



The Reciprocal Connection Between Identity and Consumption: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Consumer identity has been an integral part of marketing and psychology research for decades, resulting in an extensive stream of literature. The main purpose of this paper is twofold: First, to accentuate the reciprocity between identity and consumption, a relationship that has been insufficiently addressed in marketing literature. Second, the core papers in this field are reviewed to propose an overarching framework for grouping past and future research. The paper identifies three fundamental concepts that are at the core of the framework: (1) Identity Construction: the process of mentally forming one's identities that constitute the self-concept; (2) Self-Expression Through Consumption: conscious and strategic consumption decisions for identity-expression; and (3) Identity-Effects on Judgments: static effects of chronically salient identities and dynamic effects of primed identities on decisions. This framework will help identify potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: Identity consumption reciprocity; Consumer behavior; Consumer identity; Consumer identity literature review.

1. Introduction

"That we are what we have [...] is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (Belk, 1988, p. 139)

Belk's statement is supported by a growing body of work about consumer identity. As shown in Figure 1, since the publication of his influential paper "Possessions and the Extended Self", the percentage of marketing articles about identity has substantially increased.

Overall, consumer identity literature is very extensive with disparate streams of research. While some papers provide conceptual contributions and models that explain identity construction (e.g. Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Vignoles et al., 2006), others focus on specific connections between consumption and identity (e.g. Berger and Heath, 2007; Gao et al., 2009; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). Moreover, a large part of the past research has examined the effect of identity on consumption and judgments in various settings (e.g. Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001; Wheeler et al., 2005). However, the reciprocity in this relationship has rarely been directly addressed (see Thompson and Loveland, 2015 for an exception). This abundance of different research topics and articles creates significant barriers for students and researchers who are not familiar with the topic. Therefore, the first contribution of this thesis is to categorize and synthesize consumer identity

literature in order to provide a starting point for future researchers who are interested in exploring this field. Since there are numerous expansive subtopics from marketing and psychology, this thesis will focus on the main contributions as well as selected papers about specific topics. They will be grouped by concepts to provide a broad overview that still explains the most important ideas in detail. The second contribution is to highlight the reciprocal connection between identity and consumption which has been insufficiently addressed in the past.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: First, elaborate definitions of the key terms in consumer identity literature will be given, providing clear distinctions between non-self-explanatory terms. Second, a literature table will summarize the most important contributions, structured by three main concepts: "Identity Construction", "Self-Expression Through Consumption" and lastly "Identity-Effects on Judgments". Third, these concepts and their connection will be covered in detail. Finally, implications for theory and practice will provide an outlook and emphasize the importance of further research on reciprocity in this area.

2. Theoretical Background on Consumer Identity

Consumer identity literature is situated at the intersection between psychology and marketing. It blurs the boundaries

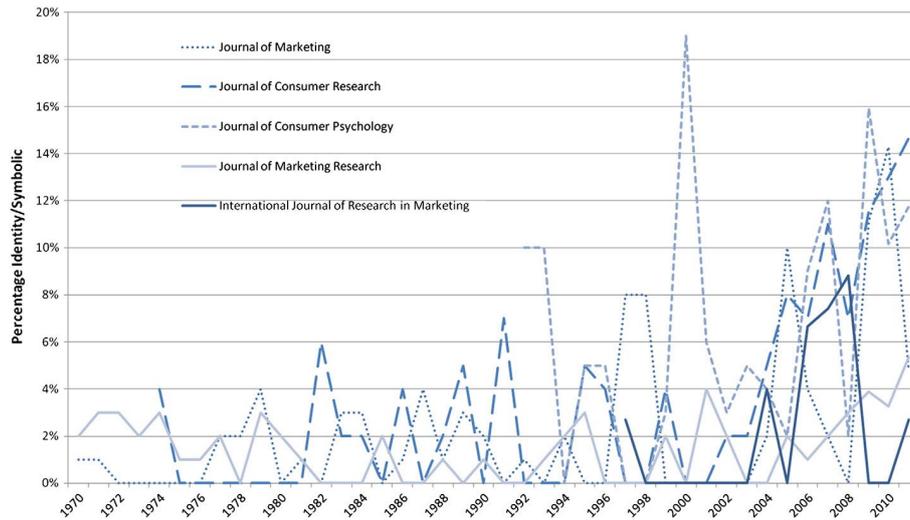


Figure 1: Share of articles about identity in renowned marketing journals

Source: Reed et al. (2012)

between both domains and research in one area often borrows from the other. Generally, the psychological domain focuses more on topics about human identity, perceptions and cognitive processes. These findings are then used as a base for research on consumer behavior, especially the connection between consumption and identity. Since this thesis draws upon numerous streams of literature and the terminology is sometimes ambiguous, the main terms will be clearly defined.

2.1. Definitions

In the general linguistic usage, “identity” is defined as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In marketing and psychology, however, the term is significantly more specific. First, it is important to understand that each person has a multitude of identities that comprise his “self-concept” (Reed et al., 2012). The self-concept therefore represents a person’s overall characteristics, shaped by numerous different identities, similar to the general definition of identity. Reed et al. define each of these identities as “any category label to which a consumer self-associates either by choice or by endowment” (Reed et al., 2012, p. 312). For example, one may have the identities of a “soccer fan”, “father” and “artist” which together form his self-concept. Closely related to identity is the term “self-view” which refers to how a person sees and characterizes himself in general (e.g. athletic, intelligent) (Gao et al., 2009).

While the aforementioned terms are clearly defined in identity literature, the use of “self” is nonuniform. Cushman defines self as a general concept of human characteristics that are unique for a certain culture and era. This allows him to compare the self in a historical context (Cushman, 1990). Most papers, however, utilize the term self synonymously with either identity (Suzuki and Satoshi, 2012)

or self-concept (Gao et al., 2009). To avoid confusion, the distinct terms self-concept and identity will be used in this thesis.

Another important term and concept is “self-construal” which divides people into two categories: Independents and interdependents (Zhang and Khare, 2009). Similar to Hofstede’s cultural dimension “individualism”, as opposed to “collectivism”, the former group is highly individualistic and places less value on group membership while the latter is collectivistic and group-oriented (Hofstede, 2011; Zhang and Khare, 2009). An individual is not strictly independent or interdependent but rather possesses both characteristics (Zhang and Khare, 2009). The extent to which one type of self-construal dominates depends mostly on societal norms (ibid.). Asian cultures tend to be interdependent as opposed to independent Western cultures (ibid.).

