

Self-Congruity and Clothing Create a Personal Brand

Lourdes S. Gomez de Cordova

Spring Hill College

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore self-branding from the perspective of clothing, it was examined through self-congruity theory to answer the research question: In what ways does the idealized self-image influence clothing purchases and selections, demonstrating self-congruence with one's brand? To answer this research question a convenience sample was taken using paper administrated surveys. 74 Spring Hill College students participated in the 21-question survey, which was later tested using Frequencies, Descriptives, Crosstabs and Cronbach's Alpha. Once data was collected and tests were run, research statistically supported the hypothesis: If self-congruity links self-image with brand preferences, then respondents will report clothing purchases and selections made to demonstrate ideal-self. People reported embracing their own self-image and selecting clothes to represent a well-established personal brand. Results demonstrated that most people from this convenience sample actually made clothing purchases and selections in order to demonstrate ideal self-image.

## INTRODUCTION

Consumers seek products that possess images similar to the self-image they wish to reflect or pursue. People develop views about their own identity, leading to the creation of their self-image (Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). Once their self-image is recognized, they are determined to protect it by purchasing products that represent how they see themselves or the image they wish to obtain in the future. To support why consumers buy products based on self-perception, the self-congruity theory was developed. Self-congruence refers to the link between a consumer's self-concept and the image of the given product they are purchasing. The similarities possessed by a person's self-image and his or her idea of a product's image influences preference. Essentially, the way consumers view themselves is associated with product preferences. This leads consumers to expect that the products they purchase will properly establish their personal image. Ultimately, assisting consumers in the process of developing their personal brand.

Consumers do not simply purchase products for the utilitarian, or practical benefits, but also for the self-expressive benefits (Sirgy et al., 2008). Consumers are driven by the idea of expressing their self-image, this enthusiasm encourages consumers to purchase products containing images and values similar to those they possess or wish to convey (Sirgy et al., 2008). People are determined to obtain a certain image that represents who they are. They act in ways to support their self-image, such as purchasing or wearing certain clothing.

The self-congruity theory can be demonstrated through the purchase of clothing. Most people when shopping for clothes, select outfits that fit their actual self-image (Sirgy et al., 2008). Fashion is a way to represent one's self and, in turn, gives others a glance of a personal

brand without having to use words. Personal preferences result in different clothing options and styles, aiming for the self-image that a consumer wishes to gain.

Clothes serve more meaning to people than fabric worn to cover the body; they are worn to enhance or project a positive image. Consumers purchase clothing for all occasions, in order to create desired looks and reject negative self-presentation. Women have discussed their goals and ambitions relating to their clothes and of attempts to use clothes to create images that perceive success (Guy & Banim 2000). Clothes help women establish success, measuring it on two levels: feeling positive because they “looked good” and the feeling of being able to achieve that image through the correct choice of clothing (Guy & Banim 2000).

Clothing selection based on self-image creates and reveals a personal brand allowing others to automatically perceive different aspects about a person. Clothing allows the representation of different images developing a link between clothes and identity. Ultimately, assisting in establishing certain images for specific occasions. The purpose of this pilot study is to explore self-branding from the perspective of clothing, it will be examined through the lens of self-congruity to determine answers to this research question: In what ways does idealized self-image influence clothing purchases and selections, demonstrating self-congruence with one brand?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Consumers become loyal to brands that reflect their ideal selves, demonstrating purchase intentions that resemble their personality. Once a person has recognized his or her self-image, he or she may do anything in his or her power to maintain it, including altering, advancing or continuing their purchases. A consumers' desire to express their own self often acts as a driving force, encouraging him or her to make specific purchases (Sirgy et al., 2008). Self-image

represents how one might see himself or herself, but the concept of self is created as a notion involving several different facets, one being the ideal self (Achouri & Bouslama 2010). Self-concept is the understanding of who and what we are and can take on two forms: the actual self and the ideal self (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011). Consumers are often determined to establish or uphold a specific image, leading them to be more inclined to purchase products from brands whose images are consistent with their own self-image or self-concept (Chih-Ching, Pei-Jou & Chun-Shuo, 2013).

