Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning

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We propose that consumers purchase brands in part to construct their self-concepts and, in so doing, form self-brand connections. We focus on reference groups as a source of brand meaning. Results from two studies show that brands with images consistent with an ingroup enhance self-brand connections for all consumers, whereas brands with images that are consistent with an outgroup have a stronger negative effect on independent versus interdependent consumers. We propose that this differential effect is due to stronger self-differentiation goals for consumers with more independent self-concepts. We also find greater effects for more symbolic than for less symbolic brands.

People engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identity (e.g., Belk 1988; Richins 1994). We examine one aspect of this construction process, namely, the appropriation of brand associations derived from the usage of these brands by reference groups. Building on McCracken's (1988) theory of meaning movement, we propose that the symbolic properties of reference groups become associated with the brands those groups are perceived to use. These associations can then be transferred from reference groups to consumers as consumers select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of their self-concept, in this article operationalized as independent versus interdependent self-construals. When brand associations are used to construct the self or to communicate the self-concept to others, a connection is formed with the brand. Two studies provide empirical support for the notion that brands used by ingroups enhance consumers' self-brand connections, whereas brands used by outgroups detract from such connections. We show further that this influence of ingroup versus outgroup brand usage differs depending on whether the consumer has a primarily independent or interdependent self-construal. Finally, we show that these effects are moderated by the degree to which the brands are symbolic, that is, communicate something about the user.

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THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Brands, Meaning Transfer, and Self-Brand Connections

Possessions can be used to satisfy psychological needs, such as actively creating one's self-concept, reinforcing and expressing self-identity, and allowing one to differentiate oneself and assert one's individuality (e.g., Ball and Tasaki 1992; Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Possessions can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties to one's family, community, and/or cultural groups, including brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Consumer researchers have extended some of these possession findings to brands (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fournier 1998). For example, recent research indicates that consumers construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on the congruency between brand-user associations and self-image associations (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Levy (1959) asserted that people do not buy products just for what they do, but also for what the product means; thus, brands can be symbols whose meaning is used to create and define a consumer's self-concept. McCracken's (1988) model of meaning transfer asserts that such meaning originates in the culturally constituted world, moving into goods via the fashion system, word of mouth, reference groups, subcultural groups, celebrities, and the media. For example, meanings "get into" a brand through advertising because ads reference the general cultural symbols needed to provide meaning. Similarly, reference group usage of a brand provides meaning via the associations consumers hold regarding that group (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Next, meaning moves from goods to consumers, as consumers construct

themselves through their brand choices based on congruency between brand image and self-image. Thus, the meaning and value of a brand is not just its ability to express the self, but also its role in helping consumers create and build their self-identities (McCracken 1989).

Reference groups can be a critical source of brand meanings. Consumers use others as a source of information for arriving at and evaluating one's beliefs about the world, particularly others who share beliefs and are similar on relevant dimensions. Consumer research on reference groups has demonstrated congruency between group membership and brand usage (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Childers and Rao 1992; Moschis 1985) and has defined several types of social influence (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Park and Lessig 1977). We elaborate on value-expressive reference group influences, characterized by the need for psychological association with a group either to resemble the group or due to a liking for the group. We provide an empirical demonstration of these ideas by demonstrating that brand use by reference groups is a source of brand meaning. Consumers form associations between reference groups and the brands they use and transfer these meanings from brand to self by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self.

A critical distinction in terms of such self-construction processes is that between the use of brand associations deriving from one's own group (an ingroup) versus groups to which one does not belong (an outgroup). Consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands associated or consistent with an ingroup and reject meanings associated or consistent with an outgroup. Consumers form connections to brands that become meaningful through this process; self-brand connections are intended to measure the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Therefore, given our focus on the self-construction processes using brands, rather than information processing in response to an advertisement, the primary dependent variable in our studies is a measure of the degree to which consumers have formed a self-brand connection.

If reference groups use and become associated with particular brands (i.e., the brand's image is consistent with or matches the group), such meaning may be appropriated by consumers as they construct their self-identities. For example, if I consider myself to be an intellectual and my member group of intellectuals tends to drive Volvo automobiles, I also may choose to drive a Volvo car as a symbol of how intellectual I am. As a result, consumers may form self-brand connections to the brands used by reference groups to which they belong. Conversely, consumers may avoid associations derived from groups to which they do not belong. When outgroup members use a brand, consumers may form associations about the brand that they would not like to have transferred to themselves. Nevertheless, the brand becomes meaningful through the process of avoiding

the outgroup symbolism in constructing one's possible self. For example, if I am not a member of a fraternity (and do not desire to be a member) and see fraternity members wearing Polo clothing, I may specifically choose not to wear Polo clothing in an attempt to distance myself from the fraternity symbolism of the Polo brand. Thus, the type of group associated with the brand (ingroup versus outgroup) will moderate the effect of brand associations on self-brand connections.

Similarly, if a brand is not typically associated with an ingroup (e.g., its image is incongruent with the group), this may negatively affect self-brand connections. The same identification processes that lead to a connection with a brand associated with an ingroup lead to rejection of a brand with an image incongruent with the ingroup. However, if a brand's image does not match an outgroup, the prediction is not quite as clear. The lack of match may actually be viewed favorably, based on balance-theory considerations (Heider 1946), thus leading to enhanced self-brand connections. Alternatively, the lack of match may simply be viewed as irrelevant, leading to no effect on self-brand connections. We hypothesize that the balance-theory view will be more descriptive and that brand associations that are incongruent with an outgroup will have a favorable impact on self-brand connections. In sum, we have:

> **H1a:** Brand associations consistent with an ingroup will have a favorable effect on self-brand connections, whereas brand associations inconsistent with an ingroup will have an unfavorable effect on self-brand connections.

> **H1b:** Brand associations consistent with an outgroup will have an unfavorable effect on self-brand connections, whereas brand associations inconsistent with an outgroup will have a favorable effect on self-brand connections.