Last, “consumption” will be defined broadly to accommodate various streams of consumer identity literature. It encompasses the purchase and subsequent use of goods and services (Oxford University Press, 2017). However, a purchase decision is not necessarily involved. Consumption also includes the continuous use of possessions that have been acquired through other means such as inheritance and gifts (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Furthermore, even experiences can be consumed, especially when offered in combination with goods and services (Kleine et al., 2009).

3. Literature Review: The Reciprocal Connection Between Identity and Consumption

This chapter will first provide a complete overview in the form of a literature table. Then, the three overarching concepts “Identity Construction”, “Self-Expression through Consumption” and “Identity-Effects on Judgments” will be explained in detail.

3.1. Overview

3.1.1. Methodology

To ensure a correct methodological approach, several papers about writing literature reviews were used as a guideline. Three papers outlined stylistic features and common mistakes (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Summers, 2019; Zorn and Campbell, 2006). The fourth article provided help for conducting a complete literature search and for properly grouping relevant literature in a concept matrix (Webster and Watson, 2002). The literature search was started in the field of identity construction with Belk's influential paper "Possessions and the Extended Self". Subsequently, the EBSCO database has been used for general searches with the keywords "identity and consumption", "identity and consumption reciprocity", "identity consumption reciprocal", "identity construction", "social identity", "gender identity", "identity and culture", "identity accessibility", "self-construal", "consumption types", "consumer identity", "identity conflict", "identity threat", "extended self", "identity advertising", "identity salience" and "identity shift". The results were filtered by publication to ensure a high quality of sources. Based on the VHB ranking, only A+ and A rated journals were used to filter at first. Multiple searches confirmed that most relevant papers were published in the Journal of Consumer Research, rated at A+. Most papers provided short literature reviews that helped to identify further relevant keywords. Based on these publications, backward searches proved to be particularly useful for finding other relevant research and filling gaps. Given the exact keywords, Google Scholar was used for backward searches. The most fundamental papers were used for forward searches through the Web of Science. This yielded additional results in subdomains to complete the literature search. The quality of all cited sources was assessed using either the VHB, with C as the minimum ranking, or the Scimago Journal Ranking, with a Cites / Doc. (2 years) score of at least 1.

3.1.2. Literature Table

The following literature table provides short summaries of the main findings for all important papers cited in this thesis. Due to space limitations, the titles have not been included in the table. Please refer to the list of references for details about each publication. Additionally, a table that summarizes journal details and the corresponding abbreviations can be found below. The VHB was used as the main source for journal rankings. Journals not ranked by the VHB were assessed using the Scimago Journal Ranking with the Cites / Doc. (2 years) score.

With regards to content, consumer identity literature has been divided into several parts. There are three overarching concepts: "Identity Construction" describes how individuals' identities mentally form. "Self-Expression Through Consumption" and "Identity-Effects on Judgments" build on these constructed identities and their connection with consumption. Due to the immense quantity of available literature, only the most central publications in each domain are

included. Moreover, many papers broach several of these concepts and clear distinctions are at times impossible to make. The scientific papers have been grouped by these concepts and then sorted alphabetically by authors.

3.2. The Reciprocal Connection Between Identity and Consumption

3.2.1. Identity Construction, Principles and Perpetuation

Identity Construction

To illustrate how individuals construct their self-concept, psychological motives for identity construction need to be described. Vignoles et al. (2006) summarized the six main motives that guide identity construction. The first motive is "self-esteem" and describes that individuals view themselves positively and try to preserve this feeling. Secondly, people want to experience "continuity" in their actions and self-concept. This continuity does not exclude changes in identity but is rather based on the idea of expressing one's own story through identity. The third and fourth motives, "distinctiveness" and "belonging" are crucial to the formation of social identities as they influence group-membership (Vignoles et al., 2006). "Efficacy" is the fifth motive which revolves around "competence and control" (Breakwell, 1993, p. 205). Lastly, "meaning" refers to the human need to understand the meaning of life (Vignoles et al., 2006). These six described motives influence how individuals adopt separate identities and incorporate them into their self-concept either by "choice or endowment" (Reed et al., 2012, p. 312). Individuals perceive the motives self-esteem, distinctiveness, continuity and meaning as most central to their identity (Vignoles et al., 2006). Furthermore, these motives influence consumer behavior once the identities are constructed.

Identity construction happens in two main ways: Through material possessions and group membership. For a possession to become part of an identity and thus the self-concept, the consumer needs to attach value to the object (Belk, 1988; Kleine et al., 1995). This attachment also incorporates memories and associations. Over the course of a person's life, a timeline of identity adoption and abandonment, called "identity narrative", forms (Ahuvia, 2005). A person can start to possess an object either deliberately, for example through an active purchase decision, or unintentionally through heritage or gifts. In all cases, the degree of attachment to each object determines how strongly it is incorporated into the self-concept and what role it plays in the identity narrative (Kleine et al., 1995). Especially valued possessions, so-called "loved objects", are central to who one is and can significantly affect one's life (Ahuvia, 2005). An example could be a vintage car that has been passed down generations. In fact, some possessions are so vital to a person's self-concept that losing them causes distress comparable to the loss of a loved one (Belk, 1988).

However, tangible objects are not the only means of identity construction. Group membership is crucial to the forma-

Table 1: Journal Details

Source: Own depiction.

Abbreviation	Journal Name	Ranking VHB / SJR
ACR	Advances in Consumer Research	C
AP	American Psychologist	4
IJRM	International Journal of Research in Marketing	A
JA	Journal of Advertising	B
JAP	Journal of Applied Psychology	A
JBR	Journal of Business Research	B
JCB	Journal of Consumer Behaviour	C
JCP	Journal of Consumer Psychology	A
JCR	Journal of Consumer Research	A+
JESP	Journal of Experimental Social Psychology	2.3
JM	Journal of Marketing	A+
JMR	Journal of Marketing Research	A+
JMTP	Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice	C
JPSP	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology	5.4
PSPR	Personality and Social Psychology Review	8.5

tion of identities and encompasses a broad array of different categories. Identities that are connected to group membership are called “social identities” (He et al., 2012). In the same way as identities derived from possessions, they can be either predetermined (e.g. ethnicity, gender, culture) or adopted by choice (e.g. fan club member). Often, distinguishing between social identities and those constructed from possessions is difficult as they can merge and become one identity (e.g. a car enthusiast who is a fan club member). Social identities that are constructed from a person’s general environment, and often through endowment (e.g. nationality, family background), are central to shaping the self-concept which in turn affects the world-view and behavior of a person significantly (Cushman, 1990).