Consumers tend to purchase brands with symbolic purposes that are relative to and fit their own identity. Actual self-image is the way an individual actually perceives himself or herself and is based on the perceived reality of oneself, it describes who and what a person really is at the given moment (Malär et al., 2011). When making clothing purchases and selections for the actual self, consumers take into consideration who they are at that moment, as opposed to aiming to achieve a completely new image. Consumers choose brands not only because they highlight certain aspects of what we are or want to be, but also because brands themselves create those aspects (Achouri & Bouslama 2010).

Self-image is a form of network representation, used to show off one's personality (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). The way a person would like others to perceive him or her and the way they would like or dream to be all represent the ideal self (Achouri & Bouslama, 2010). As opposed to actual self-image, which is viewed as the present, here and now image that one possesses, ideal self-image refers to an image that one desires to attain further into the future. Seeking an ideal self-image refers to creating and attaining the image that you hope to portray. The idealized self-image may be attained through purchases, which in turn allow a consumer to mold and shape a new image or identity. Consumers are motivated to make purchases that will

support the images they wish to pursue. The ideal self is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what a person believes that he or she would like to be or aspire to become (Malär et al., 2011 p. 38). The identity a consumer dreams of attaining influences clothing purchases and selections. The images that consumer's display on the outside, through clothing, reflects their self-concept and can demonstrate congruence with brands' personalities.

Consumers attempt to achieve satisfying images as they engage with clothes, to create, reveal or conceal aspects of their identity (Guy & Banim 2000 p. 313). The ideal self-image reflects, "What I would dream to be" (Achouri & Bouslama, 2010). Purchase intentions allow consumers, such as women, to achieve the identity that they have always wanted. According to Guy, women have a relationship with their clothes that can be grouped around three existing views of self: "The woman I want to be," "The woman I fear I could be" and "The woman I am most of the time" (2000 p. 314). Through "The woman I want to be," clothing selections and purchases are made to reveal a positive self-image, while "the woman I fear I could be" reveals a negative self-image and a poor desired look. "The woman I am most of the time," focuses on the current state of clothing, how women think about themselves in their everyday relationship with clothes (Guy & Banim 2000).

Often, a new look can lead to a different self-image, and has the ability to make one feel more confident about his or her life, as well as feel more professional in the work field. "The women I want to be," reflects a woman's ideal self-image, discussing desires and dreams related to clothes, leading to the creation of images perceived as successful. Clothes allow women to achieve their ideal self-image. Through proper clothing selections, women feel positive because they "look good," reflecting in the satisfaction of accomplishing the correct image through clothing. "The woman I want to be" is to have a good collection of clothes (and the skills to use

them) in order to be sure of looking good whenever needed to (Guy & Banim 2000 p. 316). A good collection of clothes and the skills to use them has the ability to positively enhance the ideal self-image. Dreaming of pursuing a certain makeshift reality of the ideal self-image allows consumers to guide clothing purchases and selections. Although, dressing for the ideal self may reflect negatively or positively on a consumer from the standpoint of an outsider, congruence with brand personalities are present because purchases are based on desired self-image.

“The woman I am most of the time,” reflects a woman’s actual self-image, the woman that she knows she is and can be at that given point in time and how the individual currently perceives herself. Individuals experience a sense of confidence because they look good, whether it is dressing for the ideal or actual self, since the clothing selected assists in attaining a desired image. Most women recognize that their relationship with clothes is dynamic and ongoing, and that a major source of enjoyment for them was to use clothes to realize different aspects of themselves (Guy & Banim 2000, p. 313). Clothing selections are often made for the purpose of standing out and to create a recognizable image that can be taken seriously and appreciated by others. The way one dresses is a standard that he or she sets for themselves, allowing others to make assumptions and first impressions of self-image based on clothes (“Working,” 2010). Clothing use is part of an ongoing process of self-realization. When making clothing purchases and selections, consumers are more inclined to choose items that suit their own identity or allow them to express their ideal self.

