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The Self-Concept and Symbolic Consumption; Their Effect on Consumer Behavior

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THE SELF-CONCEPT AND SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION;
THEIR EFFECT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR



CORY L. DOBBS

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the graduate
School of Lindenwood College in Partial
Fullfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science Administration (Marketing)

1993

Abstract

A major issue confronting consumer researchers and other investigators of social-psychological phenomena is whether individuals are motivated to purchase products that symbolically are congruent with their self-concept.

This issue is of particular importance to consumer and marketing researchers, since much of their data and resulting actions depend on the decision processes leading up to the consumer's choice of product for consumption. Examining the relationship between the self and consumption through congruence of self-images and images of owned or desired products reveals that the consumer regards his or her consumed products as expressive of themselves.

Perception plays a critical role in consumer decision making. Perception of a product's attributional meaning, perception of one's self and the resulting perception of the congruity of these two links in consumption behavior. The essence of a product, then, becomes not the physical product itself, but the

relationship expressed in symbolic form between the product, its owner, and the rest of society (usually reduced to a reference group in consumer behavior).

A fairly large number of studies have confirmed the existence of a relationship between consumer self-perception and product-image congruency. This suggests that self-image and product-image congruency may be an important factor in the development and understanding of a significant element of consumer behavior, the self-concept.

This paper examines the stream of scholarly literature on consumption symbolism and the subsidiary notion of the self-concept in consumption behavior. This study will utilize a sociological approach to offering an interpretive framework of the self-concept. The focus will be a conceptual synthesis of the self-concept, its application in shaping and determining the behavior of the consumer in relation to the effects of the socio-cultural environment.

The assumption that many products possess symbolic features and that consumption of these goods may depend more on their social meaning, and its congruence with the individual's self-concept, than the products

functional utility is the central focus of this paper. It is hypothesized that some portion of product meaning will be held in common by members of a given consumer sub-group. This hypothesis puts forward the premise that consumers will tend to purchase the product whose image is closest to his own, and that the individual tends to see himself as he perceives his significant others him. This perception of themselves forms part of the basis of the individuals personality.

The subjects selected to participate in this study were high school seniors, fifteen male and fourteen females participated. The subjects were all members of the same school as well as in the same class at the time of the administration of the questionnaire. The participants were given a modified Adjective Self-Description questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to find if a common layer of meaning exists in the participants perception of product ownership.

Results of the questionnaire confirmed a common layer of meaning for the Nike and Reebok brand athletic shoes. The notion that a consumer's self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others was

accepted in the support of the hypothesis. The results corroborate the assumption that many products possess symbolic features and that consumption of these goods may depend more on their social meaning (as to a societal reference group), and the congruence of the product's image, than the functional utility of the product.

The significance of validating self-image and product image congruence is that it provides clear evidence of the principle of the reflected appraisal, "it is thus not others' attitudes toward us but our perception of their attitudes that is critical for self-concept formation" (Rosenberg 65). It is the process of symbolic communication that makes it reasonable to think that others evaluations will affect an individual's self-evaluation and consequently her behavior as a consumer.

This research has demonstrated an approach to the study of the notion of self-image/product image congruency. Because the data report a comparison of two products, and the small sample size, essentially the conclusions can not be applied across a broader spectrum, though one would need to be very cautious in

concluding that the congruent layer of meaning found in this study is unimportant. The study possess some limitations, yet within the limitations . . . if nothing else, the study demonstrates an approach that may be taken in further studies of the self-concept and product image congruency.

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THEIR EFFECT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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A Culmination Project Presented to the Faculty of the
graduate School of Lindenwood College in Partial
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Preface

We are all consumers, contributing to the ultimate basis for our economic system. Currently our GNP is over \$5 trillion dollars annually, with consumer spending making up about \$3.5 trillion per year. The role of consumer behavior and related activities are central to our culture. The challenge of meeting the product and service needs of our society is in large part the domain of the marketing profession. It stands to reason then that the marketer must know who his customer is. This may sound simple, but anytime your dealing with consumer behavior, the decisions the purchaser of goods and services makes, it is anything but simple.

The "mass" market approach that systematically aided in the growth of our great consumer society is no longer applicable to the marketing scenario. Those company's who try to be all things to all people will no longer survive. The idea of one large homogeneous mass consuming market is long gone. Marketers today must learn who their customer is, customer intimacy is the newly defined goal. To do this the marketer needs to

acquire insight into his customers needs and wants, beliefs, values and attitudes. Becoming familiar with the consumer and what motivates consumer behavior is the basis of this study, taking a narrow topic and developing it as a backdrop for an introduction into further study on consumer behavior.

The first chapter introduces the reader to symbolic interactionism, a sociological topic that lends itself greatly to consumer behavior research. The idea here is that we begin with a fundamental perspective, that is we live our day to day life in a social setting. From this grounding we will investigate the relationship of the self, the social world, and the relationship between the self and others. It is hoped that this investigation will (1) deepen our understanding of the individual's relation to consumption processes and (2) broaden our appreciation of how an understanding of the self-concept can be applied to the marketing concept.

The following pages present a very small part of the undertaking of inquiry into the consumer's behavior in the marketplace. The discussion is focused primarily on material from conventional marketing and consumer

behavior sources. But it is the author's contention that the importance of the sociological and psychological literature are essential to the discourse. The conversion of this literature to the consumer behavior field is necessary if we are to more fully appreciate and understand the complexity of the consumer. As Peter Drucker noted,

what the customer buys and considers value is never a product, it is always utility, that is, what a product or service does for him. And what is value for the customer is ... anything but obvious. (61)

The athletic shoe market is one of the most highly visible consumer markets. It is on par with the markets for soft-drinks, autos, snack food and clothing, as one of high visibility and distinguished by the conspicuous nature of the product. The marketing concept holds that the key to "achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets" (Haley 5). The marketing concept has been applied with great force in the athletic shoe market.

The advertising of these products attempts to link a sense of self to the shoe, or perceptually the selves

we might become if we acquire the shoes. Phil Knight, CEO of Nike Inc., acknowledges that "60% of our product is bought by people who don't use it for the actual sport" (Willigan 94). On the surface this consumption behavior is perplexing, why would anyone in their economically rationale mind purchase an item that does not fill a functional need?

It is my contention that this can be explained in part by the self-concept, that product ownership does contribute to the notion of who one is, and conversely how the individual's self-perception shapes what she purchases. The goal is to understand behavior through the mind of the consumer, how the product purchase and ownership are influenced by the individuals perception herself or himself as well as the perceptions of others relative to the product - the reflective self-concept.

Working from the interpretive framework that the purchase of a specific product is to protect, maintain, and or to enhance the self-concept, it then becomes apparent that this objective can be accomplished by the strategic purchase of products congruent with the

individuals self-concept or her desired self-concept.

The theory of self-image and product image congruency posits that the way an individual perceives others evaluation of him, is based in part, on the products he possesses and consumes. The theoretical perspective referred to as symbolic interactionism offers this kind of interpretive framework. Social interaction is defined as a communication process where the participants use symbolic cues to convey messages about themselves, the other actors, and the social setting. The participant is continually taking the role of the other in order to discover and interpret culturally based attitudes, values, norms, and role expectations.

For example, a group of students at a certain high school may attach a symbolic meaning to a particular article of clothing, such as a brand of jeans, an affiliation with a certain athletic team expressed by wearing a ball cap, or perhaps a brand of athletic shoes. This attachment of meaning would then become a source of shared meaning and thus connote perceived

meaning and value to those individuals who possess and even to those who choose not to possess these articles of clothing.

The present research empirically tests the commonly held assumption concerning the concept of "reflected appraisal" and its relation to product image congruency. This process involves the participant in an observer role sending cues about oneself and one's intentions to others, as well as interpreting and acting on the other's responses. This is know as taking the role of the other, a process of social interaction that is a part of everyday life.

Based on the vast amount of prior theoretical assessment in the literature of psychology, social psychology, anthropology and consumer behavior, it is hypothesized that some portion of product meaning will be held in common by members of a given social referent group. This hypothesis reflects the premise that a common layer of meaning exists for products and brands and that the consumer will tend to purchase the product whose image is closest to his own. This common layer of meaning is hypothesized to exist among two subgroups, as

categorized by athletic shoe preference. The two shoe categories are Nike and Reebok, brands that are highly visible in our consumer society.

The subject is expected to demonstrate a congruency of like meaning to the particular shoe they prefer, resulting in a cluster of adjectives that are characteristic of the individuals who possess those specific products. Those subjects whom select the "Nike" brand are hypothesized to appraise those who own the Nike brand in a consensual manner on adjectives they determine to be meaningful. Conversely, the same applies to those who select Reebok. That is, the adjective descriptors will differ for each shoe as a result of the difference in identity assessments between them.

In general, the information derived from this test explores the effects of content on individuals' object-meaning perceptions, and appraisal of others with whom the participant may identify as similar to his self. The result is a collective social meaning attached to an individual product relating to its brand image, albeit not an exhaustive one. This brand image is

a collection of properties, characteristics, and attributes associated with the brand, encapsulates a brand's connotations as shared by the public at large or by some particular target group of buyers. (O'Shaughnessy 225)

The hypotheses are expected to verify the concept of reflected appraisal, an integral construct in the development of the self-concept. Past research has been somewhat unclear in specifying the roles which various sorts of self-concept play in guiding behavior, therefore that is not the goal of this effort.

The objective of the data collection is to formulate a list of items (adjectives) applicable to measuring self-concepts, person concepts, and product concepts. The process is designed to extract from a broad based list of items (the present questionnaire contains 58) a useable subset for the purpose of developing a test for further measurement. The guidelines for the construction of such testing procedures is derived from Naresh Malhotra's original work in prescribing the construction of a scale to measure self-concepts and product concepts.

Malhotra suggests this process to identify a

meaningful universe of adjectives for the development of a semantic differential scale to measure self-images and product image congruency. Further, Malhotra suggests that "if unequivocal results are to emerge, marketing researchers must develop and design their own instruments to measure . . . the particular concepts being investigated" (Malhotra 456).

Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

Symbolic Interactionism

This paper examines symbolic consumption from the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism. The notion that products may serve as symbols enhancing the evaluation, purchase and consumption of products based on their symbolic content. The socialization process through which the meaning of items, tangible or intangible, are acquired, maintained or changed is crucial to this view of meaning and the social structures in which we live.

The field of consumer behavior is immense, cutting across various disciplines: sociology, psychology, economics, and anthropology. The collective influence of these established disciplines contribute empirical and theoretical subject matter to the nascent field of consumer behavior. It is from this historical context that researchers draw the needed concepts and theories. The consumer behavioral subject of symbolic consumption is a complex and often revealing body of knowledge

of social interaction that is of concern to contemporary consumer researchers.

Symbolic consumption is a macro-level approach to the study of consumer behavior that is based largely on a sociological grounding. The basic notion is that the theory of symbolic consumption behavior takes place at the societal level, that is it requires the concept of "others" as a variable. We are concerned with the aggregate of influences, the cumulation of environmental factors acting on individual behavior. Hirschman suggests that to understand symbolic consumption, "that a primarily sociological perspective will be required. That is, the primary unit of analysis will be the group" (4).

