a pocket protector).

Indeed, self-report research suggests that membership reference groups may have greater influence when the product is publicly rather than privately consumed. Bourne's original theorization regarding reference group influence suggested that membership reference groups exert greater influence when consumption is more conspicuous (Bourne, 1957), presumably because this is when people are most concerned with self-presentation.

In addition, attitude research indicates that individuals are more likely to oppose another person's opinion when that individual is associated with a negative reference group, a finding that is correlated with public self-consciousness.

Furthermore, products are often used to symbolize to others what type of person the individual is and serve "...as a means of communication between the individual and his significant references".

Indeed, people's consumption patterns (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005) and tendencies to use products to represent the self to others (Sengupta et al. 2002) are related to self-presentation concerns. Similarly, it seems likely that products associated with particular reference groups will have implications for consumer evaluations and choice, particularly when self-presentation concerns are relevant.

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