

# You Are What They Eat: The Influence of Reference Groups on Consumers' Connections to Brands

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The set of associations consumers have about a brand is an important component of brand equity. In this article, we focus on reference groups as a source of brand associations, which can be linked to one's mental representation of self to meet self-verification or self-enhancement goals. We conceptualize this linkage at an aggregate level in terms of self-brand connections, that is, the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept. In 2 studies, we show that brands used by member groups and aspiration groups can become connected to consumers' mental representation of self as they use these brands to define and create their self-concepts. Results from Experiment 1 show that the degree to which member group and aspiration group usage influences individual self-brand connections is contingent on the degree to which the individual belongs to a member group or wishes to belong to an aspiration group. In Experiment 2, we found that for individuals with self-enhancement goals, aspiration group brand use has a greater impact on self-brand connections; for individuals with self-verification goals, on the other hand, member group use has a greater impact.

The set of associations consumers have about a brand is an important component of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Such brand associations include both user imagery and psychological benefits. Many consumer researchers have made the assertion that people engage in consumption behavior to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identity (e.g., Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Richins, 1994). We examine one aspect of this construction process, namely, the appropriation of brand associations that are derived from brand usage by reference groups. We propose that consumers use brands to meet self-needs such as self-verification or self-enhancement. When brand associations are used to construct the self or to communicate the self-concept to others, a connection is formed with the brand. In particular, we consider reference groups as a source of brand associations that lead to such connections. That is, associations about reference groups be-

come associated with brands those groups are perceived to use and vice versa. The set of associations can then be linked to consumers' mental representations of self as they select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self, thus forging a connection between the consumer and the brand. Two studies provide empirical support for the notion that brands used by reference groups can lead to connections between consumers and brands as they use brands to define and create their self-concepts. Findings from the second study also support the idea that consumers' predominant self-goal (i.e., self-verification vs. self-enhancement) determines which type of reference groups' brand use (i.e., member groups vs. aspiration groups) will have the most influence on self-brand connections.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

A positive brand image is created through building strong, favorable, and unique associations to the brand in memory (Keller, 1993), including user imagery and psychological

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benefits (Aaker, 1991). User imagery consists of associations about the typical brand user, including demographic and psychographic associations. Reference group brand usage is an important source of user imagery brand associations. Psychological benefits, including social approval, personal expression, and outer-directed self-esteem, can also be associated with user imagery (Keller, 1993). Consumers value psychological brand benefits because these benefits can help consumers construct their self-identity and/or present themselves to others.

These assertions about psychological benefits parallel consumer research on the significance of important possessions and brands. Possessions and brands can be used to satisfy such psychological needs as actively creating one's self-concept, reinforcing and expressing self-identity, and allowing one to differentiate oneself and assert one's individuality (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Richins, 1994). Possessions and brands can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties such as one's family, community, and cultural groups (Reingen, Foster, Brown, & Seidman, 1984; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). As symbols, brands can add to and/or reinforce the way the consumer thinks about him or herself.

Thus, the set of brand associations can be used to create and define a consumer's self-concept. Reference group usage of a brand provides user image associations and psychological benefit associations for brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consumers construct themselves and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on the congruency between brand image and self-image. As a result of this process, the set of brand associations is linked to the consumer's mental representation of self. Thus, the meaning and value of a brand is not just its ability to express the self but its role in helping consumers create and build their self-identities (McCracken, 1989) by forming connections to brands.

### Self-Brand Connections

We propose that the set of brand associations can be more meaningful the more closely it is linked to the self. We conceptualize and operationalize this linkage at the aggregate level of self-brand connections, the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas, 1996; Escalas & Bettman, 2000). To achieve their identity goals (Huffman, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2000), people use products and brands to create and represent self-images and to present these images to others or to themselves. As a result of this process, a link bridges the brand and the self. We focus on self-brand connections rather than specific brand associations because we believe that brand meaning is most often dependent on the entire constellation, or gestalt, or the set of brand associations. Thus, we believe that self-brand connections capture an important part of consumers' construction of self. Therefore, the primary dependent variable in our studies is a measure of the degree to which consumers have incorpo-

rated the brand into their self-concept, that is, formed a self-brand connection (measurement is described following).

### Constructive Self-Concept/Self-Motivation

In our model, the set of brand associations can help consumers achieve goals that are motivated by the self when these associations are linked or connected to the self. People are motivated to create a favorable and consistent self-identity. Possible selves, for example, individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, also motivate behavior to achieve the realization of personal goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Although there are many different self-construction and self-presentation motivations, in this article we focus on two general sets of self-motives that have been the focus of recent social psychological research: self-enhancement and self-knowledge (need for consistency and self-verification; Banaji & Prentice, 1994).