The notion that products may serve as symbols and consumption of these goods on their perceived meaning is based on the sociological concept of symbolic interactionism. The confluence of the concept of "others" and the concept of "self" are the integral components of symbolic consumption. That is, how individuals interact with society at large and subgroups or reference groups in determining the content of their behavior. This implies a social phenomenon as Solomon suggests, "consumption does not occur in a vacuum;

suggests, "consumption does not occur in a vacuum; products are integral threads in the fabric of life" (*The Role of Products* 319).

The study of social roles and the corresponding expectations regarding consumption patterns find their genesis in writings of American social psychologists and sociologists, as symbolic interactionism and role theory. The major contributors were Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. The discussion of "self-perception" as a contribution to social science is part of the examination of cognitive structures as posited by Cooley (1902) as "The Looking Glass Self".

The symbolic interactionism position stresses the situational character of social behavior, viewing social interaction as an intricate process in which people constantly appraise one another's behavior in a variety of roles. It is this viewing of others that forms inferences that ultimately influence the individuals course of action. Solomon suggests that "symbolic interactionism focuses on the processes by which individuals understand their world. It assumes that people interpret the actions of others rather than

simply reacting to them". Hence, the interpretations are "a function of the meaning attached to such actions" (Solomon, *The Role of Products* 320).

Cooley (1864-1929) believed the self to be a product that emerges because we develop a sense of who we are from a perception of how others see us. He used this social cognitive construct to explain how others influence the way we see ourselves and how we react to this. Cooley structured this information under the guise of the looking glass self, composed of three elements: (1) the way we imagine we appear to others; (2) the way we imagine others judge our appearance; and (3) the way we feel about those judgements. According to Cooley a person's "self-image" and conversely his self-esteem are dependent upon the perceptions reflected in the feedback one receives in each role that an individual acts in (Franks and Gecas 4). Basically then, the looking glass self refers to the internalized self evaluation processes that move a person to behave in certain ways.

Symbolic interactionism finds its roots in the thought of George Herbert Mead and expanded by his University of Chicago colleagues. Mead's hypothesis of

the self is composed of two parts: the active, spontaneous, idiosyncratic self, which Mead identified as the "I"; and the social self, the internalized social expectations and demands, which he termed the "me". Mead expanded Cooley's thesis in that he too assumed that self-esteem and self-concept derive not only from what we think of ourselves but also from what others think of us as well (Alexander 209).

Mead suggests that symbols are the foundation of social life. According to Mead symbols guide feelings and experiences into standardized operational channels. It is this structuring of our experiences that allows us to simplify complex and ill-defined elements of discourse (Alexander 207). The ability to symbolize is crucial to an individual's development of self and his socialization processes.

Mead traced the development of one's self awareness back to the interaction between mother and child, explaining the processes that took place such as, infants learning that crying brings food as a significant symbol (a gesture) that people around the child understand and react to, thus acting to reinforce the symbolic gesture. This gesture is recognized by the

infant as a successful communication strategy, thus Mead says the acquisition of a vocabulary relies on significant symbol development (Alexander 206). These assumptions constitute an important part of the body of knowledge and suggest that a symbol system is complex and made up of many elements.

According to symbolic interactionism, a predictive process occurs because of the unique capabilities of humans to engage in role playing. Mead called this "taking the role of the other". Mead referred to the learning processes of children through the structure of play, that is, taking the role of the other. The child at play assumes the role of one of the people who figure significantly in his or her social world (e.g. mother, father). By taking the role of the other, the child is able to estimate the effect of symbolic formations upon the recipient of the communication. This process of introspection allows the child to learn to look at themselves through the eyes of other people. Thus, the notion that we develop the ability of predicting another's reactions to our behavior, because of this capability to regard ourselves through the point of view of others (Piaget 492).

The historical background of symbolic interactionism is of course, predicated on the production of symbols and the subsequent ascription of meaning supplied by some indigenous element of a culture. It is vital that the reader keep in mind that symbolic interactionists fundamentally view human thoughts and actions to be resultant of social impetus. The symbolic meaning of things is ultimately ascribed and defined by society, or at the very least a subset of that society.

A symbol can be categorized as any stimulus, tangible or intangible, such as sound, color, gesture, or idea that represents something other than itself. Symbols are arbitrary items in that they can occur at multiple levels of abstraction, they do not necessarily look, sound, or even resemble what they stand for or were intended to stand for, "basically a symbol is anything that stands for or represents something else" (Wilkie 393). A system of symbols, "is the means whereby individuals can indicate to one another what their responses to objects will be, and hence what the meaning of objects are" (Mead 61).

For instance, in some cultures black is regarded as

the color that symbolizes mourning or grief, while other cultures recognize white as the color for grief.

The flags of countries the color scheme and characters used are bursting with symbolic meaning, the contextual qualities represent both exclusive and shared meaning. Symbols derive their meaning from consensus at the group or larger level and often are passed along as tradition.

Symbols are collective creations in which people must agree on their meanings if they are to be maintained and understood. It is this shared meaning by participants that creates a successful symbol system.

"A symbol may be regarded as a stimulus with a learned meaning and value; the persons response to the stimulus is in terms of this meaning and is generally not isomorphic with its effect upon the person's physical sense organs" (Solomon, *The Role of Products* 320).

Thus, symbols are powerful agents of meaning capable of evoking and activating a range of emotions in individuals, groups and whole societies.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world, material goods or services are naked of meaning in the basic sense. It is the ascribed meanings that are shared within that

culture, that gives life to the symbolism of the product. It is the synthesis of perceptual congruity of internal value, external information about the product and the person, and the image of the product user and the image of the product that interact to affect interpretations of people and products. 9

Social systems and their corresponding structural phenomena are the central forces that shape individual behavior. At one extreme "we have nations and institutions whose structures involves millions of people,...at the other we have the coming together of a few individuals" (Lauer & Handel 7). The unit of analysis for the production and the consumption of symbols is at minimum a dyad, the sociological perspective recognizes the primary unit to be a group. Hirschman recognizes that the group is the appropriate level as "symbols represent social constructions of reality" (Holman 4).

Impression formation is often the goal of the consumer, "an interactive process involving images of products and services as well as images of people consuming these items" (Belk, *Assessing the Effects of Visible Consumption* 46). The effects of product image

are a result of collective forces that take place in the social world. The consumer of a product expects the symbolic utility to enhance his self in his perception as well the view of others.

Symbolic Consumption: Products as Symbols

The processes through which products are conceived, developed and distributed has engaged marketers in the selling of symbols as well as the functional utility of the product for quite some time. Symbols perform several important functions, both for the consumer and the marketer. Tucker articulated that it is possible to define consumers' personalities through product use.

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 towards products. (139)

For the consumer, symbolism acts as a process that improves the efficiency of the decision making task, and as well, symbolic meaning adds to the enjoyment of consumption activities as a consumer. The concept of branding, building value into the product name and store

names allows the consumer to "learn" about the marketplace and makes for efficient decisions because of the knowledge or perceived knowledge and value about the product or store based on its brand image. Thus, consumer choices are made more routine as a task.

Symbols also act to enrich our experience with a product. For example, the clothing that adorns our bodies is often rich with symbolic meaning, in the consumers perception as well as potential significant others perceptions, thereby acting to enhance or maintain one's self-image (Solomon, *Diversity in Product Symbolism* 194).

Levy suggests that modern goods are essentially psychological manifestations of "personal attributes and goals and of social patterns and strivings" (119). This offers insight into the key to understanding consumer behavior, to recognize that it is motivated by goals that a consumer may have. The value of a product is a personal assessment and is therefore unique to the individual. But, there is a link between the consumers personal concept of value and that of society.

Sidney Levy's seminal article "Symbols for Sale" proposed that "People buy things not only for what they

can do, but also for what they mean" (118). This article represented the first major work toward an understanding of the notion of product symbolism. Prior to Levy's article a marketing classic "The Nescafe Affair" served to demonstrate the need for research into the symbolic meaning embedded in products.

A professor, Mason Haire, conducted a research effort for the Nestle Company in 1950. The need for the test arose because of the failed introduction of the Nescafe brand instant coffee. The coffee was introduced with great expectations, its convenience and great taste were sure to fill a need. But something went wrong.

The company conducted focus groups to determine why the product was not accepted by the American consumer. The focus groups revealed that the taste was the reason the women (the household shopper) chose not to use Nescafe. The brand manager was sure that this was not the real problem as in numerous blind taste tests the Nescafe Instant Coffee scored well (Wilkie 400).

Haire began his research with this knowledge, and hypothesized that the problem was symbolic in nature. He developed two lists, identical except one entry - one list had Nescafe Instant Coffee listed in the fifth spot

while the other list had Maxwell House Coffee, a drip grind, in that spot. Haire presented these lists to groups of women, asking them to write a brief description of what they thought of the woman who had bought the groceries on the lists.

The results proved him correct, the study found that the women had perceived the shopper with the list including the Nescafe to be "lazy" and "a poor planner," with the description of the shopper with Maxwell House on her list to be a "good wife" and "thrifty" (Wilkie 401). This evidence is indicative of the strength of the influence of consensual symbolic meaning.

The notion that products can be a compelling source of information to draw inferences about the owner (Belk 1978, 1980; Holman 1981; McCracken 1988; Mick 1986; and Solomon 1983) has become a major contributor to the role of understanding consumer decision making.

Symbolism in products is social in nature serving to act as a tool of a means of communication (Grubb and Hupp 1968; Grubb and Gratwohl 1967). The distinction of a product, then, becomes not the functional utility, "but the relation between the product, its owner, and the rest of society" (Hyatt 299). Thus it may be useful

to think of products as "bundles of benefits".

It is important to distinguish that symbols are stimuli with learned meaning, and that their production and use offer great value to society. We live in a symbolic environment, communicating through the learned and shared meaning of symbol systems. Our materialistic consumer culture promotes the importance of this system. Self expression and conforming to norms are two aspects of social symbolic interaction. The symbolic utility of products is often of greater importance than is the functional utility in socially consumed products.

The Self as a Social Object: The Construct of Self-Image and Product Image Congruity

Self-Concept can be defined as the sum total of an individual's thoughts, feelings and appraisal of oneself. Rosenberg suggests "the totality of the individual's thought and feelings with reference to himself as an object" (ix). The idea that an individual refers to himself as an object is a fundamental principle in the development of the self-concept. For example, an individual may say, "I am a liberal," a reflection of his inner thoughts and feelings though he is referring to himself as an object. He literally

psychologically steps outside himself and looks at himself as an object. This distinction of reflexive capabilities to view the self as an object is vital in the structuring of ones self-concept.

The construct of the self-concept is an integral part of several disciplines. The significance of the self-concept to the literature of sociology, psychology, and more recently consumer behavior, is of great interest and value in the development of further understanding of our thoughts, attitudes and actions. This paper examines the self-concept, what it is, and its social determinants, how society shapes it.

The symbolic interactionist approach as postulated by Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) defines the self as the product of social interaction with others. Role taking is to be the means by which an individual learns his self-concept. It is the individual's interpreting the responses of others toward oneself thereby acting on one's definition of self-concept. Succinctly, self-concept is affected by others actual or perceived appraisal and the individual's subjective perception of the other's appraisal.