Note that hypotheses 1a and 1b predict a two-way interaction of ingroup versus outgroup and the degree to which brand associations are consistent (brand image matches) or inconsistent (brand image does not match) with the group.

The Role of Self-Construal

Brands become linked to the self when a brand is able to help consumers achieve goals that are motivated by the self. For example, brands can be used to meet self-expression needs, publicly or privately. They can serve as tools for social integration or connecting us to the past. They may act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem, allow one to differentiate oneself and express individuality, and help people through life transitions. A major focus of our article is how self-construction goals differ depending upon a consumer's self-construal. We propose that the influence of ingroup and outgroup brand usage will differ depending upon whether the consumer has a primarily independent or interdependent self-construal.

Social cognition research on the self has developed a variety of theoretical constructs to explain the complex nature of self-knowledge and self-related behavior. The self is conceptualized as consisting of multiple aspects (Linville 1987), including social roles and personality traits, the most important of which are schematic self-aspects (Markus 1977), and possible selves, that is, individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming (Markus and Nurius 1986). In this article, we focus on two aspects of self, independent and interdependent selves, and examine the effects of differences between individuals in the extent to which they are schematic on these two aspects.

Although the self-concept often is considered to be distinct from other people's self-concepts, recent cross-cultural evidence suggests that individuals' mental representations of self may depend on social aspects of self, such as relationships with others and membership in social groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989). Such research indicates that on average, Westerners tend to focus on the personal self, thinking of themselves in terms of unique personal traits and attributes and de-emphasizing others (independent self-construal), whereas Easterners tend to focus on the social self and how the self is related to other people (interdependent self-construal; Markus and Kitayama 1991). For example, Triandis (1989) argues that more individualistic cultures are characterized by more focus on the private self and less emphasis on the collective self, with increased emphasis on the collective self for less individualistic cultures.

These two aspects of self can coexist within the individual (Aaker and Lee 2001; Brewer and Gardner 1996) and can vary across ethnocultural background within Western society. That is, individuals may have both independent and interdependent aspects of self but may differ in the relative strength of those aspects on a chronic basis, leading to individual differences in self-construal that can be assessed (Singelis 1994). There are also likely to be chronic differences in the relative strength of independent versus interdependent self-construals across ethnocultural backgrounds within American society. For example, compared to Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans, whites will be relatively more independent and less interdependent in their self-construals (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989). In this article, we focus on differences in self-construals due to ethnocultural background differences and individual differences (i.e., chronic tendencies). These differences are important, because independent self-construals can lead to motivations different from interdependent self-construals. Independent self-construal goals include both independence (i.e., self-determination) and differentiation (i.e., distinctiveness), whereas interdependent self-construal goals focus on aspects of self shared with some subset of others, enhancing maintenance of relationships (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Kampmeier and Simon 2001).

By considering different facets of the independent self

(Kampmeier and Simon 2001), we can make more detailed predictions about the combined influence of independent versus interdependent self-construal, ingroup versus outgroup, and whether a brand matches the image of a group. The most clear predictions relate to the case of outgroup brand associations. Kampmeier and Simon (2001) show that when the focus is on a comparison to an outgroup, the differentiation aspect of the individual self is emphasized. Thus, for more independent individuals, comparison to the outgroup should lead to a heightened need to differentiate from the outgroup to create a unique self-concept. However, people with more interdependent self-construals should be more immune to outgroup brand associations, as their primary motivation stems from forming relationships within the ingroup. This implies that a brand associated with the outgroup should lead to lower self-brand connections for more independent individuals than for more interdependent individuals. There is not a clear argument for differential effects for the ingroup related to degree of independence versus interdependence. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: Brand associations consistent with an outgroup will lead to lower self-brand connections for independent self-construals than for interdependent self-construals.

Note that hypothesis 2 implies a three-way interaction of ingroup versus outgroup, independent versus interdependent, and brand image matching versus not matching that of the group on self-brand connections, and the specific interaction we propose relies on both self-construal differences and ingroup versus outgroup considerations.

Brand Symbolism

Our basic premise is that consumers appropriate the meaning of brands as they construct their self-identities, particularly brand meaning that arises from reference group use and nonuse of brands. Thus far we have treated all brands equally in our hypotheses. However, some brands are better able than others to communicate something about the person using them. For example, prior consumer research proposes that publicly consumed (vs. privately consumed) and luxury (vs. necessity) products are better able to convey symbolic meaning about an individual (Bearden and Etzel 1982). Additionally, a brand that is very popular and used by many different types of people (e.g., a Honda Accord automobile) may not communicate specific associations about the person who uses it. Therefore, we expect the basic effect postulated in hypotheses 1a and 1b to be moderated by the degree to which a brand is perceived to be symbolic, that is, able to communicate something about the individual using the brand. Consumers will be more likely to form self-brand connections to symbolic brands with appropriate associations as they construct their self-identities than with brands that do not communicate much about the self-identity of the user. Conversely, consumers will be more likely to reject forming a self-brand connection with symbolic brands with

inappropriate associations than with nonsymbolic brands. Thus, we hypothesize a three-way interaction between group type, brand image match, and brand symbolism.

H3: The effects on self-brand connections postulated in hypotheses 1a and 1b will be moderated by the degree to which a brand is perceived to be symbolic, that is, able to communicate something about the user's self-identity, with more symbolic brands having a more pronounced effect compared to less symbolic brands.

Note that we expect that symbolic brands will show stronger effects for both independent and interdependent self-construals, so we do not predict a four-way interaction.