*Self-enhancement/impression management.* People are heavily influenced by the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988). The impressions psychologically healthy individuals hold of themselves are biased in a positive direction. People judge positive traits to be more characteristic of themselves, and positive personality information is more efficiently processed and recalled (Kuiper & Derry, 1982). Attribution research shows that people are more likely to attribute positive outcomes to aspects of self and negative outcomes to circumstances unrelated to self (Miller & Ross, 1975). This self-serving bias is perpetuated because self-enhancement tendencies impose filters on incoming information.

Another important aspect of self-enhancement involves social interaction. People manage their presentations of self in various situations to maximize positive feedback (Schlenker, 1980). Usually, people strive to make a good impression, especially if they have high self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). People are motivated to create a good impression to gain social approval and for the intrinsic satisfaction of projecting a positive self-image, even to oneself (Schlenker, 1980). Social psychological research has identified several techniques for impression management: conforming to social norms, behavioral matching, self-promotion, flattery, and projecting consistency between beliefs and behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

*Self-verification.* In addition to the need for self-enhancement and impression management, people often have needs for self-knowledge, including self-verification. In general, people seek out and interpret situations and adopt behavioral strategies that are consistent with their existing self-conceptions. Similarly, they avoid situations and behaviors that yield information contradictory to their existing self-conceptions. In our research, we focused on self-verifi-

cation in which people strive to preserve their self-conceptions by eliciting self-verifying feedback. In this context, consistency provides individuals with a sense that the world is predictable and controllable (Swann, 1990). There are two primary strategies used to achieve self-verification: (a) seeing more self-confirmatory evidence than actually exists and (b) striving to influence the reactions of others by developing a self-confirmatory social environment, which includes displaying identity cues such as driving a certain brand of automobile (Schlenker, 1980; Swann, 1990).

Niedenthal, Cantor, and Kihlstrom (1985; Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993) have found that people choose situations (including products and brands) by (a) imagining the prototypical users for each item in the choice set and (b) choosing the item that maximizes their similarity to a desired prototypical user. Thus, people choose situations (including products) based on their need for self-consistency: They select products by matching themselves to prototypical users, a heuristic labeled *prototype matching*. For example, a person who perceives himself or herself as an environmentalist purchases the type of lawnmower he or she believes environmentalists use. Although Niedenthal et al. explained their findings using self-consistency, self-enhancement could also be an underlying rationale for their findings because participants maximize their similarity to a desired prototypical user, which may enhance their self-image.

**Reconciling self-enhancement and self-verification goals.** It might appear that seeking feedback that is favorable (self-enhancement) is incompatible with seeking accurate feedback regardless of its favorability (self-verification). Social psychological research has shown that various factors affect the relative degree to which each goal is active, for example, cognitive resources (Swann, 1990), stable versus malleable aspects of personality (Dunning, 1995), intuitive-experiential versus analytical-rational modes of thought (Morling & Epstein, 1997), or cognitive versus affective processes (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). In terms of these motives being differentially prevalent in different people, Sedikides and Strube (1995) found that people with high self-esteem, high self-monitors, narcissists, and Type B personalities are more likely than their counterparts to be influenced by self-enhancement motives as opposed to self-verification motives. In our experiments, we examined the relative degree of self-enhancement versus self-verification by measuring both. We predicted that these two self-goals would differentially affect which reference groups consumers look to for brand associations as they construct and present their self-concepts.

### Consumer Research on Reference Groups

Consumer research on reference groups has demonstrated congruency between group membership and brand usage (e.g., Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel,

1989; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Childers & Rao, 1992; Moschis, 1985). *Reference groups* are defined as social groups that are important to a consumer and against which he or she compares himself or herself. Early research focused on classification systems for the reference groups to which an individual turns as a standard for behaviors. For example, a *member group* is a reference group to which an individual belongs, whereas an *aspiration group* is a reference group to which an individual aspires to belong. More recent reference-group research is based on conformity and social comparison theory (see Folkes & Kiesler, 1991, for a review). Consumers use others as a source of information for arriving at and evaluating their beliefs about the world. This assessment of opinions and abilities uses relevant others who share beliefs and are similar on relevant dimensions. Three types of reference-group influence have been identified in consumer research: informational, utilitarian, and value expressive (Park & Lessig, 1977).