The relationship of self-concept and referent

others is the major emphasis of Cooley's Looking Glass Self, and Mead's taking the role of the other.

"Evaluations of the person's roles are dependent upon the appropriateness and quality of the symbols which accompany that role, and many of these symbols are manmade-i.e. products that have acquired learned symbolic value" (Solomon, *The Role of Products* 323).

The process of introspection and the development of the self rely on the significant relationship of perceived evaluation of others and self evaluations. An individual may comply, albeit unknowingly, to the social norms of a particular reference group. As social creatures, our interaction, membership and participation with others is important in determining an individual's many selves.

The symbolic interactionist perspective asserts at least three fundamental postulates: (Kinch 1967)

1. A consumer's self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others.
2. A consumer's self-concept functions to direct behavior.
3. A consumer's perception of the responses of others to some degree reflects these responses.

These postulates are largely shaped by the concept

of reflexive evaluation, which is the tendency of a person to speculate as to the nature of other's appraisal about himself. "The feedback that the individual receives from the reflection of others' estimated appraisal results in a decision as to whom he or she "is" at that point" (Solomon, *The Role of Products* 327). People are greatly influenced by the attitudes of others toward them. An individual comes to view themselves as they perceive "others" view them.

Reference groups are important sources from which we identify with, they serve as sources of: self-appraisal, norms, standards, values, beliefs, attitudes, and role models. The reference group "concept was first used by H. Hyman in 1942 in a study of the groups people use for purposes of comparison and evaluating themselves" (Lauer & Handel 73). It is often the approval of a reference group or reference group member that influences a person's social behavior.

Normative reference groups provide us with values and standards for our behavior. Our family is our first normative reference group. Negative reference groups represent norms or behaviors that we do not admire or seek for ourselves. Aspirational reference groups serve

as positive groups that we hope to join in the future (Wilkie 434).

In general, it is widely accepted that reflected appraisals are central to the development of the self-concept. The role of significant others act as motives to elicit attitudes and behavior. The presenting of self in social situations is often a display of conforming to social norms, seeking to maintain or enhance the perceived self-concept.

Some researchers have conceptualized self-concept as a single self-construct and treat it to mean the actual self-concept, that is, the image and appraisal of oneself as he perceives himself to be. Others have posed a duality approach to self-concept. In general, it accepts the concept of self to be either the actual self-concept or the ideal self-concept. The actual-self reflects (the "real me), The ideal-self reflecting (the "person I'd like to be") (Wilkie 211). The self-concept theory is sound and offers empirical data for support. Most social scientists operate on the implicit assumption that various self-concepts exist. It is the fluidity of the self-concept that creates a variance in the empirical data and in the existing theories.

Sirgy's (1982) critical review found that the

treatment of self-concept in consumer behavior "can be characterized as fragmented, incoherent, and highly diffuse. He notes that the general view of the self-concept has been construed from a multidimensional perspective. This alternative identifies three dimensions. "Actual self refers to how a person perceives themselves to be; ideal self refers to how a person would like to perceive themselves; and social self refers to how a person presents themselves to others" (*Self-Concept in Consumer Behavior* 288).

The integration of the perceived appraisal of others by oneself, resulting in a self-concept and its effects on the perceived image of products for consumption is central to the present analysis. Many marketers utilize the implicit assumption of self-image and product-image congruency, treating it as a sacred cow. The assumptions though, are largely without the theoretical foundation of the self-concept, and the construct of reflected appraisal. Consumer behaviorists are working to correct this seat-of-the-pants approach.

The discussion of self-image and product-image congruity initiated by Levy, (1959) concluded that self-image was significantly congruent with the image

projected by various products. If this notion holds for various products and categories then the concept of the personal value of a particular product to its owner rests in its internalized meaning to the owner and his indigenous social world. The physical object or the functional utility of the product then becomes secondary to the symbolic utility or perceived meaning of the product.

Two independent influences that act on the self-concept motives are based upon the individual's volitional strivings for self-esteem and self-consistency (Epstein 1980). Self-esteem refers to the tendency of the individual to seek experiences that will enhance his self-concept. Self-consistency refers to the tendency of the individual to behave consistently with his actual self-concept. Vast amounts of the social psychology literature expound on the theory of human activities motivated in an effort to maintain or enhance one's self esteem. This general reasoning underlines the importance of the self-esteem in the development of the self. Though self actualization and self esteem constructs are beyond the scope of this paper they are integral parts to the structure of self.

The relationship between self-image and product-image congruity can influence the ways an individual may enhance self-esteem through the selection of products for consumption. To seek to enhance the ego the individual would then consume products that hold appropriate ego enhancing images. From a self-esteem perspective, the goal of the consumer is to maintain or enhance his self-concept, and this can be done in part by the products he purchases. Generally speaking, this theory is based on the assumption that all action is toward self-actualization.

All of us formulate detailed strategies about how to act and interact with others. It is the perception's of the individual actor that influence his strategies, and specifically his self-esteem motives that will influence his decisions. It is important to clarify the mechanism of reflected appraisal and the understanding of the influence of reference others in the collective self-concept.

Summary

Products as symbols may enable the consumer to communicate his ideal self-concept through products

possessing the appropriate images. These factors 22
constitute a cluster of sociological and psychological
variables that interact with one another to create the
intensity of the individual's dependence on self-esteem
or self-consistency motives. Conversely, the consumer
may be motivated to select products that are congruent
with their actual self-concept. Research supporting the
self-congruity model while limited in some aspects, is
often a good tool for marketers.

It is important to keep in mind that certain types
of products are intrinsically more predisposed to
purchase and consumption for their symbolic value.
These products are generally referred to as socially
consumed products. Some examples are, beer, liquor,
cigarettes, automobiles, homes and furnishings. It is
essential then that the reader be familiar with some of
the concepts involved in the symbols systems of these
socially consumed products.

In considering the wide variety of phenomena that
are relevant to understanding consumer behavior, the
field of symbolic consumption offers the insight into
the relationship of symbol systems and consumption.

The principle proponents of symbolic consumption

assume a position from a sociological perspective. This approach involves perceptions and evaluations of the self, the social world, and the relationship between the self and others.

The central focus of this paper, the self-concept, examines perspectives and methods in the search for a better understanding of consumer behavior through exploration of the social environment and exogenous variables. Equally important to understanding the theory of the self-concept is the proposition of the reflected appraisal, "the process of putting one's self in the place of the other (in one's mind) and responding to oneself as it is felt the other will respond" (Kinch 73). This ability along with being able to view oneself as an object have strong theoretical implications in the development and continually evolving self-concept.

Kinch's (1967) three fundamental postulates outline the systematic inquiry into the cultural and symbolic properties of consumer products. The dynamics of the reflected appraisal and its relationship to the development of self, are central to understanding the self-concept. It is with this as a backdrop that suggests how we might think about the cultural

properties inherent in consumer goods to better understand their symbolic significance.

Statement of Purpose

Every choice a consumer makes is meaningful and offers insights into the complex job of the marketer, that is, understanding consumer behavior. The 250 million American consumers buy an astronomical amount of goods and services. This then implies that it is of crucial importance to understand the "why" of consumer behavior. That is, "why we purchase the way we do". The importance of recognizing the symbolic nature of products and the ability to evaluate and interpret the important forces shaping and molding consumption patterns gives marketers an increased understanding of the factors that motivate and guide a consumer's purchases.

The purpose of the present paper is toward an explication of the self-concept in the framework of symbolic consumption behavior. Consumer decisions are not made in a social vacuum, rather, many social factors can influence an individual's purchase decision. People are often motivated to buy a good or service on the basis of what it represents to themselves, and to others

with whom they associate or to some societal referent group. These referents are identified as significant others. For example, even if an individual is making a decision, he or she may feel accountable to others, such as co-workers or family members.

The objective is to examine the self-concept and its influence on what one purchases, and conversely how product ownership contributes to the notion of who one is. The selection of products, brands, stores, and services are directly affected by the striving of the individual consumer, who judges how well these objects fit their own needs and wants in accordance with their self-image.

The principle of reflected appraisal is significant to the formation of the self-concept. It is reasonably expected that a correspondence between others' views of us and our own view are congruent, as the reflected appraisal acts to influence our perception of self. The concept of Mead's "taking the role of the other", will be used in identifying the relevant appraisal of a popular socially consumed consumer product, athletic shoes.

Chapter II
Literature Review

Marketers, consumer behaviorists and consumer psychologists are interested in sociological and social psychological studies, that examine the individual in terms of the position they occupy in the influence of social structures. Specifically, studies of how consumer behavior is affected by the attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and actual behavior influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence and appraisal of others perceptions. The focus is on the social context of how people interact and how this affects their behavior. George Herbert Mead is acknowledged as the pioneer of the contemporary study of social interaction. Primary to Mead's perspective is his concept of the "generalized other." In his exchange theory Mead indicated that a collective socializing impact was a force that generated the generalized other, suggesting that the individual's awareness of himself, and his self-evaluation, is possible from the perspective of others in a social setting (Alexander 207).

The result of this projection process is that we are able to realize what is expected of us, an implicit understanding and reaction to normative evaluation. Generally, individuals will perform a behavior when they have reason to believe that important others think positively of it.

Behavioral researchers are increasingly interested in examining symbolic consumer behavior. The impact and the endurance (life) of the symbolic meaning is correlated with the product image and the consumer's self-image and how the value the symbol holds in a particular reference group circle or society at large.

The central concept of this literature review is the relationship of product symbolism and the self concept. The treatment of the literature is formalized around the consumption symbolism literature, which is primarily developed by theory. Induced from the accepted notions of product and consumption symbolism is the concept of self, which has gradually moved from generalizations to the realm of empirical facts. It is therefore practical to begin with symbolic interaction theory and progress to the literature on the self-concept.

The major emphasis of symbolic interaction theory

is on the social nature of self-definition. As well, symbolic interactionism examines the processes by which people in interaction come to interpret a situation. Kurt Lewin (1951) articulated that a person's behavior is a function of a multitude of internal and external processes. Lewin's formulation $B = f(P,E)$ is a classic that has had an impact on formulation of behavioral theories. In Lewin's formulation, $B = f(P,E)$:

Behavior is a function of the person and the environment. Many psychologists have focused their attention mostly on factors within the person (P) such as attitudes, personality, needs, and abilities, and have paid relatively little attention to social system or environment (E) factors. (Brigham 382)

As the field of consumer behavior has evolved, the focus of research has changed, progressing from motivation theory to learning theory to judgements of the self and the social world. This philosophical evolution has produced numerous theories, but the complex puzzle of social processes has yet to achieve unanimity of the leading researchers.

The symbolic interaction orientation offers four versions; symbolic meaning, the collective behavior approach, the self-theory, and the dramaturgical model (O'Shaughnessy 160). The concepts of each version differ in explanation of the diverse phenomena involved,

but all seem to integrate the basic principles of the self-concept.

Brief treatment of these versions helps to explain the thematic intent consumer behaviorists aim for in their conceptual scheme. As each strain of symbolic interactionism has a following that have chosen that particular strain to answer their assumptions.