To test our hypotheses, we conduct two studies that examine differences in the effect on self-brand connections of brand associations arising from reference groups for individuals with independent versus interdependent self-concepts. In the first study, we compare Asian and Hispanic American participants to white American participants; within American society, Asians and Hispanics tend to have more interdependent self-construals, while whites have more independent self-construals (e.g., Aaker and Schmitt 2001; we also check this below). In study 2, we examine independent-interdependent differences independently of ethnicity by measuring chronic tendencies toward independent and interdependent self-construals (Singelis 1994) and limiting our participants to those who are high on either one or the other type of self-construal, but not both. Study 2 also adds a measure of the degree to which our participants believe the brands they listed communicate something about the brand's user; these measures enable us to test hypothesis 3. In addition, we include thought protocols and other measures in study 2 to provide some insight into the processes influencing the determination of self-brand connections.

STUDY 1

In this study, we examine the influence of ingroups and outgroups on self-brand connections due to differences in independent and interdependent selves that arise from ethnocultural background differences within the United States. Specifically, we compare Asian and Hispanic consumers to white consumers, based on previous research that shows that Asian and Hispanic Americans generally have more interdependent self-construals, while white Americans have more independent self-construals (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Lee et al. 2000; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989). We also test the degree to which these groups differ on independence and interdependence. Although there is less variation on independence and interdependence within American ethnocultural groups than between cross-cultural groups (Triandis 1993), this limitation makes our study a conservative test of our hypotheses.

Method

Participants. Three hundred and eighty-eight undergraduate students at a public university in the Southwest participated in this study to meet an introductory marketing course requirement. Data were collected over two sequential semesters. One hundred participants had to be eliminated from the data set due to incomplete or improper responses, leaving a total of 288 participants.[1]

Procedure. This study used a Visual Basic program that allowed us to customize the study based on participants' responses. The program began with a short study introduction, after which participants entered a group to which they belonged (i.e., an ingroup; "In the box below, we would like you to type in the name of a group on campus that you belong to and feel a part of. You should feel you are this type of person and that you fit in with these people. This group should be a tightly knit group, consisting of individuals who are very similar to one another."). Next they entered a group to which they did not belong (i.e., an outgroup; "In this box, we would like you to type in the name of a group on campus that you do NOT belong to and do not feel a part of. You should feel you are not this type of person and that you do not fit in with these people. This group should be a tightly knit group, consisting of individuals who are very similar to one another.").

After each group, participants were asked to list one brand that was consistent with the group and one brand that was not ("In the box below, we would like you to type in a brand that is consistent with the group that you belong to. This can be a brand that members of the group actually use or it can be a brand that shares the same image as the group. A brand is considered to be a name or symbol that distinguishes one seller's goods from another's"; and "Now, we would like you to type in a brand that is NOT consistent with the group you belong to. This can be a brand that members of the group would never use or it can be a brand that has the opposite image from the group."). Thus, each participant entered four brands, corresponding to four group-brand pairs: ingroup-brand matches, ingroup-brand does not match, outgroup-brand matches, and outgroup-brand does not match. Next, participants completed a series of scale questions indicating the degree to which they fit with each group. After a short, unrelated filler task designed to reduce potential demand effects, participants rated the degree to which they had self-brand connections with these four brands (see details below). This was followed by some additional manipulation checks and demographic information, including ethnicity: African American, Asian, Hispanic, white, and "other." The program ended with a debriefing statement. The entire procedure took approximately one half hour.

Independent Variables. Participants were divided into

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[1]Examples of improper responses include listing the same brand twice, listing adjectives rather than brands, or typing in "I don't know."

two groups based on their self-reported ethnicity. Asians and Hispanics make up the interdependent ethnocultural group, while whites form the independent ethnocultural group. Participants who checked African American or "other" (or left the question blank) were eliminated from the data set, leaving a total of 243 participants. As noted above, during the study each participant entered two groups, an ingroup and an outgroup. Additionally, for each group, participants entered a brand consistent with the image of the group and a brand not consistent with the image of the group (for examples of groups and brands listed, see table 1), resulting in a set of four brands. The groups and brands are idiosyncratic to each participant and are not of interest in the analysis; the data are coded only by group type (ingroup vs. outgroup) and brand image match (image matches versus image does not match). Thus, we have a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed design in our study, with ethnocultural group (independent vs. interdependent) as a between-subjects variable and group type and brand image match as within-subjects variables.

Dependent Variable. Self-brand connections were measured using seven items (anchored by strongly disagree [0] to strongly agree [100]; see Escalas and Bettman 2003), averaged to form one self-brand connection score per participant per brand ($\alpha = .96$):

1. This brand reflects who I am.
2. I can identify with this brand.
3. I feel a personal connection to this brand.
4. I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.
5. I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.
6. I consider this brand to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).
7. This brand suits me well.

Manipulation Checks. To check whether our ethnocultural groups vary on the degree to which they have independent versus interdependent self-construals, we had participants complete two of the Singelis (1994) interdependent scale items ("I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplish-ments" and "It is important for me to respect decisions made by the group," $\alpha = .58$) and two of the independent scale items ("I'd rather say 'No' directly than risk being misunderstood" and "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects," $\alpha = .44$). These items were chosen based on their having the highest item-to-total correlations with the corresponding twelve-item Singelis (1994) scale in previous research. Further checks measured the degree to which the participant belongs to the ingroup and the outgroup he/she entered, assessed using the average of three items ("I consider myself to be this type of person," "I belong to this group," and "I fit in with this group of people," anchored by strongly disagree [0]/strongly agree [100]; $\alpha = .96$).

Results

The model used in the analyses to predict self-brand connections is a mixed ANOVA model, with ethnocultural group (white vs. Asian/Hispanic, or independent vs. interdependent) as a between-subjects factor and group type (ingroup vs. outgroup) and brand image match (match vs. no match) as within-subject factors. The dependent variable was self-brand connections.