We argue that consumers actively construct themselves using brand associations that arise through reference-group usage and the resulting self-brand connections. By examining consumers' self-brand connections, we attempt to demonstrate that brand use by reference groups is a source of brand associations, which become linked to consumers' mental representation of self as consumers actively construct themselves by selecting brands with associations relevant to an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self. We propose that when consumers appropriate the brand images of brands used by their reference group, they do so to meet self-related needs. For example, self-enhancement needs would lead to forming connections with brands associated with favorable aspiration groups and avoidance of brands associated with unfavorable prototypical users. Consumers form self-brand connections that become meaningful through this process.

### STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

One source of brand associations is brand usage by reference groups with certain images. These brands (and their associations) may then be connected to consumers as they construct their self-identities. The extent to which such connections occur will depend on the degree to which the consumer is a member of a reference group. For example, if consumers consider themselves to be intellectual and their member group of intellectuals tends to drive Volvos®, they may choose to also drive a Volvo as a symbol of how intellectual they are and form a connection between Volvo and the self. On the other hand, if being intellectual is not viewed as a desirable aspect of the self, then the consumer will not form such a connection with Volvo. Thus, consumers may form self-brand connections to the brands used by reference groups to which they currently belong (i.e., mem-

ber groups) depending on the fit between the member group and the self.

H1: Consumers' perceptions that they belong to a member group will moderate the effect of that group's brand usage on self-brand connections. Consumers will have more positive self-brand connections when they perceive that a member group uses a brand and that they have a positive fit with the member group.

Similarly, consumers may utilize the associations derived from groups to which they would like to belong, that is, aspiration groups. When aspiration groups use a brand, consumers may form associations about the brand that they attempt to transfer to themselves despite the fact that they are not yet members of the aspiration group. Nevertheless, the brand becomes meaningful in the process of being used to construct one's possible self. For example, if a consumer wishes to be more hip, and he or she sees hip people wearing Versace® clothing, he or she may choose to wear Versace clothing in an attempt to appropriate the hip associations of that brand. Thus, H1 refers to groups in which the individual belongs, whereas H2 refers to those groups to which the individual aspires to belong.

H2: Consumers' perceptions that they wish to belong to an aspiration group will moderate the effect of that group's brand usage on self-brand connections. Consumers will have more positive self-brand connections when they perceive that an aspiration group uses a brand and that they have a positive fit with the aspiration group.

If individuals are guided by self-verification goals, that is, seeking accurate feedback regardless of its favorability, then we would expect that they would strive to create and/or project a realistic image of themselves. An accurate self-image would reflect membership in reference groups to which they belong (i.e., member groups). On the other hand, if individuals are guided by self-enhancement goals, that is, seeking feedback that is favorable and creating favorable impressions on others, then we would expect a greater influence of aspiration groups. Self-enhancement would be achieved by creating/projecting an image consistent with groups to which the individual wishes he or she belonged.

H3: For the relationships proposed in H1 and H2, consumers who have self-verification goals will be more influenced by their member groups, whereas consumers who have self-enhancement goals will be more influenced by their aspiration groups.

Note that this third hypothesis goes beyond the predictions made by previous studies by postulating an interaction

between the goal and the source of influence on self-brand connections.

## EXPERIMENT 1

In this study, we examined how reference groups influence brand connections. Thus, in Experiment 1, we tested H1 and H2. We tested whether group membership or desired membership in an aspiration group interacts with the group's brand usage such that consumers are more likely to have a self-brand connection with a brand used by their member or aspiration group.

### Method

*Participants.* To meet an introductory marketing course requirement, 45 undergraduate student participants at a public, southwestern university participated in this study.

*Selection of stimulus brands.* In a pretest designed to select brands that are meaningful to the participant population, 20 students at the same university were asked to list up to 5 brands they considered to be "really cool" and up to 5 brands they would "never use." The 10 brands listed most often by students (across both categories) were used to measure self-brand connections in Experiment 1 (focal brands), with the next 10 brands used as filler brands for the question about each group's brand usage. These brands are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
Brands Used in Experiments

<i>Experiment 1</i>	<i>Experiment 2</i>
Focal brands	Abercrombie & Fitch®
Adidas®	Adidas
Coca-Cola®	Birkenstock®
The GAP®	BMW®
Hershey's®	Doc Martens®
J.Crew®	FUBU®
Kellogg's®	The GAP
Levi's®	Tommy Hilfiger®
The Limited®	Levi's
Nike®	Polo
Reebok®	Mountain Dew
Filler brands	Nike®
Crest®	
Diet Coke®	
Kodak®	
Macanudo cigars	
Mountain Dew®	
Polo®	
Snapple®	
Sony®	
Timberland®	
Victoria's Secret®	