Individuals have a disposition to express themselves. Consumers purchase clothes that possess symbolic meanings that correspond to their self-image. Through clothing selections and purchases, consumers have the ability to create, reinforce and communicate their self-image (Kim & Hyun, 2013). The self-congruity theory is based on the idea that a consumer’s self-

concept is linked to the image they are trying to attain from a specific product purchase. Through self-congruity, a person's self-image reflects their purchase intentions. When purchasing and selecting clothes, consumers make decisions based on how they wish to present themselves, as the person they wish to be or the person they actually are. Self-congruity helps generate purchase intentions, in turn creating a consumer's own brand personality for others to form an opinion.

An individual's personal brand is a symbolic reflection of his or her own personality and self-image. Consumers prefer brands that better suit their self-perception and will assist in setting their personal brand or self-image out there for others recognize. An individual's personal brand is not defined by what they say or do, but it is characterized by what others say it is (Sauers, 2013). Examples of personal branding are demonstrated in the workplace when selecting the proper attire that best suits a professional environment. If chosen properly, an individual's appearance can set the standard and be an element of personal branding success (Morgan, 2011).

Clothes are an important aspect of an individual's personal brand, allowing consumers to feel confident and recognized, but according to Guy, the person who was noticed is important too, rather than merely the clothes. Clothing purchased and selected is directed by an individual's self-image with the hope of being known. Public self-consciousness is when consumers become aware that their self-image is a social object that others are also aware of. Individuals with high public self-consciousness are more aware of how others perceive them and try harder to create a favorable public image (Malär et al., 2011 p. 37).

Consumers prefer brands that possess features representing functions that suit their own identity or allow them to express their ideal self (Dikcius, Seimiene, & Zaliene, 2013). They do not purchase products based on material benefits, but because of symbolic meanings portrayed through a product's image (Dikcius, Seimiene, & Zaliene, 2013). Self-congruity reflects the links

between the self, or idealized self, and a brand. The image a consumer wishes to pursue will be reflected through their clothing selections and purchases. People favor brands with images similar to their own; self-congruence discusses the match between consumer self-concept, their ideal self, and the user image of a given product (Sirgy et al., 2008 p. 1092). Consumers wishing to attain their idealized self-image will lean toward buying products with identities that exemplify values held by the ideal self. To better present the person they wish to become, consumer's purchase clothing that illustrates their idealized self-image. To create, reveal and conceal aspects of their identity, consumers seek their idealized self-image to determine clothing selections.

Self-congruity deals with how consumers are motivated to express their self-image. The idealized self-image is taken into consideration, leading to clothing brand selections inspired by images consumers wish to portray. People wish to portray an idealized self-image in order to gain new image. Once the idealized self-image is established, consumers have a need to protect it through clothing purchases that reflect specific images. If self-congruity links self-image with brand preferences, then respondents will report clothing purchases and selections made to demonstrate ideal-self.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Surveys were distributed to 74 students around the Spring Hill College campus. Paper administrated surveys were distributed around various locations including: classrooms, the cafeteria and group meetings. Surveys were taken in one sitting and students were requested to quietly answer while refraining from talking with others. This allowed surveys to remain unaltered by the opinion of those around and for respondents to give their undivided attention.

Questions were broken down into four categories, one question related to self-image (Q1), seven related to ideal self-image (Q2, Q4, Q6, Q8, Q9, Q13, Q15), nine related to personal brand (Q3, Q5, Q7, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q16, Q20, Q22) and four related to actual self-image (Q14, Q17, Q18, Q19). The majority of the questions asked concentrated on personal branding and how respondents believed their clothing selections and purchases reflected their self-image. Each question was selected to find results that would support the hypothesis stating if self-congruity links self-image with brand preferences. Q1 focused on how respondents felt about their overall image and representations. Q2, Q4, Q6, Q8, Q9, Q13 and Q15 discussed purchases and selections that respondents made to become the person they wished to be. Q3, Q5, Q7, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q16, Q20 and Q22 concentrated on how important respondents believed self-representation is. Last, Q14, Q17, Q18 and Q19 discussed the person the respondent felt they were at the given moment.