Symbolic meaning embraces the action that symbolism evokes involving emotions relating to an interactive relationship with the meaning associated with a particular symbol. The symbol is no more than a communications shortcut, the meaning is transferred from the psychological object to the individual

The collective behavior approach is a holistic approach taking all the exogenous variables as collective influencing factors. Patterns of group interaction, consensus building strategies and opinion formation are elements critical to theorists, the emphasis is on social movements rather than social forces.

The self-theory accepts the notion that social systems are the antecedent in the cause and effect relationship between the individual and his social world. The inclination here is in terms of structural

approach to individual interaction. The theorists who subscribe to the self-theory see the self as socially constructed.

The dramaturgical model is largely the province of Erving Goffman who wrote, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life". Goffman suggests that we as individuals engage as actors in roles, the behavior is a product of the role that the individual is playing with respect to situation specificity. Goffman suggests three types of expectations as influencing an actor's behavior in a role:

1. expectations from the "script," that is, the norms attached to the position;
2. expectations from other players (demands of other people in the situation); and
3. expectations from some audience (real or imagined "reference" groups). (O'Shaughnessy 161).

Goffman has achieved great notoriety with his work, and has influenced many of the contemporary researchers, as is evident as perhaps the strain of interactionism employed most frequently.

This taxonomy of the symbolic interactionist viewpoints are the domain of social scientists and as such are employed in sociological theory. The theory of

symbolic interactionism has generated into somewhat of an ideological level, legitimated by the dedication of an academic journal to its theoretical development. This paper reflects the literature as it has been adopted to the field of consumer behavior.

In reviewing the symbolic consumption literature the present paper addresses this investigation through the argument of three theoretical issues set forth by Hirschman in a 1980 watershed conference on symbolic consumer behavior. Hirschman suggest these as critical to its further development, significant to a pursuit of synthesis of the literature in its crossing over into the consumer behavior field of study.

Hirschman posed these three central elements necessary for analysis of symbolic consumption. First, is the need to discern the systemic level, that is at what level does the activity occur, or what is the proper unit of analysis. Second, "what are the major processes integral to the consumption of symbols"? And third, the controlling agents involved in the development of the symbolic meaning as inherent in a product. Hirschman's three central tenets are used here as a guideline in evaluating the development of product symbolism to the marketers world, and to measure how

well researchers have attended to these elements (4).

Levy's initiate "Symbols for Sale", reflected the growing influence of a sociological perspective to business circumstances "the thoughtful business man is undoubtedly aware of the growing use and influence of social science concepts in the business world" (117). Levy made the assumption that symbolic content was a derivative of communications and understandings, "and the concomitant concern with what the people of the world think (117).

The treatment of symbolic interaction has from the chief works of Cooley to modern day discussion has always assumed a social perspective. This then would infer that the study of symbolic consumption would preclude the qualification of a systemic level of, at the very least a group, however one decides to define group.

Prior to Hirschman's proclamation for adoption of an organized perspective of theory development of symbolic consumption from a sociological perspective, the existing research was from a psychological view. "In the majority of consumer behavior investigations, researchers have adopted a psychological posture" (Hirschman 4). A psychological perspective historically

treats phenomena from the Socratic dictum "know thyself" a posture from the level of the individual. Hirschman was suggesting that human cognitive organization utilize the tools of sociological analysis as the instruments to further the development of symbolic interaction.

The consumer behavioral community, following the lead of Levy and the example of Hirschman has recognized that "symbols are generated and learned at a relatively macro-level" (Solomon 321). The appropriate view to human communication and social life is a sociological approach to the social psychological perspective.

Solomon (1983) proposed a bi-directional relationship between products and consumers, viewing products as capable of acting as "a priori" stimuli to behavior. He suggested that we need to examine the contributions of products in the structuring of (consumers) reality, self-concept, and behavior (319). His contention was that most studies were of the post hoc view, that is the view of the consumption of a product motivated by need arousal.

Inherent in symbolic consumption is the concept of reflexive evaluation. This portends a dyad as the needed unit for analysis, thus requiring the systemic level to be as Hirschman suggests "that in order for an

object to function as a symbol, it must have a shared reality among consumers. That is, consumers (not necessarily all, but at least those in the reference group of interest) must have in common a shared conception of the product's symbolic meaning" (Hirschman 5). Reflexive evaluation offers a mechanism for self-evaluation, which extends to self-presentation that is generally based on a shared meaning of a symbol.

The dramaturgical version offers insight into the many social roles an individual may encounter in a day or lifetime. These roles are associated with and often identified by product symbols. Witness Solomon's (1987) examination of the role of a female executive and the product symbolism communicated by specific products for the desired role attributes. In this context Solomon identifies the social recognition in the sources of information that the consumer/role player uses to determine which products or brands denote a particular role or are acceptable/expected in that role. "These sources range from mass-media or store displays to observation of others in similar or related roles (Diversity in Product Symbolism). The observation of others is often referred to as the social comparison theory, the evaluation of role performance/conformity by

comparing oneself to significant others.

The role of clothing in the case of the female executive typifies the social context of symbolic consumption. "Clothing is often an important external cue used by others in impression formation and to project an image of self. In addition, it can also be an important internal cue reinforcing an individual's self-concept and self-confidence in role performance" (Solomon, Diversity in Product Symbolism 207).

INTEGRAL PROCESSES

The integral processes relate to the actual production, the ascribing of meaning, the consumption, and the individual's subjective experience with the psychological reality that forms the person-object relationship. Hirschman argued that symbols do not arise via parthenogenesis that they are "created and introduced into the consuming sector by a production process" (5). It is, in fact, the unique capacity of a society to link together meanings and assumptions, to function in a symbolic environment.

The stream of literature relating to product symbolism stresses the socially descriptive nature of products and their personal relationship to consumers.

We "understand the world in terms of the symbols that are available to us or in terms of symbols which we create to explain the world" (Lauer & Handel 38). It is this relationship between the object and the person that relies on the meaning involved with the product, and the perceptions and perceived responses of others that serves the complex process of self-definition.

Holman contends that there are three necessary conditions in order for a product to act as a communication vehicle. They are; visibility in use, variability in use, and personalizability (12). The consequences of the visibility and personalizability of products imputes the use of products for communication to primarily enhance ones self-esteem. Some may even interject a sense of Machiavellianism impression management into an individuals selection of products that are used to communicate self.

Kliene elaborates that "a consumption object's meaning for an individual is that person's aggregate [attitudes, images and beliefs] perception of the object." Kliene sets forth a duality of attribution for a product. "One's perception consists of two dimensions: an interpretation of the object's attributes (the attribute dimension) and of its action potential

(the performance dimension)" (Kliene 312). Kleine's analysis clearly proposes the separation of the functional utility from the social or psychological attributes.

We can readily see the physical components of an object, but it is often the psychological or social attributes that imbues symbolic meaning, invariably the result of the consumers attitudes and images, shaped in a normative reference. The implication is that our social world is of great importance to us, therefore the value of symbolic utility becomes an economic reality with equity and reward.

Kliene views meaning as a perception or interpretation of an object, with allowance for the contextual meaning. He holds up Levy's (1959) example of two cheese advertisements to demonstrate the contextualization of objects. He cites Levy's example:

in a recent study of two cheese advertisements . . .
. one wedge of cheese was shown in a setting of a brown cutting board, dark bread, and a glimpse of a chess game . . . Although no people were shown, consumers interpreted the ad as part of a masculine scene, with men playing a game, being served a snack. The same cheese was also shown in another setting with lighter colors, a suggestion of a floral bowl. . . . This was interpreted . . . as a feminine scene, probably with ladies lunching in the vicinity" (Kliene 311).

The process of producing the symbolic meaning of a product does in fact at times derive some of its meaning from the acts of the firms involved in the marketing of the product. People draw inferences from packaging, advertising, price, channel of distribution of products though some may argue that the marketer designs these components to fit with what already exists in a consumers perceptions.

Another important pattern of meaning ascription is in the form of stereotyping, that is making a generalization of the typical user by "gathering together information, interpreting that information, and making some judgement or inferring additional information is heavily influenced by preexistent expectations" (Hyatt 302). This process of inference introduces an inherent bias into stereotyping, though it does not deny its significance in producing, maintaining or elaborating the meaning of a particular product and its symbolic traits.

Grant McCracken's seminal article "Culture and Consumption" builds upon the dynamic nature of meaning acquisition. His model is holistic in character viewing that "culture is the 'lens' through which the individual views phenomena; as such it determines how the phenomena

will be apprehended and assimilated" (72). McCracken views the movement of meaning as a three step process. Stage one is the evocation of meaning in a cultural context, moving to the product and then to the consumer. Primary to this process is that meaning must be shared by members of the culture [or sub culture] at some fundamental level (Who is the Celebrity Endorser 315).

The integral process of consumption of symbolism will be treated later in the following review of literature pertaining to the self-concept. It is within this context that consumption of symbols deeply involves the self-concept, and as such examination of consumption is implicit in the treatment of the concept of self.

SOURCE OF CONTROL

A related distinction to the production and consumption of symbolism is the control of the symbolic meaning. Who are the agents of influence in respect to the meaning derived from a particular symbol? Are consumers active or passive agents in the control of symbols?

Belk, Bahn, and Mayer illuminate the social nature of symbolic meaning through the idea of the composition of groups of significant others as influences. "For

children as well as adults, the major sources of information about the "language" of expressive consumption are media, family, schools, and peers" (4). It is their contention that these groups are active in controlling a symbol and extending its life.

The media are in all probability the largest and perhaps the greatest source of control. For instance our culture's fascination with sports and entertainment create agents of control by development of a celebrity. McCracken (1989) illustrates the collective forces and the power of the image possessed by a celebrity endorser "the argument is that the endorsement process depends upon the symbolic properties of the celebrity endorser" (310). The promotional messages marketers send to consumers attempt to get the consumer to view the advertised brand integrated within cultural categories, connecting with norms and values in terms likely to induce a favorable perception.

McCracken illuminates this symbolic control "for example, class and status are represented by the likes of Peter Jennings and John Forsythe as patrician men and Catherine Deneuve and Audrey Hepburn as regal women" (Who is the Celebrity Endorser 312). Social class distinctions are a vital part of culture (ours in

particular). Social classes tend to differ in their lifestyles, values, attitudes, beliefs and behavior. Thus social class is a variable of culture seen by McCracken as manipulated as a vehicle for production and or transference of meaning in a product, in the context of culture (or subculture) as the antecedent.

By accepting McCracken's argument it then follows to reason that an athlete such as Michael Jordan is capable of becoming a potent force of symbolism, who can determine control and act as an agent of meaning transfer for a product such as Nike tennis shoes. "Celebrities draw these powerful meanings from the roles they assume in their television, movie, military, athletic and other careers" (Who is the Celebrity Endorser 315).

Thus, Hirschman in setting forth the precept of the compelling need to develop key research directions has persuaded the consumer behavior community that "symbols are created, not indigenous; that they are malleable, not immutable; and that their meaning as social referents is dynamic not static" (180).

An explication of the nature of the source of control of the symbolic meaning and the role that it plays in the transference, maintenance, and dynamism is

of importance to researchers, who have answered Hirschman's call for direction. Clearly, it is imperative to understand the issues of coordination, organization and information flow involved in the assessments of the systemic level, the production and consumption of symbols, and the control of the meaning involved in products and services.