**Procedure.** In a pencil-and-paper survey, participants first identified up to 10 typical social groups or student “types” found on their campus. We provided them with an example of what was meant by types of people using 7 types of elderly people. Although 10 spaces were provided, participants were told they need not complete 10 types. Popular responses included “Athletes” and “Greeks.” Next, we instructed participants to write the types they had identified on the top of each of 20 successive pages (each type was written in a blank space provided on two pages for up to 10 types). Next, participants rated whether or not each social group they identified was likely to use the 10 focal brands and 10 filler brands selected in the pretest (see Table 1). Participants then indicated the degree to which they belonged to or aspired to belong to each student group. In a final task, participants rated the degree to which they themselves had formed self-brand connections with the 10 focal brands. Participants were then debriefed. The entire procedure took approximately 30 min.

**Independent variables.** Each participant listed up to 10 student types. These types are idiosyncratic to each participant and are not of interest in the analysis. Rather, our analysis focuses exclusively on the participants’ self-assessed fit with each type, regardless of what type they listed. Member group fit for each type is a continuous variable, measured by the average of three 7-point scale items: “I like the people in type X,” “I fit in/belong to the type X category,” and “I have a negative opinion of the people in type X” (reverse scored). All three items were anchored with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much so*) ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Similarly, aspiration-group fit was measured with the average of two 7-point scale items: “I respect the people in type X,” and “I would like to be a part of the type X group,” anchored with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much so*) ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ). The likelihood that people of a particular student type use a brand (type use) was measured on a 5-point scale anchored 1 (*never*) and 5 (*always*). These measures were taken for each type listed by the participant.

**Dependent variables.** Self-brand connections were measured using seven 7-point scale items (see Table 2). The

TABLE 2  
Self-Brand Connection Scale Items

1. Brand X reflects who I am ( <i>not at all/extremely well</i> ).
2. I can identify with Brand X ( <i>not at all/extremely well</i> ).
3. I feel a personal connection to Brand X ( <i>not at all/very much so</i> ).
4. I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people ( <i>not at all/extremely well</i> ).
5. I think Brand X (could) help(s) me become the type of person I want to be ( <i>not at all/extremely well</i> ).
6. I consider Brand X to be “me” (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others) ( <i>not “me”/“me”</i> ).
7. Brand X suits me well ( <i>not at all/extremely well</i> ).

*Note.* Items in parentheses are scale anchors. Scale source: Escalas (1996).

seven items were averaged to form one self-brand connection score per participant per brand ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

## Results

Participants listed an average of 4.74 types. The model used in the analyses to predict self-brand connections was a within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) model, with the categorical subject variable first, followed by the type variable, brand variable, either member group fit (H1) or aspiration group fit (H2), type use, and the Member Group Fit (H1) or Aspiration Group Fit (H2)  $\times$  Type Use interaction.<sup>1</sup> Self-brand connections is a continuous variable, whereas member group fit, aspiration group fit, and type use were each dichotomized using a median split.<sup>2</sup>

**H1.** This hypothesis asserted that the degree to which a consumer perceives himself or herself as fitting into a member group will moderate the effect of that group’s brand usage on the consumer’s self-brand connection. H1 was supported by the data: the Member Group Fit  $\times$  Type Use interaction was significant,  $F(1, 125) = 7.47, p < .01$ . Figure 1 shows the significant interaction. Type use also had a significant main effect that was qualified by the significant interaction,  $F(1, 125) = 33.20, p < .001$ . For participants who identified with the group, whether the group used the brand or not mattered more than for those participants who did not identify with the group.

**H2.** This hypothesis asserted that the degree to which a consumer wishes to belong to an aspiration group will moderate the effect of that group’s brand usage on the consumer’s self-brand connection. Hypothesis 2 was supported by the data: the Aspiration Group Fit  $\times$  Type Use interaction was significant,  $F(1, 125) = 7.74, p < .01$ . Figure 2 shows the significant interaction. Type use also had a significant main effect that was qualified by the significant interaction,  $F(1, 125) = 35.13, p < .001$ . For participants who aspired to belong to the group, whether the group used the brand or not mattered more than for those participants who did not aspire to belong.