Ethnicity is particularly important for identity construction and several studies observing the consumption behavior of migrants show that different ethnic identities are present throughout their entire lives (Askegaard et al., 2005; Oswald, 1999). Though, the importance of each identity differs between individuals (ibid.). If the individual has access to “basic levels of economic, social and cultural capital” (Üstüner and Holt, 2007, p. 43), so-called “hybrid identities”, a mixture of dominant and minority culture identities, form (Üstüner and Holt, 2007). An individual engages in a particular “identity project” where separate cultural identities are weighted and merged according to personal preferences (ibid.).

In the past decades, as globalization progressed and “Western culture” became omnipresent worldwide, this phenomenon has started to affect not only migrants but all people who are constantly confronted with a “global culture”. Youth become “bicultural” as they grow up with both the “local identity” of their home country and a “global iden-

tity” that is conveyed through mass media and technology (Arnett, 2002). This omnipresence of Western ideals causes problems, if the individual does not have access to sufficient capital (e.g. person living in a slum) and consumption practices of the dominant culture (e.g. large city / Western culture) are mostly inaccessible. In this case, mixing dominant and minority culture is considerably more difficult and hybrid identities do not form (Üstüner and Holt, 2007).

Apart from ethnicity, personal and social traits such as age, gender and family status determine important identities in the self-concept (Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013; Machin, 2007). While gender is, in most cases, static, age and family status change over the course of a person’s life. As a result, even undesirable identities like old age identity can form (Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013). Furthermore, gender influences the importance of group membership and distinctiveness from other people (Dommer and Swaminathan, 2013). Men are generally focused on being clearly distinct from out-groups (ibid.). In contrast, women value connections with others more and have a weaker urge to be different from out-groups (ibid.). These gender differences are comparable to having a more independent (men) or interdependent (women) self-construal (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Identity Principles

To explain the interplay between multiple identities and their effect on behavior, different identity principles have been used in consumer identity literature. Reed et al. (2012) provide a synthesis of the most important characteristics of identity: The first principle is “identity salience” which refers to how important a particular identity is in a given moment. This salience changes depending on environmen-

Table 2: Literature Table

Publication Details			Main Concepts			Main Findings
Author(s) and Publication Year	Journal	Ranking VHB/SJR	Identity Construction	Self-Expression Through Consumption	Identity Effects on Judgments	
Cushman (1990)	AP	4	X			Model of the “empty self” that drives consumption as individuals try to “fill” it
Kleine et al. (1995)	JCR	A+	X			Types of attachment to possessions moderate their importance in the life-narrative
Vignoles et al. (2006)	JPSP	5.4	X			Most central psychological motives for identity construction: Self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness and meaning
Oyserman (2009)	JCP	A	X	X	X	Review of identity-based motivation and its effect on behavior
Reed et al. (2012)	IJRM	A	X	X	X	Synthesis of five main identity principles: Identity salience / association / relevance / verification / conflict
Ahuvia (2005)	JCR	A+	X	X		Synthesizing solutions (often loved objects) reconcile identity conflicts
Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013)	JCR	A+	X	X		Old age identity forms through social interactions with peers
Belk (1988)	JCR	A+	X	X		Possessions are crucial to identity construction and self-expression
Escalas and Bettman (2003)	JCP	A	X	X		Member and aspiration groups are used to create self-brand connections
Escalas and Bettman (2005)	JCR	A+	X	X		Identity construction through brands and stronger (weaker) self-brand connections if the brand fits the ingroup (outgroup)
Oswald (1999)	JCR	A+	X	X		Consumers with different ethnic identities switch between them using goods
Suzuki and Satoshi (2012)	ACR	C	X	X		East Asians’ absence of the need for a coherent identity narrative

(Continued)

Literature Table 2—continued

Thompson and Love-land (2015)	JMTP	C	X	X		Theoretical framework that incorporates the reciprocity between identity and consumption and the strategic reasoning of consumers
Üstüner and Holt (2007)	JCR	A+	X	X		Development of the dominated consumer acculturation model that is applicable for acculturation among poor individuals
Vignoles et al. (2000)	PSPR	8.5	X	X		Subdivision of the psychological need for distinctiveness into difference, separateness and position
Berger and Heath (2007)	JCR	A+		X		Consumption is driven by the desire to express identities through symbolic products
Berger and Ward (2010)	JCR	A+		X		Subtle signals are used to convey group membership to insiders
Gao et al. (2009)	JCR	A+		X		Self-view restoring actions taken by individuals whose self-view has been threatened
Kleine et al. (2009)	JCB	C		X		Strong associations with a desired identity lead to transformational consumption choices
Machin (2007)	ACR	C		X		Identity-shifts over time lead to changed consumption behavior
Schau (2000)	ACR	C		X		Consumer imagination as the cognitive link between identity and consumption
Tian et al. (2001)	JCR	A+		X		Three types of consumer behavior for expressing uniqueness
Ward and Broniarczyk (2011)	JCR	A+		X		Purchase of identity contradicting gifts causes giver identity threat and subsequent identity reestablishing actions
White and Dahl (2007)	JCR	A+		X		Consumption practices linked to dissociative reference groups are regarded as most harmful to the own self-concept
Chatterjee et al. (2013)	JCR	A+		X	X	Endowment effect results from self-threat that is caused by loss aversion and ownership
Chernev et al. (2011)	JM	A+		X	X	Finite need for self-expression that can be satiated by unrelated activities
Morewedge et al. (2009)	JESP	2.3		X	X	Proposition that the endowment effect is caused mostly by attachment to the object

(Continued)