The second theoretical issue of central concern is the self-concept theory, the construct of self as influenced in a social setting. Self-definition is an integral part of this study and the processes of conceptual frameworks and an understanding consumption symbolism are part of the formation of the self-concept.

The treatment of self-concept in the marketing and consumer behavior literature has led to an insightful awareness of the consumer choice process (Grubb and Hupp , 1968; Birdwell, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Landon, 1974;) self motives, (Epstein, 1980;), self congruency theory (Sirgy, 1980, 1982, 1992;) the role of impression management, (Burnkrant and Page, 1980; Solomon, 1983) and an anthropological perspective (Belk, 1988, McCracken 1986, 1989). These studies have generally supported the hypothesis of a positive relationship between self and ideal-self concepts and consumer's

purchase decisions.

The literature is largely theoretical, though more recently the research community has embraced empirical studies, though with various caveats.

The discussion of self-image and product image congruity was initiated by Levy (1959). Levy focused his attention upon the image projected by the product and the consumer's motivation to purchase, "when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself" (119) the congruency of images, of the self and the product, inferred the preference for products.

Birdwell's study of the influence of image congruence on consumer choice was the first investigative attempt to measure the extent to which self-concept is congruent with purchase. His attempt was to demonstrate empirically the relationship between an automobile's owner's perception of himself and his perception of his car, "to show that persons with different sorts of personalities bought different sorts of automobiles" (76). He employed a semantic differential as the measuring instrument, utilizing a seven-point scale of polar adjectives. Birdwell posed as his point of departure from previous research his

utilization of the self-concept as the central component. He criticized prior research for applying personality as the central component. He argued that,

In attempting to account to some extent for this disagreement, two facts stand out clearly. First, the concept of personality is not clearly formulated, and second, the instruments used by most researchers to isolate personality characteristics are diverse and sometimes suspect. (76)

Birdwell's fundamental problems serve as mention of the problems that have plagued research of this nature, whether by consumer behaviorists or any area of research concerning behavior.

Birdwell concluded that a significantly high degree of congruity exists, with a higher degree of congruity for owners of Cadillac, Lincoln, and Imperial, all higher priced cars. That is, the individuals self-image was more closely aligned with the product image, more significantly for those products and people in a higher socioeconomic category. He also concluded that as you go down in price of the auto, the congruency also tended to go down.

Dolich (1969) advanced the congruity research, building upon Birdwell's' study, though he utilized a semantic differential as well, he treated two levels of

self (actual and ideal), whereas Birdwell treated self unidimensionally. Dolich's differentiated his analysis by seeking to measure product images of most and least preferred brands across four product categories. In his study, product preference was the dependent variable with product conspicuousness the moderating variable. The "social" products were beer and cigarettes, the "private" products were bar soap and toothpaste. Dolich concluded that there was a greater congruity between actual self-image and the most preferred brands within the four product categories.

Dolich found that about equal congruency existed with self-image and ideal self-image with the most preferred product in all four product categories. The positive or negative feelings toward a product and its correlation with a persons self image, measure an element of congruency but do not measure behavioral intention.

Grubb and Hupp utilized a descriptor list of sixteen adjectives to be rated for applicability to the concepts: self, VW owner, and GTO owner. The student subjects were asked to rate themselves and the owners of Volkswagens, and Pontiac GTO's. Thirty six GTO owners and forty five VW owners rated the applicability of all

sixteen adjectives (eight were specific for GTO's, and eight were specific for VW's) to the concepts of self, VW owner and GTO owner. They concluded that VW owners and GTO owners have significantly different self-images. The VW drivers tended to describe themselves as "thrifty" whereas the GTO drivers tended to describe themselves as "adventurous". It is interesting to note that the VW drivers perceived a similarity amongst themselves, whereas the GTO drivers differed to some extent.

Sirgy in "Self Congruity versus Functional Congruity" points out that there are at least four different approaches that "can be identified in self-concept studies that deal directly with product image". Sirgy identified these as: (1) product image as it relates to the stereotypic image of the generalized product user; (2) product image in direct association with the self-concept; (3) sex-typed product image; and (4) differentiated product images (288). Sirgy contends that Grubb and Hupp (1968) defined the stereotypic image of the generalized product user. Contending that their treatment of the self-concept as a single variable is indicative of the imprecise conceptualization of the self-concept that has plagued its development and

applicability to marketing theory (288).

Landon (1974) supported the examination of actual self-image and product image congruity with his investigation of the relationship between the consumers' actual self image, ideal self image, and the intent to purchase. Landon's attempt to measure the intent to purchase demonstrates the gradual progression of the self-concept research, from earlier research of congruency to his attempt to measure congruency and its effect on behavioral intention.

Employing a modified Q-sort methodology, whereas prior research had primarily utilized the semantic differential, Landon obtained results from 179 male and 173 female student subjects across 19 product categories, some as periphery as mouthwash and sun tan lotion. His intent was to clarify the relative importance of self and ideal self-image to the purchase intention of customers.

The results of his study did indicate that purchase intention is correlated with the self-image. Landon found that both actual and ideal self influence purchase intention. The indication was that the ideal-self image for some products and some subjects were correlated and that actual self-image for other products for other

subjects also were correlated.

Landon cautioned that better measures of self-concept are needed and that the measuring of congruence or incongruence in regard to the self-concept purchase choice relationship "must no longer be considered fruitful" (50).

In attempting to understand the self-concept and its relationship with product image congruity, Sirgy was concerned about the treatment thus far of the self-concept. In his investigation he identified four perspectives of the self-concept, (1) actual self; (2) ideal self; (3) social self; (4) ideal social self-image (*Self-Concept Relation to Product Preference* 351). In effect, Sirgy had issued a call to operationalize the self-concept, to bring continuity into future research efforts.

The expanding of the continuum of the concept of self suggests that Sirgy was in agreement with Schenk and Holman (1980) and their fundamental symbolic interactionist viewpoint that considered the situational self-concept, that is the self is situation specific. The theoretical underpinnings point to a more dynamic self, that is that the self is not static as the prior studies assumed, or at least treatment of the self-



concept.

The situational specificity of the self-concept has several advantages: (1) it replaces the proliferating concepts of actual self and ideal self of which proliferation induces fragmentation and less consistency for evaluations of studies; (2) a behavioral component is included; (3) it precludes the concept of "subselves" in consumption activities, the expression of self-concept in a given situation.

Sirgy proposed that:

actual self-image (i.e., the degree to which a subject believes that he has a specific image), social self-image (i.e., degree to which a subject believes that he is perceived by others as having a specific image), ideal self-image (i.e., degree to which a subject would like to have a specific image), and ideal social self-image (i.e., degree to which a subject would like to be perceived by others as having a specific image) (Self-Concept Product Preference 351).

Specifically Sirgy hypothesized that product preference is primarily influenced by ideal- or ideal social-congruity. The research objective was to develop and test the matching between product image and ideal self-image or ideal social self-image. This was a break from prior research efforts, thus portending the need for a paradigm shift.

Questionnaires were administered to one hundred and

twenty-four female students enrolled in undergraduate psychology classes. Six brands of magazines and six brands of automobiles were assumed to be variable in their personalization potential. This attends to Holman's argument that at least three conditions be present to distinguish products as communication tools; visibility in use, variability in use, and personalizability; (the degree to which the use of a product can be attributed to a stereotypic image of the generalized user) (9). Sirgy used the personalization potential as a moderating variable.

The results of the relationship between social self-image/product-image was not very well supported. The relationship between ideal social self-image/product-image congruity found moderate support.

Sirgy (1992) in subsequent work has continued to emphasize the framework of a dynamic, flexible, goal directed concept of self. He has elaborated this in his social self-congruity theory.

The operation of interpersonal processes is dependent upon the individual's perceptions of and acting upon his beliefs, thoughts, and the expectations of others. Epstein (1980) added to the theoretical framework with his borrowed constructs of self-esteem

and self-consistency. These self concept motives find their development and elaboration in psychological research (Freud, Jung, Adler, Rogers, Maslow).

The influence that others have on individuals is often due to the person's concern to enhance or maintain their sense of self, a psychological construct called "ego defense". It is within the social context that dependence on others makes us sensitive to group norms, failure to comply may cause damage to self-esteem and act to reexamine the perception of self.

In a departure from the traditional self-concept product image congruity but closely aligned with Sirgy's attempts to uncover the lack of "trans-situational consistency in product selection Burnkrant and Page suggest a more dynamic nature of the self.

Burnkrant and Page applied the variable of public self-consciousness (PSC), stating that an individual's level of public self consciousness varies among individuals. Some are high in PSC while others are low in PSC, the hypothesis is that those who exhibit high PSC are more likely to be influenced by subjective norms.

In their study, scenarios were developed that were representative of a realistic encounter. Burnkrant and

Page utilized Fenigstein's measure of public self consciousness. Two scenarios were developed involving the subject and her husband preparing to have the husband's boss over for dinner. The description of the boss was that he was a gourmet who in the past had served the husband and wife a gourmet meal. The scenarios differed in the social intent of the situation. In one the boss was described as preferring to promote people of similar tastes and interests. The other described the boss as preferring to promote people with differing tastes and interests than his own.

The prediction was that, "people who are high in public self consciousness would choose products that were more consistent with the kind of impression called for in a given situation" (453) and that those low in public self consciousness were not as likely to conform.

The studies added distinction of a person's public consciousness being a variable in the degree to which an individual tends to express his self-concept, acknowledged the independent power of collective norms.

Burnkrant and Page concluded from their data that individuals "do use consumer goods to create impressions" and according to the self-concept theory "their selection of these goods is consistent with the

reward contingencies inherent in social situations" (454). This complies with the basic assumption of the self-concept theory, that individuals perceive objects to be psychologically meaningful in the context of the environment.

Solomon thematically subscribes to the Goffman's dramaturgical viewpoint, undertaking the theory that individuals use products as a form of impression management to influence the ascriptions others might make of them. Solomon argues that "the subjective experience imparted by the consumption of many products substantially contributes to the consumer's structuring of social reality, self-concept, and behavior" (The Role of Products 319). According to Solomon, product symbolism is an antecedent to role definitions and behaviors connected with those roles.

Solomon refers to his view as "homo faber", meaning man as the maker and user of objects. This is in contrast to the prior literature with the viewpoint of "homo ludens", the experiential examination of products as evidenced by Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) investigation of hedonic consumption. Solomon's perspective focuses on "consumers' relationships with the objects they produce and purchase" (The Role of

Products 319). This notion suggests "that a significant portion of consumption behavior is actually social behavior -and vice versa" (The Role of Products 319).

Solomon's approach is an adoption of the fluid perspective that Sirgy has called for with his postulation of the self-congruity theory as outlined above. Solomon acknowledges that consumers do in fact have many self-concepts, and that a correlation does exist with various situations.

Because of the almost infinite number of stimuli in an individual's environment, the notion of a fluid role playing self is comprehensible. To this Solomon posits that "products function as social entities which, much like other (human) role models, act as a guide to behavior" (The Role of Products 327). Many of the roles that consumers play provide some degree of social status, recognition, and prestige, thus the products act to enhance or maintain self-esteem, as well as improving performance of the role.