## Discussion of Results From Experiment 1

Experiment 1 results provide empirical support for the notion that students are more likely to develop a self-brand connection when there is a strong perceived usage association between the member group and the brand and there is a strong

<sup>1</sup>We used the Member Group Fit (H1) or Aspiration Group Fit (H2)  $\times$  Type Use  $\times$  Subject interaction as the error term in the models to test H1 and H2 throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup>Analysis results using the continuous measures of member group fit, aspiration group fit, and type use are virtually identical to the categorical analysis results presented in this article.

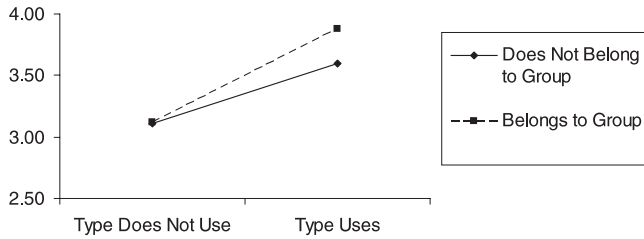


FIGURE 1 Self-brand connections in Experiment 1 for member groups (H1; 7-point scale).

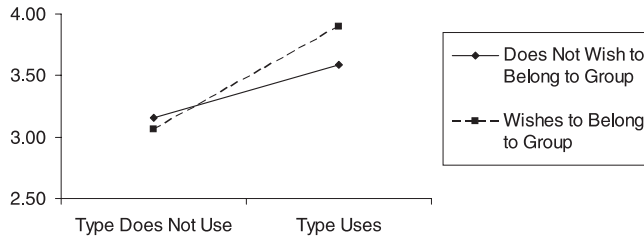


FIGURE 2 Self-brand connections in Experiment 1 for aspiration groups (H2; 7-point scale).

connection between the member group and the consumer’s self-concept or possible self (H1). The same relationships exist between aspiration groups, brands, and self-brand connections (H2). When these scenarios exist, the consumer may adopt the brand to meet a self-need, such as enhancement or consistency. Niedenthal et al. (1985) demonstrated that people choose brands based on self-needs; however, Experiment 1 results go beyond brand choice to show that member and aspirational group influence affects self-brand connections.

Experiment 2 extends the results of Experiment 1 by considering the role of different self-motives such as self-enhancement and self-verification (H3). We argue that people motivated to enhance their self-concept form connections to brands that are used by groups to which they aspire to belong, whereas people motivated to verify their self-concept form connections to brands used by groups to which they already belong.

### EXPERIMENT 2

In this study, we examined the role of two self-motivations, self-enhancement and self-verification (H3), in addition to revisiting H1 and H2. By differentiating self-enhancement goals from self-verification goals, we were able to provide some support for the idea that brand associations are transferred from a reference group to an individual as they construct their self-concepts in a manner consistent with their predominant self-motivations. If individuals use the user imagery and psychological benefits of brands to create their self-concept, then individuals with different types of goals should be differentially influenced by the two types of groups

that provide these associations for brands. Specifically, self-enhancers will form connections to brands used by aspiration groups to achieve their need to look better to themselves and others, whereas self-verifiers will form connections to brands used by groups to which they actually belong to achieve their goal of verifying or maintaining consistency with their existing self-concept.

### Method

**Participants.** As part of their requirements in an introductory marketing course and marketing research course, 171 undergraduate student participants at a public, south-western university participated in this study.

**Stimulus brands.** We ran a series of pretests to select 12 brands that were relevant to the participant population and had specific brand images (i.e., people perceived that very specific user types were associated with them) as opposed to brands that were widely used by the population in general. These brands are listed in Table 1. Although it is possible for people to develop self-brand connections to almost any brand, in general, people should have stronger positive or negative connections to brands with specific user images. These are the brands that communicate the most about the user and thus are better suited for being incorporated into one’s self-concept.

**Procedure.** In this study, we used a Visual Basic® program installed on the network in a university decision behavior laboratory that allowed us to customize the experiment based on participants’ responses. After a short study introduction, participants entered up to six (at least two) types of students found on campus using instructions similar to those in Experiment 1. The computer program enabled us to use these participant-specific types throughout the experiment and randomize the order of the types and brands being evaluated. Next, participants completed a series of questions that were answered on 1 to 100 sliding scales using a mouse. First, they indicated the degree to which they fit with each student type, both in terms of current group membership and a wish to belong in the future (three scale items each, see the following). Participants then rated whether or not each social group they identified was likely to use the 12 brands in Table 1. After a short, unrelated filler task, participants rated the degree to which they had formed self-brand connections with these brands. At the end of the experiment, we measured the degree to which participants had self-verification goals versus self-enhancement goals, followed by demographic information. The program ended with a debriefing statement. The entire procedure took approximately 30 min.