Literature Table 2—continued

Zhang and Khare (2009)	JCR	A+	X	X	Identity salience affects preferences for global / local products
Bolton and Reed (2004)	JMR	A+		X	Identity-driven judgments dominate analytic judgments and the latter are difficult to induce
Dimofte et al. (2003)	JA	B		X	Unusual advertisements are more likely to increase identity salience
Forehand and Deshpandé (2001)	JMR	A+		X	Impact of ethnic-primers on ethnic self-awareness and advertising response
Forehand et al. (2002)	JAP	A		X	Situational cues and social distinctiveness increase identity salience
He et al. (2012)	JBR	B		X	Brand identification influences value perception, satisfaction and trust
Markus (1977)	JPSP	5.4		X	Self-schemata are identity-based knowledge patterns that influence judgments
Reed (2004)	JCR	A+		X	Impact of self-importance (strength of identification) and identity salience on judgments
Sela and Shiv (2009)	JCR	A+		X	Goal activation through self-discrepant cues, semantic activation through self-consistent cues
Torres and Briggs (2007)	JA	B		X	High product involvement prevents identity primes from increasing salience
Wheeler et al. (2005)	JCR	A+		X	More critical elaboration of messages that match a recipient's self-schema

tal cues which in turn affects subsequent behavior. Secondly, “identity association” refers to how a certain action or object is assessed depending on its association with an identity. In other words, an individual infers his opinion on something depending on its mental connection with an identity. For example, an avid soccer player will view products related to that sport more favorably. Thirdly, “identity relevance” describes the degree to which an identity is applicable for a decision. For instance, a “musician” identity has no impact on the selection of a car but it is relevant for discriminating between guitars. The fourth principle is called “identity verification”. It is based on the assumption that individuals have an ideal image of a person with their desired identity. They strive to act in accordance with these desired traits and the internal process of controlling whether they do so is called “identity verification”. The last principle, “identity conflict”, describes that some identities might not fit in an individual's self-concept as they represent conflicting values or traits. (Reed et al., 2012)

All of these principles are frequently used in consumer identity literature and are crucial for explaining the connection between consumption and identity. However, there is some ambiguity concerning these terms. The term “identity salience” is also called “identity accessibility” and “diagnosticity” is used synonymously with “identity relevance” (Zhang and Khare, 2009).

Maintaining a Coherent Identity Narrative

As described, every individual's self-concept is constructed from multiple identities that are derived from either possessions or group membership. Yet, with the existence of different identities, conflicts can arise and cause psychological tensions (Ahuvia, 2005; Reed et al., 2012; Suzuki and Satoshi, 2012). For example, a woman who is a mother and extreme sports professional might experience an identity conflict. On the one hand, she wants to be safe and care for her children. On the other hand, she is aware of the risk of

her occupation and even enjoys it.

A growing body of research suggests that individuals generally try to avoid and reconcile identity conflicts in order to maintain a coherent identity narrative (Ahuvia, 2005; Amiot et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2012; Suzuki and Satoshi, 2012). One way to do so is by “managing the relative salience of their various conflicting identities” (Reed et al., 2012, p. 318). This means that the conflicting identities are not “activated” at the same time. Rather, the individual “activates” the identities separately depending on the situation. Another way to reconcile a conflict is by abandoning an identity either through disposing possessions or ceasing group membership (Kleine et al., 1995). While both managing the salience of identities and identity abandonment simply avoid conflicts instead of reconciling them, there is a third option. So called “synthesizing solution[s] occur[r] when an object or consumption activity successfully combines the previously conflicting aspects of the consumer’s identity” (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 181). An example for such a solution is rural clothing that on the one hand reminds the individual of his childhood and on the other hand is regarded as a fashion statement by coworkers. Thus, the “rural roots” are synthesized with being a young professional in the city.

Since most research about identity conflicts was conducted among culturally Western participants, those findings are not necessarily applicable worldwide. In fact, Suzuki and Satoshi (2012) investigated identity conflicts among East Asians and observed vastly different consumer behavior. After in-depth interviews they concluded that Japanese do not experience the need for a coherent identity narrative. Instead, they accept contradictions between different identities and adjust their behavior depending on the situation. (Suzuki and Satoshi, 2012) Summing up, while the identity principles are applicable for both East Asians and Westerners, culture seems to have an influence on the acceptance of contradictions.

3.2.2. Expression of Identities Through Consumption

Now that the principles of identity construction and conflict have been described, the expression of identities through consumption will be covered. At the base of this chapter lies the idea that identity influences consumption but consumption can in turn also influence identity. The following paragraphs will first explain that individuals have a need for distinctiveness to then describe how they express their identities through consumption, product avoidance and abandonment. Then, the notion of “identity threat” and its influence on consumption will be covered. Lastly, the reciprocity between identity and consumption, a topic that has been insufficiently addressed in consumer identity literature, will be emphasized.

Self-Expression Through Consumption, Avoidance and Abandonment

As described earlier, psychological needs govern identity construction. These needs also drive self-expression through

consumption, but the main motives are “distinctiveness” and “belonging” (Vignoles et al., 2006, 2000). Three types of distinctiveness have been classified by Vignoles et al. (2000): The first type is called “difference” and refers to “intrinsic qualities of the individual, such as abilities, opinions, traits [and] physical characteristics” (Vignoles et al., 2000, p. 346) that set him apart. For instance, there are people who dress strikingly to express this “difference”. At the core of the second type of distinctiveness, called “separateness”, lies the idea of physical and mental boundaries. While “difference” is also used to associate oneself with others, “separateness” aims at dissociating. An example for such behavior is the use of symbols as markers of social class (e.g. garments that are reserved to certain individuals). The last type, “position”, describes intragroup (e.g. superior in a company) and intergroup (e.g. teachers and students) connections and one’s role in these settings. All three types of distinctiveness are used by individuals to express their identities in various situations. Furthermore, culture and self-construal influence the importance of each distinctiveness type. While individuals with an independent self-construal value difference and separateness more, interdependents prefer position to express their distinctiveness (Vignoles et al., 2000).

Since consumers want to be distinct, a large part of consumption is driven by the desire to express their specific identities. This self-expression only works because individuals tend to infer a person’s character from visible cues (Belk, 1988; Berger and Heath, 2007; Chernev et al., 2011). These cues are actively shaped and manipulated by consumers in order to express a desired identity (Schau, 2000). However, not all objects are equally good at conveying a message. While “all commercial objects have a symbolic character” (Levy, 1959, p. 119), there are certain product domains that are predominantly used for identity-signaling. These domains are usually highly visible and therefore the ones that identity is mostly inferred from by other people (Berger and Chip Heath, 2007; Berger and Heath, 2007; Berger and Ward, 2010). For example, a music CD or car are highly symbolic while tooth paste or soap usually have no connection to identity (ibid.).