Manipulation Checks. White participants exhibited significantly stronger independent selves on the two Singelis scale items compared to the Asian/Hispanic participants (white = 65.69, Asian/Hispanic = 58.41, $F(1, 241) = 8.43$, $p < .01$). However, the Asian/Hispanic participants were only directionally higher on the interdependent-self measure compared to the white participants (Asian/Hispanic = 61.02, white = 57.08, $F(1, 241) = 1.54$, $p = .22$), making our tests more conservative. Participants considered themselves to belong to the ingroup significantly more than they felt they belonged to the outgroup (ingroup = 82.74, outgroup = 15.90, $F(1, 241) = 1687.31$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses 1a and 1b. These hypotheses predict a two-way interaction of group type and brand image match, such that whether or not brand associations match a group's image has a different effect on self-brand connections depending on whether the group is an ingroup or

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF GROUPS AND BRANDS LISTED BY PARTICIPANTS

Participant number	Type of group	Group listed	Brand with associations that match group	Brand with associations that do not match group
1	Ingroup	Conservatives	Polo	Pacific Sunwear
	Outgroup	Hippies	Birkenstock	Banana Republic
2	Ingroup	Chi-Omega	Gap	Prada
	Outgroup	Kappa Kappa Gamma	Burberry	Old Navy
3	Ingroup	Academic group	Guess	Levi's
	Outgroup	Athletic group	Nike	Gucci
4	Ingroup	Business school	IBM	Martha Stewart
	Outgroup	Basketball team	Nike	Doc Martens

outgroup. We find a significant interaction of group type by brand image match on self-brand connections ($F(1,723) = 394.93$, $p < .001$; see fig. 1). As suggested by hypothesis 1a, brands consistent with the ingroup have more positive self-brand connections than brands that do not match the image of the ingroup (match $= 63.59$, no match $= 17.31$; a priori contrast $F(1,723) = 191.20$, $p < .001$). As suggested by hypothesis 1b, brands consistent with the outgroup have less positive self-brand connections than brands that do not match the image of the outgroup (match $= 24.05$, no match $= 45.02$; a priori contrast $F(1,723) = 117.26$, $p < .001$). Ethnocultural group, group type, and brand image match also have significant main effects that are qualified by the significant interaction (ethnocultural group: white $= 36.15$, Asian/Hispanic $= 40.30$, $F(1,241) = 4.84$, $p < .05$; group type: ingroup $= 40.17$, outgroup $= 34.17$, $F(1,723) = 11.96$, $p < .001$; and brand image match: match $= 43.39$, no match $= 30.96$, $F(1,723) = 66.68$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 implies a three-way interaction of ethnocultural group by group type by brand image match. In particular, we hypothesize that self-brand connections to brands with associations that match the outgroup will be lower for white (more independent) participants compared to Asian/Hispanic (more interdependent) participants. We find a marginally significant three-way interaction of ethnocultural group by group type by brand image match ($F(1,723) = 3.13$, $p = .08$; this interaction and the two-way interaction reported above are the only significant interactions in the model). Figure 2 shows the pattern of results, which supports hypothesis 2, as do preplanned comparisons. The contrast comparing the white individuals' to the Asian/Hispanic individuals' self-brand connections in the outgroup, brand image match conditions is significant (white $= 20.94$, Asian/Hispanic $= 30.59$; $F(1,723) = 11.59$, $p < .001$), but there are no significant differences between white and Asian/Hispanic individuals in the outgroup brand image does not match

FIGURE 1

SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS ACROSS TYPE OF GROUP BY BRAND IMAGE MATCH IN STUDY 1 (HYPOTHESES 1A AND 1B; 0–100 SCALE)
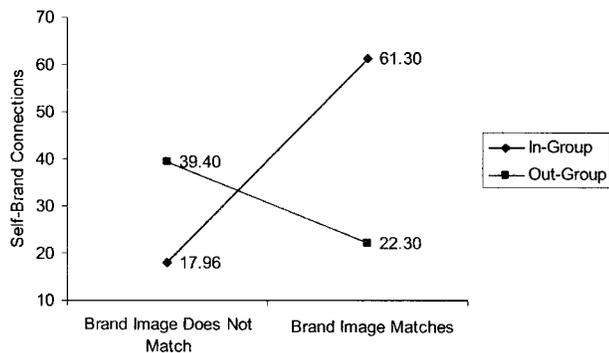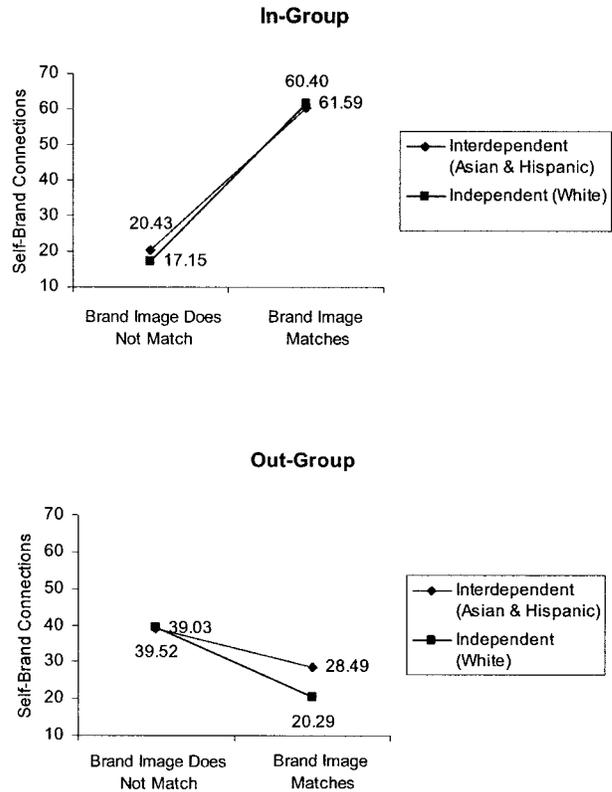

FIGURE 2

SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS ACROSS TYPE OF GROUP BY BRAND IMAGE MATCH BY SELF-CONSTRUAL IN STUDY 1 (HYPOTHESIS 2; 0–100 SCALE)

($F(1,723) < 1.0$), ingroup brand image match ($F(1,723) = 1.63$, NS), or ingroup brand image does not match conditions ($F(1,723) = 2.49$, $p = .12$).