**Independent variables.** Each participant listed up to six student types. As in Experiment 1, our analysis focuses exclusively on the participants’ self-assessed fit with the

type, regardless of what type they listed. In Experiment 2, all variables were measured on a 1 to 100 scale. Member group fit was measured by the average of three scale items: “I fit in with this group of people,” “I belong to this group,” and “I consider myself to be this type of person.” All three items were anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 100 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Aspiration-group fit was also measured by the average of three scale items: “I would like to be a part of this group,” “I look up to this type of person,” and “I wish I had more friends in this group,” again anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 100 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The degree to which the student type was perceived as using the brand (type use) was measured on one scale: “To what extent do the X type of people use the following brands” (where the participant’s own type label replaces the “X”), anchored with 1 (*definitely does not use*) and 100 (*definitely does use*). Self-enhancement was measured with a single item, “It is important that people see me in the best possible light,” whereas self-verification was also measured with one item, “It is important for me to have accurate information about my strengths and weaknesses.” Both items were anchored 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 100 (*strongly agree*) (Swann, 1990). Although the two items were significantly correlated ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the relation was not particularly strong.

**Dependent variables.** Self-brand connections were measured using the average of three of the seven scale items used in Experiment 1 on a 1 to 100 scale: “I feel a personal connection to this brand,” “I can identify with this brand,” and “This brand reflects who I am” ( $\alpha = .93$ ). These items had the largest item to total correlation in Experiment 1.

## Results

In this experiment, participants listed an average of 5.39 types. The model used in the analyses to predict self-brand connections for H1 and H2 is a within-subjects ANOVA model, with the categorical subject variable first, followed by the brand variable, type variable, either member group fit (H1) or aspiration group fit (H2), type use, and the Member Group Fit (H1) or Aspiration Group Fit (H2)  $\times$  Type Use interaction. The model used to test H3 is a mixed between- and within-design, which is described with the results of H3. Self-brand connections was a continuous variable, whereas member group fit, aspiration group fit, type use, self-verification, and self-enhancement were each dichotomized using a median split.

**H1.** This hypothesis asserted that the degree to which a consumer perceives himself or herself belonging to a member group will moderate the effect of that group’s brand usage on the consumer’s self-brand connection. H1 was supported by the data. The Member Group Fit  $\times$  Type Use interaction was significant,  $F(1, 172) = 25.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , as shown in Figure 3. Type use also had a significant main effect that was

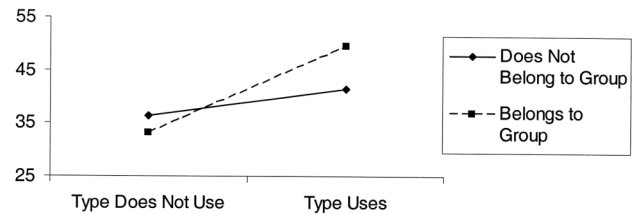


FIGURE 3 Self-brand connections in Experiment 2 for member groups (H1; 1–100 scale).

qualified by the significant interaction,  $F(1, 172) = 39.80$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**H2.** This hypothesis proposed that the degree to which a consumer would like to belong to an aspiration group will moderate the effect of that group’s brand usage on the consumer’s self-brand connection. Hypothesis 2 was also supported by the data. The Aspiration Group Fit  $\times$  Type Use interaction was significant in the model,  $F(1, 169) = 9.57$ ,  $p < .01$ . Type use also had a significant main effect that was qualified by the significant interaction,  $F(1, 169) = 31.22$ ,  $p < .001$ . (See Figure 4.)

**H3.** This hypothesis asserted that consumers who have self-verification goals will be more strongly influenced by their member groups, whereas consumers who have self-enhancement goals will be more strongly influenced by aspiration groups. For this analysis, we used participants who had either high self-enhancement goals but low self-verification goals (self-enhancers, or SEs) or high self-verification goals but low self-enhancement goals (self-verifiers, or SVs) using median splits to divide up the participants and eliminating those who were high on both or low on both categories.<sup>3</sup> To dichotomize member groups versus aspiration groups, we first created an index of member group score minus aspiration group score that ranged from +100 to –100. Next, we eliminated any type that scored between +50 and –50 on the index. To avoid unequal weighting of participants based on the number of times they were represented in the data set (which directly corresponds to the number of types they entered), we only included the two most extreme types per participant (i.e., no participant in the analysis has more than two types). This resulted in 46 participants averaging 1.49 types per participant across 12 brands per type, for 804 observations.<sup>4</sup> The ANOVA model consists of one between-subject variable, self-motive (SV vs. SE), followed by a subject

<sup>3</sup>Of 170 participants, 47 were low SV, low SE; 38 were high SV, low SE; 36 were low SV, high SE; and 49 were high on both SE and SV. When a model was run with all four groups, the three-way interaction was significant and the qualitative results were consistent with H3.