One further concept that explains how individuals connect consumption and identity is “consumer imagination”. It describes the mental process of how consumers first analyze their surroundings to then personally form opinions about different signals. They then try on an identity in their mind and decide whether to express it and which products to use for doing so (Schau, 2000).

As described by Tian et al. (2001), there are various types of consumer behavior that are enacted by individuals to display their distinctiveness and personal identity. Through “creative choice counterconformity” people express being different by adopting original tastes that are liked by the mainstream consumer. A more extreme form is “unpopular choice counterconformity” where the general population is unlikely to imitate (e.g. “ugly” clothes). In both cases, initially unique consumption practices are often mimicked by others after some time has passed. Consequently, individuals

seek “avoidance of similarity” by abandoning now popular consumption practices and avoiding mainstream choices (Tian et al., 2001).

Apart from their personal identities, individuals want to express social identities by signaling group membership and distinctiveness from other groups (Berger and Heath, 2007; Berger and Ward, 2010). A very common scenario in this context is as follows: One group of people (e.g. a group of popular kids in school) visibly expresses a social identity through a specific consumption practice (e.g. a particular clothing style) (Berger and Chip Heath, 2007; Berger and Heath, 2007). Outsiders (e.g. less popular kids) desire this identity and start mimicking the signal (ibid.). Consequently, the signal deteriorates since that specific consumption practice no longer clearly distinguishes between group members and outsiders (ibid.). Lastly, initial group members abandon the consumption practice to avoid being associated with an undesired identity (ibid.). In order to avoid such misidentification, people sometimes prefer subtle signals (Berger and Ward, 2010). These cues are less obvious and correctly perceived only by those who have sufficient knowledge in the product domain (ibid.). An example for this are clothes that display no conspicuous logo but are unique in some other way. These signals are often misinterpreted by outsiders who are therefore unlikely to imitate them (ibid.). Hence, signal deterioration is avoided (ibid.). Since subtle signals are meant to be recognized only by a selected group of other people, they are less suitable for expressing a personal identity.

The previous paragraph has shown how consumers associate themselves with positively viewed groups through consumption and simultaneously create distance to other groups through avoidance. Further research has shown that the degree of this avoidance varies between groups. Those that represent exceptionally undesired identities are called “dissociative reference groups”. Consumption practices linked to such groups are regarded as more damaging to the own self-concept than those linked to more neutral out-groups. (White and Dahl, 2007)

Closely related to social identity is consumers’ direct identification with brands, called “selfbrand connection”. Two main types of reference groups influence self-brand connections: Member groups that the individual is already part of and aspiration groups that the individual wishes to belong to. Furthermore, the person’s inner identity goals influence this connection: Some individuals are more focused on improving and altering their identities (self-enhancement goals) while others aim to further strengthen their existing identities (self-verification goals) (Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

First, individuals observe their reference groups and mentally connect certain brands with them. For example, one might associate design students with Apple products. For individuals with self-enhancement goals, aspiration groups are more important as their members already hold the aspired identity. If self-verification goals predominate, member groups have a greater influence on self-brand connections. Consequently, if the individual aspires to be a design student

or already belongs to this group and wants to reinforce this identity, he forms a selfbrand connection with Apple (Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

Understandably, brands that are associated with an ingroup (member group) are incorporated into the self-concept. This is true for individuals with both types of self-construal. However, when a brand is connected to an outgroup, independents’ self-brand connections are weakened while interdependents are mostly unaffected (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Escalas and Bettman (2005) observed this effect and propose that it originates from independents’ stronger need to be unique while interdependents value group membership and belonging more.

Such self-brand connections are especially important for companies since they influence perceived value, satisfaction and trust (He et al., 2012). Hence, supporting the incorporation of the brand identity into the self-concept can lead to competitive advantage (ibid.). Congruent with these findings, many companies have started “lifestyle branding” to enhance self-brand connections by offering self-expression through their products (Chernev et al., 2011). However, building on that notion and consumer identity literature, Chernev et al. (2011, p. 79) found that the “need for self-expression is finite [...] [and] that satiation can occur across domains”. As a result, they imply that lifestyle branding is not necessarily beneficial for companies and the abundance of possibilities to express one’s identities limits the formation of self-brand connections (Chernev et al., 2011).

Identity Threat and Self-Restoring Reactions

As previously described, individuals’ purchase decisions are driven by the need to express identities consistent with the self-concept. However, when a person does something that contradicts the self-concept, the individual’s confidence in the own self-view is damaged. This phenomenon is called “identity threat” or “self-threat” and can substantially influence consumer behavior. (Chatterjee et al., 2013; Gao et al., 2009; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011)

Identity threat is not necessarily caused by actions that strongly contradict one’s self-concept. Even “subtle situational factors, such as when one has to perform familiar and routinized tasks in unfamiliar ways” (Gao et al., 2009, p. 30) are often enough to threaten identity. For example, Gao et al. (2009) induced identity threat in their experiments by making participants write with their nondominant hand. As a result, the participants showed weakened confidence in personal traits such as intelligence (ibid.). However, identity threat is not limited to experiments but can indeed occur in the real world. Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) showed that the purchase of gifts inconsistent with the self-concept can cause identity threat. The closer the gift recipient to the gift giver, the bigger the identity threat (ibid.). For instance, an atheist purchasing a religious symbol for a close relative experiences significantly stronger identity threat than he would if the recipient was a distant friend.

After experiencing identity threat, individuals tend to en-

gage in behavior that eliminates their doubts. They reassure their confidence in who they are either directly by strengthening the threatened identity or indirectly by strengthening an unrelated identity. Such identity-reassuring behavior includes consumption and other actions that express a personal trait (e.g. talking about a liked characteristic of oneself). (Gao et al., 2009; Wheeler et al., 2005; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011)

Moreover, identity threat has recently been used to explain an effect that strongly influences consumers' value perceptions. The "endowment effect" describes the phenomenon that individuals tend to ascribe higher value to their possessions compared to those people who do not own a similar object (Chatterjee et al., 2013; Morewedge et al., 2009). This effect is observable when people sell their used goods. They tend to demand higher prices than buyers are willing to pay (ibid.). Past research has shown that "people expect the pain of losing something to be greater than the pleasure of gaining it" (Morewedge et al., 2009, p. 947). This "loss aversion" has been utilized to explain the endowment effect for a long time. However, Morewedge et al. (2009) isolated both possible explanations for the endowment effect and found that emotional attachment and not the fear of losing something is the underlying force. They argued that the influence of loss aversion on the endowment effect is minimal. Contrary to that, Chatterjee et al. (2013) propose a model that incorporates both loss aversion and ownership to explain the endowment effect. According to them, the potential sale triggers an individual's fear of losing something. Together with the emotional attachment to the object, self-threat emerges as the person fears losing a piece of identity. As with identity threat in general, self-restoring reactions follow. In this case, individuals enhance their self-view by assigning a higher value to their offered possession, creating the endowment effect. The following figure 2 illustrates the underlying cognitive process.