Discussion of Results from Study 1

As hypothesized, we find that consumers report stronger self-brand connections for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an ingroup compared to brands with images that are not consistent with an ingroup (hypothesis 1a). The positive effect of ingroup brand associations on self-brand connections is consistent with both assimilation goals for individuals with interdependent self-construals (here, the Asian and Hispanic participants) and self-determination goals for those with independent self-construals (here, the white participants). Also as hypothesized, brands consistent with an outgroup are less likely to show a self-brand connection than brands with images inconsistent with the outgroup, and brands not consistent with the outgroup have a positive effect on self-brand connections (hypothesis 1b), empirically demonstrating that consumers use brand symbolism in a manner consistent with balance theory predictions (Heider 1946). The negative effect of

outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections is stronger for white (independent) consumers than for Asian/ Hispanic (interdependent) consumers. As Kampmeier and Simon (2001) argue, differentiation needs are more predominant for the independent self when outgroups are the focus; thus, whites, who tend to be more independent, show a stronger effect (hypothesis 2).

In study 1, we examined self-construal differences due to ethnocultural background. In study 2, we examine chronic tendencies toward interdependent and independent self-construals without reference to ethnicity, using the scales developed by Singelis (1994) as a measure of these two types of self-construals. We expect the same general pattern of results for this different way of categorizing chronic differences in independence and interdependence. We also examine hypothesis 3, that effects on self-brand connections are stronger for brands that are symbolic and communicate something about the user. Finally, we use thought protocols to examine our findings about outgroups in more detail.

STUDY 2

In this study, we again examine the influence of ingroups and outgroups on self-brand connections, with the expectation that the effects will differ for people with chronically independent versus interdependent self-concepts. We examine individual differences in independent and interdependent self-construals without regard to ethnic background, thus providing a test of the effect of independence versus interdependence unconfounded by ethnicity. We use the two Singelis scales (1994) for independence and interdependences to identify participants who are high on one type of self-construal, but low on the other. Additionally, we ask participants to rate the degree to which the brands they have listed are able to communicate something about one's self-identity to test hypothesis 3. We propose that the extent to which a brand has such symbolic characteristics will moderate the basic effects postulated in hypotheses 1a and 1b, with stronger effects for more symbolic brands (i.e., those brands better able to communicate about one's self-identity). In addition, we collect thought protocols and other measures to explore the processes underlying our findings. In particular, we examine the degree to which participants explicitly report negative and positive links to the self for outgroups and the degree to which being associated with a group reflects positively or negatively on an individual. We expect that we will find additional evidence that independents are more concerned with differentiating themselves from outgroups than are interdependents.

Method

Participants. Two hundred and fourteen undergraduate students at a public university in the Southwest participated in this study to meet an introductory marketing course requirement. Fifty-three participants had to be eliminated

from the data set due to incomplete or improper responses, leaving a total of 161 participants.

Procedure. This study is virtually identical to that used in study 1, with four exceptions. First, half of the subjects completed the Singelis (1994) independent and interdependent self-construal scales at the beginning of the study, while half the subjects completed these scales at the end of the study.[2] Second, after participants rated the degree to which they fit within each group, they were asked to rate the extent to which an association with each group type would communicate something positive or negative about them. Third, after participants rated the degree to which they had formed self-brand connections with the four brands they had entered earlier (generated by the four combinations of ingroup vs. outgroup and brand image matches vs. does not match), they were also asked to rate the brands on a number of dimensions, including the degree to which the brand was able to communicate something symbolic about the brand's user. This was followed by the collection of thought protocols, where participants were asked to retrospectively report the thoughts they had when they rated the degree to which each brand reflected "you" versus "not you." With the exception that the filler task was slightly different, in all other respects the study was the same as study 1. The entire procedure took approximately one half hour.

Independent Variables. Participants completed the entire Singelis (1994) scales for independent (12 items, $\alpha = .64$) and interdependent (12 items, $\alpha = .62$) chronic self-concepts. Based on median splits, participants were divided into high and low groups for each self-construal type. Participants who were high in independent and low in interdependent were considered to be schematic on independence, while participants who were high in interdependence and low in independence were considered to be schematic on interdependence. Participants who were high on both or low on both scales were eliminated from the data set, leaving a total of 75 participants.[3] By construction, the interdependent participants scored significantly higher on the mean of the interdependence items (69.37 vs. 54.35, $F(1, 743) = 102.62$, $p < .001$) and significantly lower on the mean of the independence items (57.21 vs. 73.65, $F(1, 73) = 127.52$, $p < .001$) compared to the independent participants. Participants also rated the extent to which each of their four brands was symbolic with two 100-point scale items ("to what extent does this brand communicate something specific about the person who uses it?" anchored by "does not communicate a lot/communicates a lot"; and "how much does this brand symbolize what kind of person uses it?" anchored by "not at all symbolic/highly symbolic";

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[2]No order effects were found as a result of this counterbalancing measure.

[3]We also ran the analyses reported for this study using a continuous index of the degree of independence relative to interdependence for each individual. This index was constructed using the Singelis scales as (independent − interdependent)/(independent + interdependent). Using this index allowed us to retain all participants in the analysis. The results were virtually identical to those reported below.

$\alpha = .89$). These two items were averaged. The remaining independent variables are based on the instructions to participants to enter groups and brands during the computer program and are identical to those in study 1 (group type and brand image match).

Dependent Variable. Self-brand connections were again measured using seven 0–100 sliding scale items (see above). The seven items were averaged to form one self-brand connection score per participant per brand ($\alpha = .96$).