<sup>4</sup>After eliminating types that were neither high-member/low-aspiration groups nor high-aspiration/low-member groups, some participants in the data set were left with only one type.

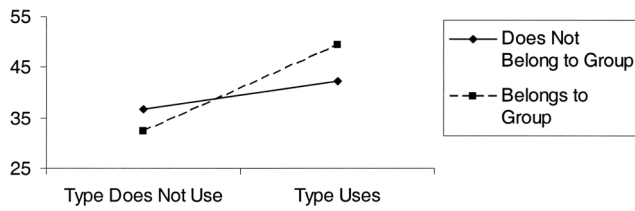


FIGURE 4 Self-brand connections in Experiment 2 for aspiration groups (H2; 1–100 scale.)

variable, brand variable, continuous type use variable, group type (member vs. aspiration), 3 two-way interactions (Self-Motive × Type Use, Self-Motive × Group Type, and Type Use × Group Type), and 1 three-way interaction (Self-Motive × Type Use × Group Type).<sup>5</sup>

As predicted by H3, we found a significant three-way interaction for Self-Motive (SV vs. SE) × Type Use × Group Type (member or aspiration) on self-brand connections,  $F(1, 50) = 3.68, p < .05$ , one-tailed. The nature of the three-way interaction, shown graphically in Figure 5, supports our assertions. Specifically, for SVs, when the member group used the brand, self-brand connections were significantly higher compared to when member groups did not use the brand,  $F(1, 50) = 13.15, p < .001$ , whereas this is not true for aspiration groups,  $F(1, 50) < 1.0$ . In the case of self-enhancement goals, self-brand connections were higher when aspiration groups used the brand compared to when aspiration groups did not use the brand,  $F(1, 50) = 5.79, p < .05$ . However, the difference in self-brand connections when member groups used the brand versus did not use the brand approached significance,  $F(1, 50) = 2.66, p = .11$ . Importantly, the effect of aspiration groups was significantly larger than the effect of member groups,  $F(1, 50) = 4.43, p < .05$  for SEs; and the effect of member-group usage on self-brand connections was larger for SVs compared to SEs,  $F(1, 50) = 2.92, p < .05$ , one-tailed, supporting H3.

### Discussion of Results From Experiment 2

Experiment 2 results replicate H1 for member groups and H2 for aspiration groups. Furthermore, the addition of self-motives (H3) provides insight into the self-construction processes used by consumers. We find that people motivated to enhance their self-concept form connections to brands that are used by groups they aspired to belong to, whereas people motivated to verify their self-concept form connections to brands used by groups to which they already belong. By differentiating self-enhancement goals from self-verification goals, we provide some support for the

<sup>5</sup>For the three way interaction and all contrasts, the mean square of Self-Motive × Type Use × Group Type × Subject was used as the error term. Additionally, type use was dichotomized using a median split for the contrasts.

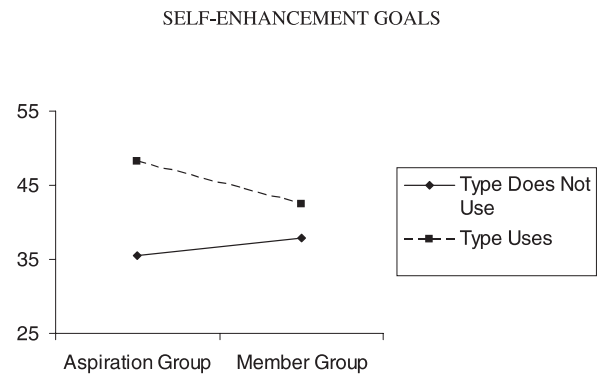
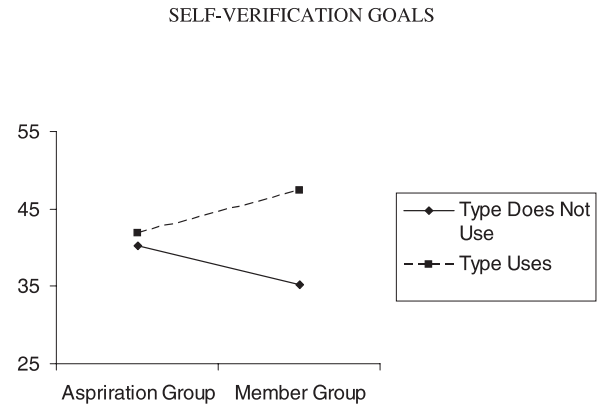