Reciprocity

Most publications in consumer identity literature focus on the influence of identity on consumption. However, the reciprocity in this relationship and therefore the influence of consumption on identity has been directly addressed by few scientific papers. Authors do mention this relationship but mostly in subtle ways that are easily overlooked. For example, Belk writes that "we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us" (Belk, 1988, p. 141). Furthermore, the fact that consumption is used to construct identities implies that identities can be altered by consumption. For example, Escalas and Bettman (2003, p. 378) start their paper by stating that "[p]eople engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identity".

One should always consider that consumers might purchase something that fits their identity but they might as well buy products and services to alter who they are. The

prime example of desired identity alterations which are accomplished through consumption are "transformational consumption choices" (Kleine et al., 2009). Individuals who consider transformational consumption first assess who they want to become and picture themselves in that particular role (ibid.). If they deem the desired identity fitting to their self-concept, individuals engage in the associated consumption behavior to attain the desired identity (Kleine et al., 2009; Schau, 2000). Exemplary for such offerings are weight-loss programs that highlight the future "skinny" identity of their customers (Kleine et al., 2009).

However, the term "reciprocity" has only recently been directly discussed in consumer identity literature. Thompson and Loveland (2015, p. 236) emphasize that "identity itself can be shaped and reinforced by consumption, rather than merely being a driver of consumption". To better describe this relationship, they introduce Identity Investment Theory. In this framework, strategic consumption choices are explained and the reciprocity over time is highlighted. It is based on five propositions, most of which have already been described in detail previously. First, they propose that every individual possesses numerous identities. Second, based on the six identity construction motives (self-esteem, distinctiveness, belonging, continuity, efficacy and meaning), each identity offers "payoffs" towards these psychological needs. However, the relative need for each motive differs among individuals. Third, they propose that individuals assess their possible consumption choices based on these payoffs and then strategically decide which identities to express and reinforce. Fourth, consumption choices linked to conflicting identities can negatively affect the associated payoffs. Lastly, they assume that continuous expression of an identity leads to facilitated enactment and enhanced payoffs over time. (Thompson and Loveland, 2015)

For a better visualization, Figure 3 illustrates Identity Investment Theory. Different consumption choices affect identities and they in turn influence the consumption motives. It is important to note that consumption that reinforces one identity can negatively affect another identity and they can also negatively influence the six psychological needs. The pictured environmental factors are situational cues that affect the salience of identities and therefore behavior (Thompson and Loveland, 2015). These factors will be extensively covered in the next chapter.

3.2.3. Identity-Effects on Judgments

The previous chapter described how individuals express their identities through consumption practices, how they react to identity threat and why this connection should be regarded as reciprocal. As explained, identities are not rigid constructs but instead change over time as individuals adjust their behavior. The extent of this dynamic will be covered in the next sections. First, "identity priming" will be introduced to then explain the influence of situational factors on judgments and advertising response, two major topics in consumer behavior literature.

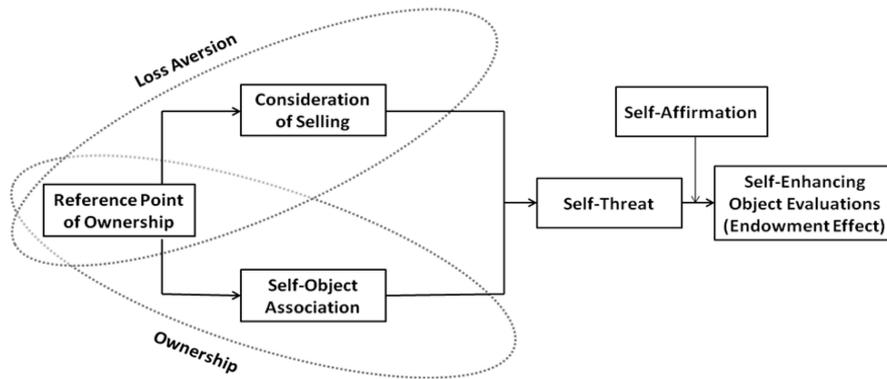


Figure 2: The endowment effect

Source: Chatterjee et al. (2013)

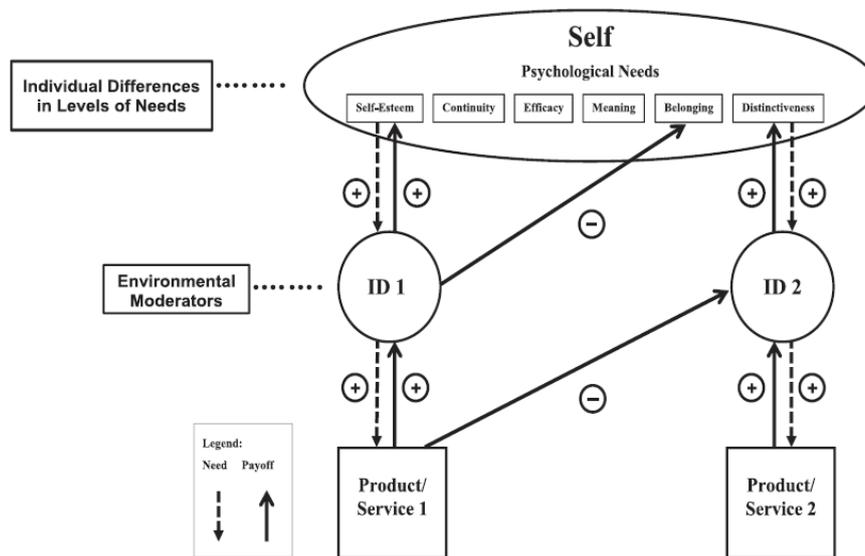


Figure 3: Identity Investment Theory

Source: Thompson and Loveland (2015)