Belk's seminal "Possessions and the Extended Self" offers an anthropological conceptualization of the extended self and posits an intense object-person relationship, introducing a broader view of the self. The "extended" self is a demonstration of how the

consumer experiences products by the process of investing self in objects. The consumption of objects become part of the self, acting much like personality traits. Belk's extended self theory examines how people encode internally and display externally who they are by the products they own.

Sirgy points out that Belk (1988) and Solomon (1983) offer theory into "mechanisms through which product symbolism contributes to the formation and change of the consumer's self concept (Sirgy et. al. 311). This recently emerging importance to the field of consumer behavior is in the context of Sarte's (1943) distinctions of having, doing, and being. Belk argues that the ordinary things that we possess mediates our self-concept. "Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (Possessions and the Extended Self 139). According to Belk's interpretation of Sarte's philosophy, ". . . the only reason we want to have something is to enlarge our sense of self and that the only way we can know who we are is by observing what we have (Sirgy et. al. 315).

This similarity to the adage "you are what you eat" now literally implicates the meaning "you are what you

possess." Belk is the first consumer behaviorist to broach this anthropological construct, "the term extended self has not been applied previously to the conception of self-plus-possession" (Extended Self 140). Belk enlarges the scope of self from previous studies in that he suggests that pets, family, friends, and community are special categories of possessions that are commonly incorporated into the sense of self, via the extended self.

Belk holds that Sirgy (1982) and other research on the self-concept have underestimated the extent of the robustness of the contention that possessions are incorporated into the self-concept. Their moderate support is limited because of the attempts to find correspondence between perceived characteristics of objects and perceived characteristics of self. Belk argues that "only a complete ensemble of consumption objects [Solomon calls this a product constellation] may be able to represent the diverse and incongruous aspects of the total self" (Extended Self 40).

Belk demonstrates the concept of extension "as when a tool or weapon allows us to do things of which we would otherwise be incapable of" (Extended Self 145).

Possessions are capable as well of symbolic extension, "as when a uniform or trophy allows us to convince ourselves (and perhaps others) that we can be a different person than we would be without them" (Extended Self 145). Thus, our possessions can contribute to our capability to perform, as evidenced by tools, and our possessions can contribute to our being, enlarging our sense of self with a display of a trophy.

That anthropologists assume that possessions (the ritual of burying the dead with their possessions) offer insight into the possessor is itself evidence to extrapolate the possessions as symbols of self (Belk 1988). Solomon shows that the feeling of identity invested in material psychic objects can be intense. For example, "many car owners anthropomorphize their cars. . . . they describe them as "sexy, cute, muscular, quick, hot, powerful, macho" (Driving Passions 167). Who among us does not know of anyone who has described this type of relationship with their car?

Belk and Solomon illustrate the effectiveness of a qualitative approach in its yielding perhaps a richer, more comprehensive view of the person-object relationship than the various quantitative approaches have to date.

Summary

Symbolic consumer behavior has as its focus the "communicative impact of products as components of popular culture" (Holbrook 1), the coordination, the organization, and the flow of the symbolic process is crucial to the development of this process.

Symbolic interactionism and its influence on the study of consumer behavior offers concepts and theories from a sociological position. The sociological position examines the influence of the social world on the consumer's behavior. Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical interpretive framework defines social interaction as a communication process where the actors use symbolism to convey messages to others about themselves and receive perceptions of others from their use of symbolism.

The literature has endorsed the idea that the symbolic process takes place at the cultural level, that the experience of the social world impacts the social character. The ascription of meaning to symbols is the production of symbols. The consumption of symbols is viewed often times as a process of communication, consumers communicate their self-images to one another by display and use of products imbued with symbolic

meaning and images perceived to be congruent with their self-image. The process of developing the self image is referred to as the self-concept in the literature.

Understanding the processes involved in an individual's buying behavior has been a central concern in the field of consumer behavior. The consumer behavior field is comprised of a diverse set of phenomena, of which the investigation of cognitive structures and their consequences on these actions have become an important element of this domain.

The integration of external influences with internal processes is important to the structuring of information about self and others. The perceptions and appraisal of the self, the social world, and the relationship between the self and others impacts the consumers' behavior in the marketplace.

Purpose

The purpose of the this paper is toward an explication of the self-concept within the framework of symbolic consumption behavior. The objective is to examine the self-concept and its influence on what an individual purchases, and conversely how product ownership contributes to the individuals notion of who

he is.

The individuals self-concept is a configuration of perceptions and appraisals by significant others, both actual and imagined, which are incorporated in one's self-definition. Furthermore, if we accept the assumption that a basic objective of all human activity is to protect, maintain and or enhance the self-concept, then it is apparent that this objective can be accomplished by the strategic purchase of products congruent with the individuals self-concept.

The theory of self-image and product-image congruency posits that the way an individual sees others evaluating him is based, in part, on the products he possesses and consumes.

The present research empirically tests the commonly held assumption concerning the concept of reflected appraisal and its relation to product image congruency. The assumption that product symbolism is generated at the societal level leads to the assumption that products are consumed both for their social meaning (as symbols) and for their private meaning (as signs).

The subject is expected to demonstrate a congruency of like meaning (shared symbols) in relation to their choice of athletic shoe, either Nike or Reebok. The

assumption is that by dividing the subjects into two categories (those who prefer Nike versus those who prefer Reebok) will result in a consensual manner on adjectives they find meaningful. In this sense the empirical research acts as an investigation as well, identifying specific criterion from which to further research the subjects whom purchase the individual brand, or offering a base understanding of that target groups self-concept.

The specific hypotheses examined in the research are as follows:

H1: Some portion of product meaning will be held in common by members of a subgroup (Nike or Reebok owners) as measured by consensus among group members on attributes of the product's owner. That is, the group members will agree on product image/owner image descriptive adjectives thus revealing product meaning. This hypothesis basically reflects the premise that the subject's reflective evaluation of the meaning assigned by others is influenced by the products with which the self is surrounded. The (real or imagined) appraisal by significant others is, in turn, incorporated into self-definition, or one's self-concept.

Those subjects whom select the "Nike" brand are expected to appraise those who own the Nike product in a consensual manner on adjectives they perceive as being descriptive of the Nike owner. Conversely, the same

applies to those who select Reebok. That is, the adjective descriptors will differ for each shoe as a result of the difference in identity assessment between them.

The hypothesis is expected to verify the formative principle of reflected appraisal in the development of one's self-concept. The self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others and the consumer's self-concept functions to direct his behavior.

Chapter III
Research Methodology

Subjects

Subjects for this ad-hoc research were 29 high school seniors ranging in age from 17-18 years old. The students were all members of an economics class in a Phoenix area high school. There were 14 males and 15 females who responded to the questionnaire. The sampled population was a convenience sample for data collection. Reliability, social desirability, and validity assessments based on student samples have been described elsewhere, and were not of concern as this empirical effort is exploratory and designed to demonstrate the construct of reflected appraisal.

Because of the objectives of the study, a sample population of high school seniors was deemed appropriate. Erik H. Erikson profile of the human life cycle and life stages suggests that the selected subjects would be appropriate. He hypothesized eight different stages of human development (Monte 212). In this analyses he identifies the adolescent stage (the population used here) as embroiled in a psychosocial

crisis of "Identity versus Role Confusion." The assumption is that the respondents of this research fit this profile and that the investigation of self-image and product image congruence as posited in the concept of reflected appraisal is ideally suited to this sample.

Instrument

The self-descriptive data was extracted by use of an adjective self-descriptor technique. The questionnaire used was a modification of the Adjective Self-Description test (ASD) by Donald J. Veldman, University of Texas at Austin. This questionnaire is similar to the widely used Adjective Check List (Gough and Heilbrun, 1965).

The ASD (adjective self-description) attempts to identify commonalties in across various personality dimensions. Seven dimensions act as factors along which individuals systematic analysis will reveal certain commonalties in their responses. The seven dimensions measured are: (1) Attitude, (2) Behavior, (3) Efficiency, (4) Orientation, (5) Anxiety, (6) Ideology, (7) attractiveness.

It is Veldman's contention that "taken together, multiple personality trait-dimensions may be considered

to define a personality space" (Veldman 2). The seven dimensions consist of eight adjectives related to that dimension, for a total of fifty eight adjectives for self descriptive purposes. For example, the "attitude" dimension utilizes adjective descriptors such as, cheerful, gentle, and good-natured. The technique of dimensionality is applicable to the research applications of this study, with modification coming in the defining of measurement. The ASD is used to identify the "factor scores" as they relate to the individual's self-image and his concept of "real self." This is done with a simple sum Likert scale.

The present study utilized a modified version of the five-point semantic differential to elicit adjective descriptions of the owners of the two products, Nike and Reebok. The modification changed the scale to a bi polar scale. The respondents were asked to represent how well each adjective applies to their perception of the owners of the products. A five-point bi-polar scale was used ranging from "Much more characteristic of Nike user" to "Much more characteristic of Reebok user". This bi-polar scale utilized five dimensions to give alternate choices from an answer of "no difference." The use of the two divergent products offers insight into

how these products are positioned against one another in the perception of a group of interrelated consumers. Many of the adjectives seem to be related to the advertising of the products, therefore the subjects would have some familiarity with the adjectives. Toward this end, this study will measure product images and self-images, assisting in the development of a scale to capture self-image product image congruency.

Procedure

The 29 subjects were given the questionnaire during seniors. To introduce the test the presentation of order of the questions was structured so as to ask the individual his preference of athletic shoe at the end of the questionnaire. The adjective descriptors were offered first in order to elicit a closer representation of the subjects attitudes toward the products owner without the bias of social desirability if they knew they were rating a product they had chosen.

The class received the questionnaire containing directions with a sample question and response at the beginning of the questionnaire. The facilitator read the instructions aloud and asked the respondents to answer the sample question accordingly. The respondents

were then asked if they had any questions regarding the completion of the questionnaire. The instructions and sample were repeated on page two of the questionnaire in the event that the respondent would need to refer to them. The objective of the repeating of the instructions was to increase the likelihood that the respondent would answer all adjective descriptors alike.

The total time for the administration of the questionnaire, including explanation and debriefing was twenty minutes. The debriefing informed the respondents that the questionnaire was an investigation into their aggregate appraisal of the owners of the two products. At this time the respondents were reassured of their total anonymity.

Coding

The completed questionnaires were divided into two exclusive groups according to the individuals response of a preference for Nike or Reebok. The Respondents whom selected Nike were placed into the Nike category and the same was done for those specifying a preference for the Reebok athletic shoe.

The seven personality dimensions were assigned a factor number. The dimension of attitude was assigned a

factor number 1, behavior a 2, efficiency 3, orientation 4, anxiety 5, ideology 6, and attractiveness was assigned as factor 7. Each adjective on the questionnaire was assigned the corresponding factor number, for example, next to the adjective "cheerful" the number 1 was placed signifying its inclusion in the dimension of "attitude." Each dimension and its adjective descriptors were placed into the rows of the data matrix.

Each questionnaire was assigned a respondent number and gender identification. Each column represents an individual respondents responses.

The 5-point bi-polar scale for questionnaire responses were assigned a numerical score. A response of "Much more characteristic of Nike" was converted to a value of 1. "Slightly more Nike" was given a score of 2, "No Difference" a 3, "Slightly more Reebok" a score of 4, and the other Polar "Much more characteristic of Reebok user" was given a value of 5.