FIGURE 5 Self-brand connections in Experiment 2 for aspiration groups versus members groups (H3; 1–100 scale).

idea that user imagery and psychological benefit associations are appropriated from certain reference groups by individuals who construct their self-concepts in a manner consistent with their predominant self-motivations. The results indicate that individuals with different types of goals appear to be differentially influenced by the member groups versus aspiration groups that provide images with which to create their self-concept. Specifically, SEs can form connections to brands used by aspiration groups to achieve their need to look better to themselves and others, whereas self-verifiers can form connections to brands used by groups to which they actually belong to achieve their goal of verifying or maintaining consistency with their existing self-concept.

### CONCLUSION

These two studies examining undergraduate students' attitudes and beliefs about prototypical student types and the fit between brands and these student types indicate that students are more likely to develop a self-brand connection when there is a strong usage association between a reference group and the brand and there is a strong connection between the reference



group and the consumer's self-concept. When this scenario exists, the consumer may appropriate user imagery and psychological benefit associations of the brand to meet a self-need, such as self-enhancement or the need for consistency. Additionally, in the case of SVs, member groups have a larger effect on self-brand connections, whereas for SEs, the effect of aspiration groups on self-brand connections is greater. We believe that this finding is an important demonstration that consumers are motivated by their self-needs to utilize brand associations derived from different types of groups in a contingent fashion to construct and present their self-identities.

### Marketing Implications

The set of associations consumers have about a brand is an important component of brand equity, and we believe that forming a self-brand connection is a psychological manifestation of such equity at the consumer level. For example, self-brand connections may lead to robust brand attitudes, that is, attitudes that are not very susceptible to change. Consumers who have used brand associations to construct their self-identities may be more forgiving of marketer blunders, be it a poor advertising campaign or a temporary product quality problem. They may also be more brand loyal and less likely to switch to competitors' brands in response to price cuts, special displays, bundling tactics, and coupons. Therefore, the notion that consumers form a link to a brand as they use the brand's associations for self-construction is important to marketing managers. When consumers' self-concepts are linked to a brand, then the company behind the brand may be able to gain an enduring competitive advantage because this type of connection is difficult for competitors to imitate.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The main limitation of this research is the correlational nature of our data. Although our results were consistent with the processes we proposed (particularly in the case of H3), we did not demonstrate causality in our two studies. One could argue that our participants were projecting their own behavior onto others in their member or aspiration groups. Future research could explore potential moderators to help establish causality. For example, in Experiment 2, we used brands with specific images because they are better suited for being incorporated into one's self-concept. However, our model would indicate that the effect of reference group brand usage on self-brand connections brands should not occur for brands with broad, non-specific user associations. Another similar moderator to explore is public versus private goods (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). We would expect a larger effect for public goods due to their increased visibility, which makes them better suited for communicating one's self-concept to others.

Future research could also examine how consumers appropriate brand associations from sources such as celebrities and sports figures to construct and communicate their own

self-identities. Specifically, in the case of celebrity influence on brand associations, consumers' assessments of the degree of congruency between the celebrity and the brand could be influenced by either celebrity use of the brand (for example, Tiger Woods and Ping® golf clubs) or by the perceived fit between the celebrity and the brand (e.g., Tiger Woods and American Express®; see McCracken, 1989). Similarly, assessments of the fit between the consumer and the celebrity could be either based on the degree to which the consumer would like to become more like a particular celebrity (more like aspiration groups) or on the extent to which the consumer feels they are similar to the celebrity on a variety of dimensions (more like member groups). The process of association creation could be examined in more detail, therefore, by manipulating the salience of these various aspects that could influence consumers' assessments (e.g., manipulating whether use or perceived fit is made more salient). Although such factors might also be differentially relevant in the case of reference groups, we believe that their impact is likely to be more pronounced in the case of celebrity influence. There may also be individual difference factors that come into play with celebrities in addition to the self-goals examined in this article. For example, skepticism toward celebrity advertising may moderate the degree to which consumers accept movement of associations from the celebrity to the brand to themselves and form self-brand connections.

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