In a separate section, there were questions involving the respondent in general. The respondent was asked to identify their age and gender. Then, participants were asked about their clothing purchases in the last two months and the amount of time taken in making clothing selections a week. It was important to understand if the participant was actively involved in making clothing selections and purchases since the research is focused on how people connect personal branding and self-image.

Questions were asked in three formats: scale, nominal and ordinal. Scales have choices from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree,” and present a clear statement on a single topic. The scale questions consisted of Q1-Q17, and were categorized as follows: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). Questions formatted as nominal are thought of as naming, and participants respond by selecting words, not numbers. The nominal

questions consisted of Q18-Q20 and asked about age, gender, and clothing purchases in the last two months. Ordinal measurements place participants in order from high to low. Q21 was the only ordinal question and considered the time respondents spent making clothing selections in a week: one hour per week or less (1), two to three hours per week (2), four to five hours per week (3) and six or more hours per week (4). These three formats were each different, but were still well-matched with specific questions being asked.

After all the questions were answered, four separate tests were run using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, or SPSS. The four tests included Frequencies, Descriptives, Crosstabs and Cronbach's Alpha. Frequencies are tested in order to easily see how scores are distributed. Frequencies were tested to determine how many people answered the survey and to determine which questions were answered and which the respondent left out. Descriptives were run on scale items to assist in making sure research was not entered incorrectly. Descriptive statistics summarize data so they can be easily comprehended. Standard deviation was run to measure the variation in responses, to see the amount by which participant responses varied or differed from each other. Crosstabs were tested to demonstrate how different questions are meant to be directed to different parts of the hypothesis or research question. Crosstabs allow the researcher to recognize how questions relate and how answers fall, such as if males answered a question differently than females; where one question is in relation to another. Last, Cronbach's Alpha was run to test scale items, allowing the researcher to determine the questions that are similar and belong in the same group. Cronbach's Alpha also allows the researcher to determine what scale items are not similar and how the ones that are match up with each other.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Responses were collected from a convenience sample, where people who happened to be available were asked to participate in the pilot study. Because a convenience sample was used, the data and results collected cannot be applied to the Spring Hill College population. There were a total of 74 participants, and they ranged between 19-25 years of age. Most respondents had purchased clothing within the last two months. Only 14 respondents (18.9%) claimed that they had not purchased clothing of any sort within the last two months, while 60 participants (81.1%) responded that they had purchased within the last two months. The respondents fit into similar demographics, ultimately leading their answers to be similar.

Not all the questions were answered by respondents; two questions were left out by three respondents. Out of 74 students, only 73 answered the question focusing on the association of certain clothes with a poor self-image and 72 participants answered the question pertaining to the importance of selecting the proper outfit to carry out a certain image.

A majority of the respondents seemed to agree with the statements provided in the survey. There were several responses where the majority of participants either disagreed or were neutral. For the most part questions did not have a large deviation; there was consistency within the sample. It was interesting to see that 50 percent of participants agreed that their clothes accurately reflected who they are, while 56.8 percent also agreed that they had purchased specific clothing knowing it would portray a certain image. The purpose of these two questions was to determine which one people would agree with, yet the data shows that rather than selecting one of these people agreed with both. This means that those who believe their clothes accurately represent self-image also purchase and select certain clothes to portray a certain image, different from their own. This is an important finding because it explains that people who dress to represent themselves are representing an image that is not necessarily who they are.

These two questions were related to opposite spectrums of the respondent's self-image; one was about being satisfied with their overall self-image and the latter was about the person they dreamt to be.