Identity Priming and Situational Cues

Priming is a concept often used in experiments to observe the effect of identities on behavior. It describes the act of exposing an individual to a signal that, most of the time subconsciously, interacts with identities and consequently affects actions (Janiszewski and Wyer, 2014; Sela and Shiv, 2009). Priming can be exemplified using the identity principles described earlier. The signal first increases identity salience, which means that one particular identity is highlighted at a given moment and thus more likely to affect behavior (Reed, 2004). However, for the prime to increase salience, there needs to be an identity association with the signal (ibid.). Then, the salient identity influences actions if it is relevant for the given context (ibid.). For example, the yachtswoman

identity of a person is made salient by showing her pictures of sail boats. This prime would most likely have no effect on a mountaineer due to the lack of identity association. In a subsequent shoe shopping context, the sailor would be more likely to choose deck shoes after being exposed to the identity prime. However, if the subsequent task was to select personal accounting software, the woman’s choice would be unaffected by the initial signal because there is no identity relevance.

When the prime is effective, behavioral changes can have two different driving factors. On the one hand, primes can activate semantic constructs. These constructs are based on an individual’s self-concept and encompass knowledge about how to act in accordance with it. On the other hand, primes can activate goals which are based on a desired end-state

that is noncongruent with the individuals existing identities. The prime itself can be either “self-consistent (i.e., representing a state that is part of the active self-concept) [or] self-discrepant (i.e., representing a state that the self is yet to achieve)” (Sela and Shiv, 2009, p. 421). If the signal was self-consistent, a semantic construct is made salient for a short time and affects only immediately ensuing actions. However, if the situational cue was self-discrepant and connected to a desired identity, the initial reaction is weak but the wish to achieve the activated goal increases with time. The following figure 4 illustrates the Activation Striving Model developed by Sela and Shiv (2009).

Nonetheless, identity priming is not solely relevant for consumer identity research. As a matter of fact, individuals are constantly exposed to situational cues that interact with their self-concept and affect consumer behavior (Oyserman, 2009). Two major domains that are strongly influenced by primes are consumer judgments and advertising response.

Identity Salience and Judgments

Before the influence of situational cues on judgments will be covered, it is important to highlight what drives decisions in the absence of primes. Crucial to the influence of identity on decisions is identity salience (Zhang and Khare, 2009). Some identities are more salient than others without situational cues (ibid.). They are called “chronically accessible” or “chronically salient” and are most likely to influence behavior when identity salience has not been affected by primes (ibid.). For example, the reason why cultural identities tend to substantially guide consumer behavior is because they are chronically salient.

Overall, identity salience substantially influences consumer behavior. Yet, this does not necessarily increase the quality of decisions since judgments based on identity are often subjective and highly emotional (Bolton and Reed, 2004). In contrast, analytic judgments do not sway in favor of specific identities but are based on objective reasoning (ibid.). Accordingly, analytic judgments are more likely to be informed decisions (ibid.). It is a fortiori important to understand how identities influence decisions since research has shown “that judgment driven by a salient and strong identity will tend to persevere” (Bolton and Reed, 2004, p. 407). This means that despite efforts to induce analytic judgments in experiments, they are mostly dominated by identity-driven assessments (Bolton and Reed, 2004). Consequently, the influence of identities on decisions is omnipresent.

One further notion that underlines the perseverance of identity-based judgments is the “self-schema”. It represents knowledge about a pattern of behavior that fits with a person’s self-concept. An individual learns how to behave consistently with the self-concept through experience and subsequent judgments are directly made by referring to the self-schema instead of making specific analytic judgments. It can be regarded as a cognitive shortcut that saves time and resources (Markus, 1977).

However, when situational cues affect salience, even ini-

tially less accessible identities can affect behavior. The ease of identity activation is influenced by “self-importance”, a term that describes how central an identity is to an individual’s self-concept (Reed, 2004). If an identity is especially self-important, the likelihood of it becoming salient and therefore having an effect on judgments is higher (ibid.). Moreover, being socially distinct increases identity salience and reinforces the effectiveness of identity primes (Forehand et al., 2002). Nonetheless, one has to keep in mind that identity salience has no effect on behavior if the identity is not relevant (Reed, 2004; Reed et al., 2012).

The following example will further demonstrate how identity can specifically affect consumption. As previously mentioned, modern consumers tend to have global and local identities. Furthermore, there are local products that were made specifically for one market and global products with the same characteristics worldwide (Zhang and Khare, 2009). Zhang and Khare (2009) found that consumers normally choose products that are consistent with their salient identity. Based on which prime was used, consumers selected either global or local products. This effect was reversed, when participants were told to recall moments when they “felt overly similar to other people” (Zhang and Khare, 2009, p. 530), and their need for distinctiveness was activated. Consequently, they selected differentiating products that contradicted the primed identity. A primed local identity led to the choice of global products to show this distinctiveness. Therefore, situational cues can not only affect identity salience but also psychological needs such as distinctiveness (Zhang and Khare, 2009).

Identity-Effects on Advertising Response

Since literature on factors that affect advertising response is extensive and covering all of it is not in the scope of this thesis, the next section will only discuss identity-related aspects. Identity primes in advertising can significantly affect individuals’ message elaboration. These alterations in how advertising messages are perceived can subsequently influence consumer behavior.

Much of the research about identity-effects on advertising response has focused on ethnic identity (e.g. (Dimofte et al., 2003; Forehand et al., 2002; Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001; Torres and Briggs, 2007)). Such advertisements are a common marketing strategy because matching the message with the viewers’ ethnicity results in stronger identification and thus increased persuasion (Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001; Torres and Briggs, 2007). What such commercials do is increase the salience of consumers’ ethnic identity which then has a stronger influence on judgments. The state of temporarily increased ethnic salience is called “ethnic self-awareness” and should not be confused with the chronic accessibility of ethnic identities (Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001).

However, as consumers get used to commercials with ethnic identity primes, ethnic self-awareness is no longer increased by them. A measure that counters this development

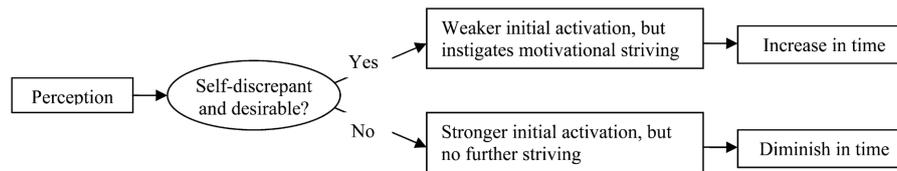


Figure 4: Activation Striving Model

Source: Sela and Shiv (2009)

is “advertisement schema incongruity”. The more a commercial is incongruent with known schemata (e.g. creative, surprising, unconventional), the more its ethnic primes induce ethnic self-awareness (Dimofte et al., 2003).