The individual respondents responses were converted into the appropriate numerical value for tabulation purposes. The numerical value was then placed into the row of the corresponding adjective, with the column the domain of the respondent. Thus, each row represents the

adjective score while the column represents the respondent. The tabulation of the adjective scores is done by row.

Data Analysis

Responses to a questionnaire were obtained from 29 high school seniors. The questionnaires were administered in an economics class, with the assumption that this represented a wide cross-section of the student population as the course is a required course and not an indigenous course of interest.

Each student rated his or her own perception of the owner of a particular athletic shoe, thus attempting to achieve a reflected appraisal of the owner of the product.

A data matrix for the evaluation was designed along the seven dimensions of the ASD questionnaire. All the adjectives for the particular dimension were placed in their respective category. The purpose of this structure is to identify the dimension that an adjective is a property of.

The questionnaires that were administered contained a bi-polar scale of five points, with the mid-point representing a response of "no difference." The coding

of this data was then collapsed into three response categories. These categories are labeled; Nike, No Difference, and Reebok. Responses of the numerical coding of 1 or 2 were collapsed and placed in the Nike category. The responses of 4 and 5 were collapsed and attributed to the Reebok category. The respondents selection of "No Difference" was coded with the numerical value of 3.

The use of the five-point scale was to give the respondents alternate choices representing a differing degree of adjective closeness as a descriptor. This was done to foster a response that was perceptively still attributable to the owner of the product while limiting the less useful "no difference" responses.

The analysis results from the tabulation of the responses by group, Nike or Reebok. The respondents in the Nike and Reebok categories were categorized and evaluated on an adjective-by-adjective basis. Column 1 on the Nike chart represents a response of characteristic of Nike, column 2 represents no difference, and column 3 represents a response of the adjective being more descriptive of a Reebok owner. This procedure was duplicated for the Reebok group.

Analysis and measurement of the data was done by a

simple frequency tabulation and conversion into a percentile score. This procedure was chosen because of the data being of nominal quality. The measurement was done by an arbitrarily selected significant percentage. That is if a score of higher than 53% in the Nike group or 55% in the Reebok group (calculated as 1 n more than half of the responses) was achieved on an adjective it was placed into the significant category.

Alternatively, if a score of 20% or below was achieved this also was arbitrarily chosen as a indicant of some significance. A summation scale score is not possible because of the bi-polar adjectives representing two divergent product owners, whereas to be able to sum the scores we would need to have one product as the variable for scoring.

An extremely high correlation of reflective value is represented by a score of 75% or higher. The contention here is that a high degree of congruency of meaning exists in the individual adjective, and that this adjective is an important part of the perceptive image of the respondents. A bridging of the two groups occurs when both identify a adjective as being meaningful.

For example, this occurs when the Nike respondents score is of significant value on an adjective, and

likewise the Reebok group recognizes the adjective as being descriptive of a Nike athletic shoe wearer. The inference here is that the adjective as a descriptor seems strongly indicative of self-image and product image congruence.

The idea here is that the significant adjective descriptors are projective, that a symbolic meaning has been identified and therefore a further efforts could be made to identify more closely the relationship between the adjective/symbolic meaning and the self-images of the particular target group.

Ideally, one scale should be utilized to assess the product image and the self-image to insure a congruency within the segment under study. An objective of this study was to identify adjectives that the product owner would find meaningful in describing the user of a particular athletic shoe, in this case Nike or Reebok. The intention then is to find those adjectives that have desired or non-desired symbolic qualities for the development of a scale to measure product and self-images.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The sub-hypothesis predicted a congruence on select adjectives by those individuals whom chose Nike as their preferred brand versus the Reebok brand athletic shoe. The salient adjectives are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Nike Cluster: Adjectives of Significance

POSITIVE CONGRUENCE	NEGATIVE CONGRUENCE
1. cheerful 65%	1. gentle 12%
2. reckless 65%	2. soft-hearted 17%
3. loud 53%	3. industrious 12%
4. outgoing 65%	4. practical 18%
5. anxious 53%	5. thorough 18%
6. emotional 53%	6. quiet 12%
7. impulsive 53%	
8. individualistic 59%	
9. spontaneous 59%	
10. clever 59%	
11. good-looking 71%	
12. handsome 65%	
13. sexy 59%	
14. sharp-witted 53%	
15. talkative 76%	

The adjectives that are positively congruent are

those items that reflect what the individual's of this cluster view as strong attributes of the other members. The negatively congruent highlight the adjectives that the members agree are not representative of the owner of the Nike athletic shoe, thus demonstrating a strong agreement on attributes that are not congruent with the product image and self-image. For example, 12 percent of the Nike respondents view other Nike wearers as possessing the attribute "quiet" representing a negative congruence, while 65 percent of the Nike respondents find the adjective reckless as a descriptor of the Nike owner, this is a positive congruence.

Table 2 highlights those adjective that the Nike cluster attribute strongly to the Reebok cluster, relative to the Nike cluster.

Table 2

How the Nike cluster view Reebok owners

1. soft-hearted	53%
2. industrious	53%
3. quiet	65%
4. shy	53%

It is interesting to note that these adjectives

fell just short of the 53% level set forth as a strong agreement; gentle at 47% of respondents, silent with 47% of the respondents, and timid with 47% of the respondents indicating a slight congruency of these symbolic qualities with the Reebok possessor.

Hypothesis 2 stated a congruency would exist within the Reebok cluster, that is, that a congruency will result on select adjectives by those individuals whom chose Reebok as their preferred brand over Nike in the athletic shoe category. The salient adjectives are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Reebok Cluster: Adjectives of Significance

POSITIVE CONGRUENCE		NEGATIVE CONGRUENCE	
1. organized	58%	1. cheerful	17%
2. sexy	66%	2. indifferent	8%
3. sophisticated	58%	3. obnoxious	8%
		4. rude	8%
		5. efficient	17%
		6. clever	8%

Table 4 highlights those adjectives the Reebok cluster find congruent with the Nike product and the

possessor of their product, relative to the Reebok product and possessor. The Reebok cluster rated these adjectives in a similar manner. Also, Nike respondents were in strong agreement the Reebok cluster on the adjectives, reckless, loud, and talkative.

Table 4

How the Reebok cluster view Nike owners

1. foolish	58%
2. reckless	58%
3. loud	75%
4. talkative	58%
5. touchy	66%

The following adjectives scored high on both the Nike cluster reflection and the Reebok cluster reflective appraisal of the product possessor.

Table 5
Salient Fitting of Individual Scale Items

ADJECTIVE	% of all respondents found this to be descriptive of NIKE owners
1. gentle	10%
2. soft-hearted	10%
3. reckless	62%
4. practical	10%
5. loud	62%
6. quiet	14%
7. silent	7%
8. talkative	69%
9. handsome	55%

ADJECTIVE	descriptive of REEBOK owners
1. quiet	59%
2. talkative	7%

The dimension's that proved most congruent and most meaningful in the search for adjectives were the "orientation" and "attractiveness" dimensions. The following table shows these results.

Table 6
 Analysis of Orientation Dimension
 Composite of all Ratings

Adjective	Reebok	No difference	Nike
loud	7%	31%	62%
outgoing	31%	17%	52%
quiet	59%	28%	14%
reserved	31%	41%	28%
shy	52%	35%	14%
silent	48%	45%	7%
talkative	7%	24%	69%
timid	41%	41%	17%
	N = 29	15 females	14 males

The combining of all respondents as a whole produced a closer resemblance to the null hypothesis of no difference. The orientation and attractiveness dimension's (Table's 6 & 7) demonstrate clusters of meaning held in common by a larger population, reflecting the premise that a common layer of meaning exists for conspicuous products.

Table 7
 Analysis of Attractiveness Dimension

Adjective	Reebok	No difference	Nike
charming	35%	35%	31%
clever	7%	41%	52%
good-looking	17%	31%	52%
handsome	17%	28%	55%
polished	28%	52% *	21%
sexy	38%	38%	38%
sharp-witted	24%	38%	38%
sophisticated	45%	24%	35%

* Adjective attribution of "no difference" might indicate a future area of focus.

Table 7 demonstrates that the combining of the two clusters tends to bring a meaningful dimension closer to the null hypothesis of no meaningful distinction. Within the Nike cluster, 5 of the 8 adjectives are distinguished as meaningful, while table 7 highlights only 3 as somewhat meaningful and congruent across the clusters.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION

In general, it was the purpose of this study to demonstrate that the self-concept influences buying behavior. The approach was to demonstrate empirically the relationship between an owner's perception of the image of a particular product brand owner. A second objective of the study was to identify adjectives that could be used in further study of the products, to develop a scale to measure product images and self-images.

With the objectives in mind, the hypothesis of the study was formed. The primary assumption is that some portion of product meaning (as evidenced in adjective descriptors) will be held in common by members of a given society regardless of the level of generality-specificity at which the product resides. It is further assumed that the consumer buys a product that can communicate his or her self-concept to a given society or social referent group.

The construction of a scale to measure self-concept and product image congruency was an underlying

objective of this empirical study. A self adjective descriptor was employed to develop a 15-item semantic differential scale for use in further empirical work on self-image product image congruency.

It may be seen from Table 1 that the degree of congruency, both positive and negative, as measured by a percentile agreement, is maintained in this table. The positive congruence generated 15 adjectives that appear to exert some symbolic meaning on the product and the product's owner. This cluster of "Nike" respondents produced a strong product/self-perception recognition.

The data support the hypothesis, it is evident that some portion of product meaning (adjective descriptors) is held in common by members of a given society. The support reflects the premise that a common layer of meaning exists for products/brands, specifically more so for those of higher visibility.

A significantly high degree of congruity exists in the way the respondents perceive the adjectives of; talkative, good-looking, cheerful, reckless, outgoing, and handsome, toward the reflected appraisal of the product owner. A moderate degree of congruency resulted among the adjectives of; individualistic, spontaneous, clever, and sexy, while a lesser agreement was

correlated to; loud, anxious, emotional, impulsive, and sharp-witted.

When the negative congruent adjectives are added to the Nike cluster analysis, the Nike cluster appears consistent. A total of twenty one items of congruence resulted with six adjective items from this category salient to the descriptive process of recognition and meaning of product symbols. The negative congruent items are those items that the Nike cluster identified as not being a descriptor of the owner of the Nike product. Thus, the congruency among these adjective produces just as much symbolic meaning as those in the positive congruence column, in essence they are the polar opposites of the image of the Nike brand owner.

The Nike cluster respondents do not find the adjectives gentle, soft-hearted, industrious, practical, thorough, and quiet, to be symbolic qualities of ownership of Nike athletic shoes. Among these variables there is a consistent pattern, gentle, soft-hearted, and quiet are in our culture of similar meaning, and as such the agreement among the cluster on these items strengthens their relationship as an image that the Nike owner prefers to avoid or deems not part of their desired image. This can be said because the Nike

cluster to a large degree saw these adjectives as more descriptive of the Reebok owner. As proposed earlier, a primary motive of human activity is the protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the self concept, that is we desire to realize our potentialities.