The descriptive analysis tests that were run on the 17 scale questions demonstrated a minimum result of one (strongly disagree) and a maximum result of five (strongly agree). Out of the 17 questions people agreed with 12, were neutral towards with 2, disagreed with 3 and were divided in half between neutral and disagree on one question. The standard deviation for all the scale questions ranged between .756 and 1.174

Crosstabs were run using questions pertaining to the respondents clothing selections and purchases based on ideal self-image and if clothing purchases had been made in the last two months. Seven questions all dealing with the respondent's ideal self-image were crossed with one question dealing with clothing purchases in the last two months. After the seven questions were crossed with one, four showed insignificance and three demonstrated significance. The four crosstabs that were run and resulted in mathematical connections had Pearson's Chi Square lines and *Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)* of .011, .035 and .026. Next, the three crosstabs that were run and resulted in no mathematical connections had Pearson's Chi Square lines and *Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)* of .090, .258, .369 and .826.

Last, to determine the relationship between all the questions, Cronbach's Alpha was run. After running Cronbach's Alpha on all 17 scale questions (Q1-Q17), the results generated a .835 alpha coefficient. This alpha coefficient demonstrated that all the scale questions were statistically related to one another.

## RESULTS

The hypothesis of this study states: If self-congruity links self-image with brand preferences, then respondents will report clothing purchases made to demonstrate idea self-image. Convenience sampling done at Spring Hill College along with research and testing led to results that supported the hypothesis, so self-congruity does link self-image with brand preferences. The data demonstrated that a person's personal brand and the ideal self-image they wish to attain are related. With this being said, it was supported that on average, most people surveyed in this convenience sample had purchased clothing in order to portray or attain an image other than their actual self.

People reported embracing their own self-image and selecting clothes to represent a well-established personal brand, yet respondents also agreed to buying clothes that portrayed an image other than their own (ideal self-image). With this being said, results demonstrated that on average most people from this sample actually did make clothing purchases and selections in order to demonstrate ideal self-image. This is interesting because these findings can imply that there is a possibility people do not realize that their wardrobe choices are not representations of themselves but instead represent the person they would like others to see them as.

Aside from discovering a person's unconscious desires, findings showed that the questions had statistical significance in relation to one another. The studies showed to be significant partly because of the types of questions asked as well as their relation to one another. The implications of this pilot study could suggest a company to use words and images in advertisements that refer to images that customers usually work hard achieve. Companies can advertise products such as make-up, hair care and clothes by targeting them to consumers who are attempting to change their self-image. By using vocabulary suggesting change and what

others portray as an acceptable look to conform to, companies have the ability to easily aim advertisements at the ideal self.

### **CONCLUSION**

After testing the convenience sample responses, running data analysis and reviewing the results, research can conclude that the hypothesis was supported. This pilot study was successful and its instruments could be used for an expanded study. As mentioned in the results section, companies can use the pilot study not as a convenience sample, but to test the population. The survey used in this study has the ability to assist companies in deciding on the people they would like to advertise to. By using this study, companies will have an advantage and find that consumer purchase and select clothing based on the self-image they dream of attaining.

If this pilot study were to be modified and done differently, testing would be done on a wider variety of participants. Instead of having all participants in the same age group, surveys would be distributed to a wide range of respondents. Also, if the research were to be tested again some questions could be discarded to make room for questions discussing specific clothing attire. Since the pilot study pertained to personal brand, using specific examples of wardrobe that portray different images could have been used.

Findings proved the hypothesis of this pilot study to be statistically supported. It would be interesting if through the use of more specific examples and respondents of different ages, findings would change or stay static. Clothing selection and purchases allow people of all ages to represent themselves, it would have been interesting to see a difference in age groups. As clothes continue to represent image, consumers, prospective bosses and peers will only increase their expectations of self-image.

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Appendix A: Blank Survey

Appendix B: SPSS