Process Measures. The thought protocols were coded by two coders blind to the experimental manipulations and hypotheses for the purpose of examining links to the self made with respect to outgroups. Thoughts were coded with respect to whether they expressed a positive link between the self and the brand or a negative link. Intercoder reliability was high; there were 17 disagreements for the positive self-link codes (11.3%) and eight for the negative self-link coding (5.3%). Disagreements were resolved by the authors, blind to experimental conditions. Additionally, participants completed three items to measure the degree to which participants felt being associated with the group would reflect either negatively or positively on them ("how would being associated with this group reflect on someone?" anchored by very negatively/very positively; "how much would you like to be identified with this group and what they represent?" anchored by not at all/very much; and "to what extent would you like being linked to this group and what they stand for?" anchored by "definitely disliked being linked/definitely like being linked"; $\alpha = .93$).

Manipulation Checks. The degree to which the participant feels that he/she belongs to each group was assessed using the same average of three items as in study 1 ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

The model used in the analyses to predict self-brand connections is a general linear model with measured self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) as a between-subjects factor, group type (ingroup vs. outgroup) and brand image match (match vs. no match) as within-subjects factors, and brand symbolism included as a continuous variable. All the two-way, three-way, and four-way interactions of self-construal, group type, brand image match, and brand symbolism were included in the model used to test all three hypotheses, and the dependent variable was self-brand connections.

Manipulation Checks. Participants considered themselves to belong to the ingroup significantly more than they felt they belonged to the outgroup (ingroup $= 87.09$, outgroup $= 17.06$, $F(1, 193) = 1,931.63$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Once again, these hypotheses assert that whether or not brand associations match a group's image will have different effects on self-brand connections depending on whether the group is an ingroup

FIGURE 3

SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS ACROSS TYPE OF GROUP BY BRAND IMAGE MATCH IN STUDY 2 (HYPOTHESES 1A AND 1B; 0–100 SCALE)
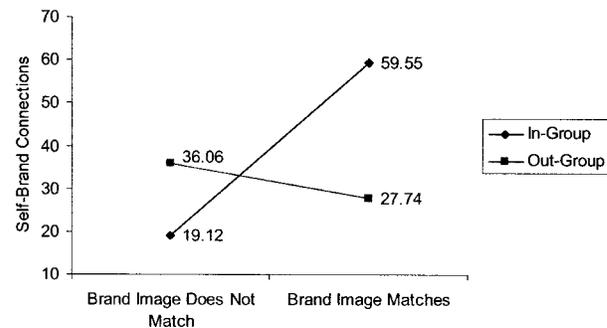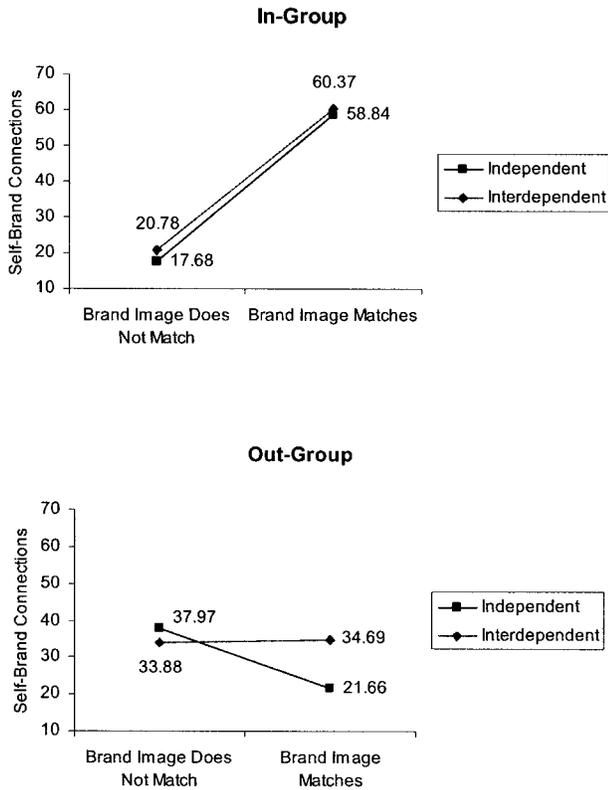
or outgroup, thus predicting a two-way interaction of group type and brand image match. Study 2 replicates study 1: the interaction of group type by brand image match on self-brand connections is significant ($F(1, 211) = 110.23$, $p < .001$; see fig. 3). Brands that match the ingroup have more favorable self-brand connections than those that do not match (ingroup match $= 59.55$, ingroup no match $= 19.12$, $F(1, 211) = 150.34$, $p < .001$), whereas brands that match the outgroup have lower self-brand connections than brands that do not match the outgroup (outgroup match $= 27.74$, outgroup no match $= 36.06$, $F(1, 211) = 6.36$, $p < .01$). Group type and brand image match also have significant main effects that are qualified by the significant interaction; however, self-construal does not (group type: ingroup $= 39.34$, outgroup $= 31.90$, $F(1, 211) = 7.66$, $p < .01$; brand image match: match $= 43.65$, no match $= 27.59$, $F(1, 211) = 46.06$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 proposes that self-brand connections to brands with associations that match the outgroup will be lower for independent individuals compared to interdependent individuals. We find a significant three-way interaction of self-construal by group type by brand image match ($F(1, 211) = 5.20$, $p < .05$). The pattern of results shown in figure 4 replicates the pattern found in study 1, supporting hypothesis 2, as do preplanned comparisons. The contrast comparing independent to interdependent individuals' self-brand connections in the outgroup, brand image match conditions is significant (independent $= 21.66$, interdependent $= 34.69$; $F(1, 211) = 13.03$, $p < .01$), but there are no significant differences between independent and interdependent individuals in the outgroup brand image does not match condition ($F(1, 211) < 1.0$) or in any of the ingroup conditions (F's$(1, 211) < 1.0$).[4]

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[4]We also included a three-item measure of aspiration level for both ingroups and outgroups (for items, see Escalas and Bettman 2003). We find a significant interaction of group type by self-construal on aspiration level, with independents aspiring to belong to the outgroup less than interdependents. This finding supports the idea that independents do not want to identify with the outgroup, consistent with our differentiation hypothesis.