It is interesting to note that if these items were utilized in a semantic differential scale, their bipolar partner was highlighted within the positive congruence category. For example, a semantic differential may utilize these adjectives;

gentle ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ reckless

quiet ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ loud

thus, we may conclude a significant degree of congruency does exist overall within the Nike cluster relative to the Reebok product owner.

Table 2 highlights those adjectives that the Nike cluster agree are more applicable to the description of ownership of Reebok athletic shoes. The item of significance was the adjective quiet, 65% of the Nike cluster found this to be congruent with the perception of the Reebok product owner.

The adjectives of shy and soft-hearted along with quiet appear to be meaningful in their similar symbolic meanings. It should be noted as well that 47% of the

Nike respondents concluded that gentle, silent, and timid were congruent with their perceptions of the Reebok owner. This takes on considerable significance when combined with the items in Table 2. end with the

Table 3 highlights the results of the Reebok cluster's perception of adjectival items that are congruent with the Reebok product and product ownership. It appears that the Reebok cluster is less consistent while the Nike cluster consistently more descriptive as evidenced by the total number of items (21 for Nike to 9 for Reebok) of congruence within the clusters.

The evidence in Table 3 shows only three adjectives in the positive congruence category, with only one, "sexy" of arbitrary significance. While this may be an indication of gender specificity, as Reebok has traditionally targeted a female audience, this test is not designed to be sensitive to masculine or feminine items. Therefore, it must be concluded that these patterns are the domain of the ability of the perceivers to judge those of the same consumption preference.

The negatively congruent items indicate some surprise. It is curious that on the positive side 58% of the Reebok cluster respondents found "organized" to be congruent, while only 17% were in agreement on

"efficient". Also, 58% perceived "sophisticated" to be significant while only 8% recognize "clever" to be symbolic of the Reebok consumer. Thus it appears that the Reebok cluster perceives a varying number of significant differences in the ownership group's perception of the athletic shoe owner.

The Reebok respondent's were in greater agreement in their perception of adjectives of symbolic properties of ownership of Nike athletic shoes. The adjective ensemble of; foolish, reckless, loud, talkative, and touchy are rich in descriptive value and all can be classified as meaningful.

For illustrative purposes, the adjective ensemble can be likened to a clothing ensemble. A high powered executive may combine an Armani suit, Rolex watch, Perry Ellis tie, Polo cologne and arrive for a luncheon in a stretch limousine to communicate an image to others in a society, or subgroup such as a reference group. As such, one might concede that an ensemble of adjectives demonstrate a congruent perception of the clusters utilized in this study. This study produced clear evidence of differentiation as viewed from the consumer's reflected appraisal.

The central hypothesis that some portion of

product meaning will be held in common by members of a given group is reflected in Table 5. The results indicate the adjective items of greatest congruence across the sample population in relation to the Nike product and owner. The adjective "loud" was meaningful to 62% of the total population as reflecting a common layer of meaning for the Nike owner. This should be cross referenced with the 75% of the Reebok cluster and 53% of the Nike cluster finding this adjective as consistent with the perceived image ownership of Nike athletic shoes. In general, it must be concluded that the relative high score on this item by Nike may be indicative of the need to explore the operational definition of some of these adjectives. Whereas, the Reebok cluster may find "loud" to be a negative adjective, the Nike cluster may interpret it as being "cool" or "hip". The assumption is that the idiosyncratic nature of the adjective meaning comes from the development and transference of meaning. In this case the presumption would be the communicative tool of television advertising, as Nike has in the past developed campaigns that could be perceived as loud. As well, the athletes they use to communicate, such as, Andre Agassi and John McEnroe whom many may perceive to

be symbolic of "loud" qualities.

When comparing the intergroup results with the total population results, a quick scan highlights the fact that the Nike cluster produced 21 meaningful adjectives while the total sample population produced only 9 meaningful items descriptive of Nike owners. This is evidence of the hypothesis of congruence within the cluster, essentially a potential reference group. This implies the congruency of reflected appraisal, and the accuracy with which a cluster member perceives another as well as the projection of this perception of their self-concept.

Those items in Table 5 of negative congruence; gentle, soft-hearted, practical, quiet, and silent are all significant in constructing a list of items that are meaningful in development of a self-concept product concept test. It shows, furthermore, that the selection of these items may constitute social identity elements of ownership of the Nike product.

Although one cannot assume a direct conversion of social identity evaluation into self-evaluation, one can assume that people respond in various ways to the social evaluation of their identity elements. The concept of social identity evaluation is an integral part of the

process of symbolic consumption, and as such, the choice of items for the construction of a scale for the self-concept must be held to some criterion for inclusion.

The positive congruent items in Table 5 may be descriptive as well of negative characteristics, loud, reckless and talkative. It is certain that the Nike brand has a distinct image relative to the Reebok brand.

The data also demonstrate that the Reebok owner is perceived to be quiet, and not to be talkative. These two items offer a similarity in symbolic meaning, therefore giving some credence to the reliability of the modification to this research effort. It is also maintained that the intergroup perceptions of the Reebok cluster, which produced 9 items to the 2 in the total sample population, is indicative of the hypothesized congruency of product and product ownership meaning in common by members of a certain subgroup.

Table's 6 and 7 offer descriptive results of the research on the dimensionality basis. Here it is important to point out that a summation of the categories; Reebok, No Difference, and Nike would in most cases produce no meaningful distinction on a dimension by dimension basis. Veldman points out that "clear differences in mean levels on particular

dimensions have been identified among subgroups which share virtually identical definitions of the underlying trait structure" (Veldman 4).

Therefore, the data will demonstrate those adjectives that exhibit a certain symbolic composition that may prove to be meaningful in the area of further research into the congruency of product and owner. Malhotra suggests that an initial pool of seventy items be evaluated by four judges. This list is then eliminated down to 27 scale items which are further scrutinized by factor analysis and cluster analysis to derive at 15 workable scale items. This research utilized a evaluative process of judges, a student sample population to evaluate the efficacy of the adjective self descriptive items relative to the two products.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the method employed in this study. The most important limitation relates to the measures used. The notion that an individual is able to psychologically evaluate in an objective fashion, "self-objectification," who he or she is, is an important process in the development of the self-concept. In defining what the self-concept is it

is important to understand the inherent difficulties involved with the process.

The asking of direct questions of individuals' often times leads to the most socially desirable response, one that assists in maintaining the individual's self-esteem. The self-report process has the disadvantage of this basic problem, as well the degree of accuracy of the respondents answer, essentially their attitude toward the owner of the particular shoes, may not be consistent with their overall evaluation of the individual.

The attempt to overcome this was to seek a reflected appraisal, to inquire into the individual's perception of the applicableness of adjectives as descriptor's of the ownership of the Nike and Reebok athletic shoe. The technique was designed to be projective in that the respondent upon completing the adjective self-description questionnaire was asked the forced choice question; "If you were given athletic shoes as a gift which shoe would you prefer?" The idea here is to force them to select a shoe that is closer to them in symbolic meaning.

This method is limited in its reliability and validity, as this was the modification to the qualified

adjective self-description test. The reason this procedure was chosen is because of the lack of testing procedures to derive this type of information. As noted earlier, Malhotra suggests that a "jury" judge a set of adjective items according to preset guidelines, in identifying the meaningful adjective's for the development of a scale measurement to measure self-concepts and product image congruency. The jury in this study was a particular class of high school seniors, a subset that have a keen knowledge of the particular products, as well as participants in a lifestage conducive to display and communication of self to others.

While the methodology involved in this study may be considered to offer no reliability, the selection of the "Adjective Self Description" questionnaire was done so to offer a test that meets the criteria of reliability and validity in the selection of adjectives.

The modification of the bi-polar concepts; Much more characteristic of a Nike user/owner, and Much more characteristic of a Reebok user/owner, was done so to explore the potential differentiation of these products for marketing implications. It is recognized that this modification also lends to the lack of credible measures

of reliability and validity, but its primary purpose of investigation seems to have been well served. The author is of the opinion that the test did in fact measure and produce what it was intended to do, and that the theoretical foundations that were adhered to contributed to this end.

The use of products rather than adjectives involves another problem, the responses may have been influenced by past purchase, and again the constant issue of social desirability in responses. Many researchers have noted that the measurement of the self-concept is a difficult process, and to attempt to measure self-concepts relative to specific brands further complicates this problem.

Sirgy recommends "that the semantic differential methodology include those images which are most related to the products being tested" (Self-Concept in Consumer Behavior 295). The methodology utilized in this study was to achieve this end, to identify initial item selection for the development of a self-concept measure. The problem encountered here is symptomatic of prior research efforts. Some researchers have used "general adjectives extracted from personality inventories" (Sirgy Self-Concept in Consumer Behavior 295), while

others have identified attributes that seem most related to the products being tested. There is no common approach among the self-concept investigators as to the semantic differential methodology. This creates a problem in that it is not clear if the selected adjectives are the best possible for the situation.

Another serious limitation encountered in this study is the need of a larger sample. The data produced is not projectible across a broader population. The need for a large survey is not of great concern with this study. Rather it is a goal of further development of the self-concept investigation. The examination and investigation into the development of a scale to measure self-concepts and product concepts was of primary concern in the experimental design.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has demonstrated an approach to study of the self-concept and its related construct of reflected appraisal. Given the exploratory nature of the hypotheses, the results can only serve as a basis for encouraging future research. Because the data report a comparison of adjectives relating to two brands of athletic shoes, one would need to be cautious in

concluding that the adjectives of significance are applicable to various other product's.

Further research on choice of adjectives for use in a semantic differential scale to measure the self-concept and product image congruency may be appropriate. But it is cautioned that a researcher should not limit himself to testing procedures already in place, creative development of questionnaires may produce the same or more strong symbolic meaning adjectives.

A larger sample population is a definite aim for further research efforts in this area. The small sample used in this study offers many inherent weaknesses, from a theory-building perspective, as well as from the viewpoint of implementing the data in a marketing strategy.

The basic descriptive analysis of the data can be expanded, potential cluster analysis, factor analysis product moment correlation measures may be built into the testing design. These are types of measures that could be pursued to offer more deeper analysis to the extent that it helps us to better understand the self-concept, reflected appraisal, and product image congruency.

Implications for Marketing Strategy

Consumer behavior is an immense field of study that investigates how individuals, families, groups, and organizations acquire, consume, and dispose of the various goods, services, and ideas that fulfill their experiences. It is vitally important that the marketer know who his customer is, and that his product be positioned in the marketplace according to its unique and meaningful benefits.

Consumption often takes place in difficult to distinguish abstract, intangible and esthetic form. Certainly products are used for their intended purpose but there are a great many products purchased because of the symbolic meaning associated with the product and its expected experience. The product image becomes the utility of the product, the primary connection between the consumer, his needs and desires, and his social world.

Social groups often attach meaning to a product, it is this consensual meaning and image that the marketer must be aware of in order to reinforce or alter it to their economic advantage. Companies that are proactive in the development and generation of these symbol systems, through carefully planned and implemented

marketing programs, are those that will succeed in the marketplace.

From the perspective of the self-concept, consumers are viewed as decision makers who make perceptively rational decisions regarding the products and services they purchase. Because of the importance of the self-concept in consumer decision making, the implications for symbolic communication processes exist. For the marketing manager, the knowledge of how the consumer perceives himself or herself can influence product development, distribution, pricing, and promotion decisions.

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