Moreover, product involvement mediates the effectiveness of identity primes (Torres and Briggs, 2007). High product involvement means that an individual perceives the product to be more important which encompasses increased pre-purchase considerations and later emotional attachment (Kirchgeorg, 2010). Ethnic primes are less effective in advertisements featuring highinvolvement products as the situational cue is overshadowed by the actual message (Torres and Briggs, 2007).

Furthermore, not all primes that increase identity salience necessarily make the advertisement more convincing. Wheeler et al. (2005) observed the influence of matching the advertisement to the viewer’s self-concept. They found that this identity prime induced a more critical elaboration of the message. If argument quality was good, the identity-matched commercial was perceived to be more persuasive. On the other hand, flawed arguments were more easily detected and therefore persuasion was decreased (Wheeler et al., 2005). Taken together, the described factors mediate how strong the influence of identities is on the elaboration of advertisements. As a result, this chapter further illustrates how much the selfconcept influences consumption by shaping perceptions.

3.3. Short Summary

Overall, the three main parts of this thesis all contribute to understanding how identity and consumption are connected. “Identity Construction” describes how the multitude of every person’s identities is mentally formed and which psychological needs motivate this development. Both next parts then illustrate how these constructed identities influence and are influenced by consumption. First, “Self-Expression Through Consumption” describes mostly conscious and strategic consumption decisions linked to identity-expression. Second, “Identity Effects on Judgments” shows static effects of chronically salient identities and dynamic effects of primed identities on decisions. Every main chapter covers an important part of consumer identity literature.

4. Implications for Theory and Practice

4.1. Implications for Theory

For researchers, this work offers a broad synthesis of consumer identity literature as a whole. It connects streams of research from psychology and marketing that focus on different aspects of consumer identity. Most previous publications covered only very specific topics relevant for the study at hand. One exception is the paper by Reed et al. (2012) that summarizes the most important characteristics of identity presented earlier. On top of that, Oyserman (2009) provides a synthesis of identity-based motivation.

However, this thesis approaches the topic from an even broader perspective and continuously highlights the connection between identity and consumption. This course of action revealed more general gaps and shortcomings of past research. The main problem that was identified is the lack of research focusing on reciprocity. Whether researchers omit this topic because they view it as self-evident or because they only believe in a unidirectional connection is not clear. As Thompson and Loveland (2015) point out, this area should be further explored. Since they provided a conceptual framework based on existing research, future studies should verify their propositions empirically.

While the general approach of this contribution has its advantages, it also causes unavoidable shortcomings. Due to the scope of consumer identity literature, not all publications could be reviewed and implemented. The literature search focused on the most central publications in every domain. For many subtopics, numerous additional studies that were omitted can be found. Especially studies with similar results to those already described were excluded.

Another limitation lies in the absence of an empirical study. All assumptions are based on previous findings that could potentially have flaws. To ensure a high quality of source material, only articles from renowned journals were reviewed. Furthermore, contradictions in literature were carefully assessed. Few scientific papers that were clearly contradicted by numerous subsequent studies were excluded. This was done to avoid unnecessary confusion.

4.2. Implications for Practice

Apart from implications for research, this work also offers valuable insights for companies. Many of the discussed topics have already found their way into marketing strategies. For

example, transformational consumption choices assist identity construction (Kleine et al., 2009), lifestyle branding focuses on offering countless ways of self-expression (Chernev et al., 2011) and the frequent use of identity primes in advertising aims at increasing identity salience and affecting persuasion (Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001). This work should help marketers understand the big picture of consumer behavior. It explains the whole process from identity formation to consumption decision and reciprocally from consumption decision to identity formation.

Instead of following trends and mimicking the practices of other companies, marketers should consider empirically tested research before making decisions. Not all commonly used strategies necessarily yield the best results. Especially noteworthy is the article from Chernev et al. (2011), which warns about excessive lifestyle branding that can expose companies to even broader competition. Knowing about possible downsides of identity-focused marketing should prevent unrealistic expectations.

Nonetheless, understanding the connection between identity and consumption should help marketers to better understand consumer behavior. Even new marketing strategies could emerge from the findings summarized in this thesis. For example, deliberately inducing identity threat and subsequently offering products that restore an individual's self-view could be a viable strategy. Based on the findings from Ward and Broniarczyk (2011), an online shop might detect unusual product choices that indicate the purchase of gifts. Since these choices are likely to cause identity threat, the consumer should be willing to also make a purchase that is congruent with the self-concept. Consequently, displaying such products on the website could be enough to trigger an additional sale. However, the effectiveness and limitations of such ideas should be carefully assessed.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the most difficult task of this thesis was to develop a meaningful categorization for the disparate streams of consumer identity literature. Since the goal was to provide a far-reaching summary, the three resulting groups, "Identity Construction", "Self-Expression Through Consumption" and "Identity-Effects on Judgments" are as disjunctive as possible while still being connected by the human self-concept. Each category represents its own extensive domain but understanding consumer identity in its entirety provides valuable insights for researchers and marketers. Having this overview is indispensable for grasping the ubiquity of the self-concept in consumer behavior.

Furthermore, the overarching understanding of the topic at hand facilitated the exposure of an important gap: The reciprocity between identity and consumption. It is created not due to the lack of evidence but due to the absence of explicit references to reciprocity. Since the term is almost nonexistent in consumer identity literature, this connection is easily overlooked. Instead of searching for the concrete term, one should view all consumer identity literature

through imaginary "reciprocity glasses". While the influence of identity on consumption is often covered, the notion that consumption in turn also affects identity is less obvious. At times, one needs to read between the lines to uncover reciprocity. Approaching publications with this premise reveals countless pieces of evidence that, once aggregated, offer a novel perspective on the connection between identity and consumption. A perspective that encompasses the dynamic interconnections present in reality.

Ultimately, with all of this in mind, Belk's statement should be altered slightly: We are what we have and this is perhaps the most complex and powerful fact of consumer behavior.

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