FIGURE 4

SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS ACROSS TYPE OF GROUP BY
BRAND IMAGE MATCH BY SELF-CONSTRUAL IN STUDY 2
(HYPOTHESIS 2; 0–100 SCALE)

is more negative when a brand is considered to be symbolic, compared to when it is not ($t(212) = -2.71$, $p < .01$).

Additional Process Measures. We focus on the thought protocol coding for self-links related to the outgroups to shed further light on the findings above regarding greater differentiation from outgroups among independents. In the outgroup conditions, the proportion of individuals explicitly stating a self-link is affected by image match for independents, but not for interdependents (see fig. 6). The simple main effect of brand image match versus mismatch within independent self-construals is significant for both positive self-links and negative self-links (F's$(1, 120) > 6.0$, p's $< .02$) and is not significant for interdependent self-construals in either thought type (F's$(1, 120) < 1.0$, NS). The difference between independent and interdependent self-construals on positive self-links within the brand image does not match condition is significant (independent $= .28$, interdependent $= .08$, $F(1, 120) = 6.17$, $p = .01$). Similarly, the difference in negative self-links within the brand image matches condition between independent and interdependent self-construals is significant (independent $= .61$, interdependent $= .35$, $F(1, 120) = 6.95$, $p < .01$). These outgroup findings are consistent with the notion that inde-

Hypothesis 3. In this hypothesis, we propose that the effects of ingroup and outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections will be stronger when the brand is considered to have symbolic characteristics, that is, when the brand is perceived to communicate something about the person who uses it. In support of hypothesis 3, we find a significant three-way interaction of group type by brand image match by brand symbolism ($F(1, 212) = 20.52$, $p < .001$; the four-way interaction of group type by brand image match by brand symbolism by self-construal is not significant). For ease of interpretation, we present the results after dichotomizing the brand symbolism measure; however, the results reported stem from the continuous variable analysis. The pattern of results supports hypothesis 3, as shown in figure 5. The effect of a brand image mismatch with the outgroup is more positive when the brand is considered to be symbolic ($t(212) = 3.15$, $p < .01$; the difference between the match conditions is not significant; $t(212) = -.36$, NS). Within the ingroup the effect of a brand association match is significantly stronger when a brand is considered to be symbolic, compared to when it is not ($t(212) = 8.88$, $p < .001$), and the effect of a brand mismatch with an ingroup

FIGURE 5

SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS ACROSS TYPE OF GROUP BY
BRAND IMAGE MATCH BY BRAND SYMBOLISM IN STUDY 2
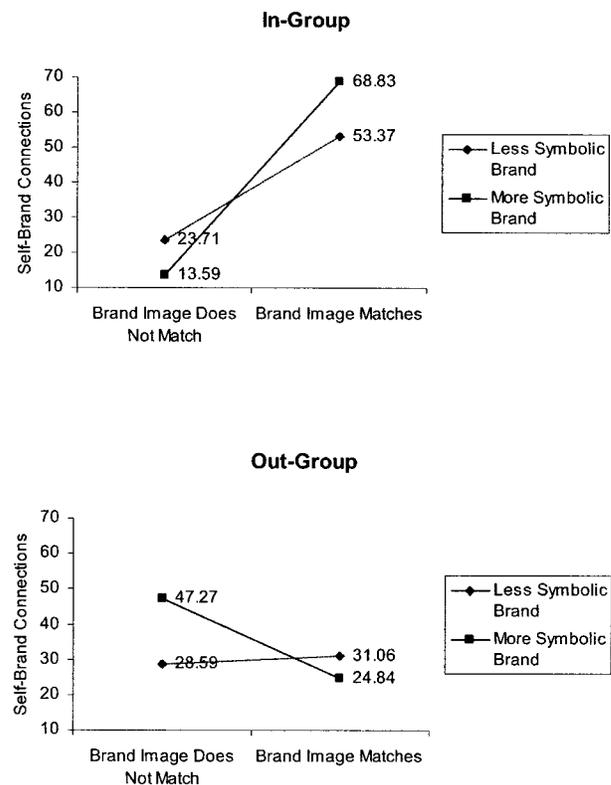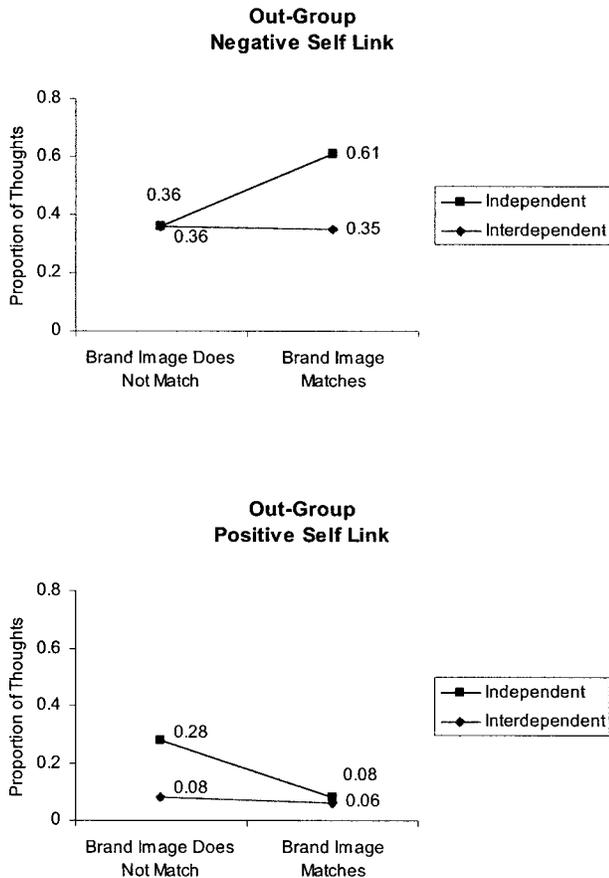(HYPOTHESIS 3; 0–100 SCALE)

FIGURE 6

PROPORTION EXPRESSING SELF-LINKS IN THOUGHT COD-
ING ACROSS SELF-CONSTRUAL BY BRAND IMAGE MATCH
FOR OUTGROUPS IN STUDY 2 (0–1.0 SCALE)

outgroup is perceived of as more negative for individuals characterized by independent, compared to interdependent, self-construals.

Discussion of Results from Study 2

In this study, as in study 1, consumers report higher self-brand connections for brands with associations that are congruent with an ingroup compared to those that are incongruent (hypothesis 1a). Additionally, brands that are associated with the image of an outgroup are less likely to show a self-brand connection than brands with images not associated with an outgroup (hypothesis 1b). The negative effect of outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections only occurs for independent consumers, and not for interdependent consumers (hypothesis 2), which we believe is due to the strong differentiation needs of independents when outgroups are focal (Kampmeier and Simon 2001). Our thought protocols and measure of the degree to which being associated with a group reflects positively or negatively on the individual also provide evidence for this differentiation-based explanation. Independent individuals' thoughts contain explicit self-links for outgroups, and they believe that an association with an outgroup communicates something more negative about them than interdependent individuals do.

The pattern of results supports the general theory proposed in this article: consumers use brands to create or communicate their self-concept. These motivations are different for different chronic aspects of self, as measured by the Singelis scales (1994). Furthermore, these goals are better achieved with symbolic brands than nonsymbolic brands, as evidenced by the support for hypothesis 3. Only symbolic brands are used to differentiate oneself from an outgroup. In both of our studies, the positive effect of ingroups on self-brand connections is stronger than the negative effect of outgroups. However, even in the case of powerful ingroup associations, the effect is stronger for those brands that are perceived to communicate something symbolic about the brand's user compared to those brands that do not. This provides additional evidence that consumers use brands to communicate their self-concept, utilizing brand associations that are the result of reference group brand usage.

CONCLUSION

General Discussion

In this article, we argue that consumers appropriate brand meanings emerging from associations of brands with reference groups to construct their self-concepts. In making this claim, we integrate literature from the sociological/anthropological tradition in marketing and social psychology research. Our studies show that consumers report higher self-brand connections for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an ingroup compared to brands with images that are inconsistent with the image of an ingroup. This finding agrees with the brand congruency findings of pre-

pendent self-construals are concerned with differentiating themselves from the outgroup, while interdependent self-construals are less concerned with outgroup brand associations.

Finally, we find a significant interaction of group type by self-construal on our measure of the degree to which participants felt being associated with a group would reflect either negatively or positively on them ($F(1, 193) = 6.75$, $p < .01$). Both independent and interdependent individuals believe an association with an ingroup communicates something favorable about them (independent = 79.87, interdependent = 80.71). However, independent self-construals believe an association with the outgroup communicates more negative (i.e., less favorable) information about them than the interdependent individuals do (independent = 30.33, interdependent = 42.16; contrast $F(1, 193) = 17.26$, $p < .001$). This is also consistent with Kampmeier and Simon's (2001) theory that independent individuals are concerned with differentiating themselves from outgroups: we find that an association with an

vious consumer research on value-expressive social influence, that is, that consumers use brands whose images match reference groups to which they belong to establish a psychological association with those groups. Further, we find that self-brand connections are lower for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an outgroup compared to brands with images that are inconsistent with an outgroup. This finding that consumers reject the social meanings of brands that arise from outgroup brand usage is an important contribution of this article.

We also show that independent versus interdependent self-construals interact with our congruency findings to determine the level of self-brand connections using two different approaches to operationalizing chronic differences in self-construal: ethnicity and Singelis's (1994) scales. We find that the negative effect of outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections is stronger for independent consumers than for interdependent consumers. We argue and provide some empirical support for the notion that this is due to the stronger needs of more independent consumers to differentiate themselves from outgroups (Kampmeier and Simon 2001). We also find that our effects are moderated by brand symbolism, such that brands that communicate something about the user yield stronger effects than brands that do not. In the case of ingroup associations, the positive effect of image congruency is stronger for those brands that are perceived to communicate something symbolic about the brand's user compared to those brands that do not. In the case of outgroup associations, only symbolic brands are used to differentiate oneself from outgroup associations; the effects disappear for brands that are considered to not communicate anything about the brand's user.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our article focuses on the constructs of independent versus interdependent self-construals, which bear a close resemblance to the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture proposed by Hofstede (1980) and others (e.g., Triandis 1989). We find that independents are motivated to differentiate themselves from outgroups, whereas interdependents are relatively unaffected by outgroups. However, research on individualism versus collectivism has found that collectivists may behave antagonistically toward outgroup members (e.g., by pursuing conflict with outgroup members; Leung 1988). Although many of these studies use strangers rather than well-defined outgroups, this finding appears to be inconsistent with our finding that interdependents pay little attention to outgroups. Further research could explore a number of possible ideas for how to reconcile this apparent conflict, such as contrasting interpersonal behavior toward outgroup members with consumption behavior or exploring other constructs (e.g., interpersonal orientation, self-monitoring, or social identity) that may underlie the independent-interdependent differences we find.

As mentioned above, many of the studies examining individualism versus collectivism use strangers as a proxy for well-defined outgroups. In our research, each participant listed a social group to which they did not belong, resulting in wide variance in the nature and specificity of these outgroups (see table 1). An interesting issue for future research would be to explore the effects of different types of outgroups. It is very likely that there are both outgroups that one does not belong to but are relatively unimportant and groups to which one does not belong but wants to be clearly distanced from. Different types of outgroups may have varying effects on the extent to which consumers reject the social meaning arising from outgroup brand usage. In addition, the degree to which a brand is strongly or weakly associated with an ingroup or outgroup may moderate our effects.

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