

Brand Attachments and Social Feedback:  
The Moderating Effect of Self-Concept Clarity

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## Abstract

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Just as individuals can develop emotional attachments to other people, places and possessions, they can develop attachments to brands. In the current research, we investigated whether the trait, self-concept clarity (SCC), the extent to which the contents of one's self-concept are stable, consistent and recognizable to the individual, moderates the effect of social feedback on brand attachments. Participants were asked to indicate the brand they feel most attached to and then to indicate the extent of their brand attachment. They were then randomly assigned to receive positive or negative feedback about this brand and then re-report attachment to this brand. We predicted that individuals low in SCC would be more susceptible to social feedback and more likely to change their brand attachment feelings based on others' opinions compared to individuals high in SCC. Surprisingly, however, SCC did not moderate the effect of social feedback on brand attachments. Using stronger manipulations and changing the sample population could improve this study so that the hypothesized effect is found and results have real-world implications.

## Brand Attachments and Social Feedback: The Moderating Effect of Self-Concept Clarity

### **The Self-Concept:**

Rosenberg first defined the self-concept as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Conscious awareness of the *self* is the human ability that most differentiates us from lower animals. Individuals draw upon the content of their self-concept in order to answer questions such as “Who am I?” or “How do I feel about something?” The psychological self, the self-concept, has developed as one of the most widely investigated areas of psychology. Behaviorists interpret the self-concept as a collection of conditioned responses. Cognitive psychologists define the self as a cognition-system, responsible for processing self-relevant information (Sirgy, 1982). The multifaceted, complex nature of the self-concept makes it a challenging area to research; yet, self-concept research is critical in psychology because humans think and behave in relation to their self. If psychologists were able to understand how individuals develop their self-concepts and self-perceptions, they would be better equipped to understand human motivation and behavior as a whole.

Early psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow were among the first to study and develop the notion of the self-concept. Rogers hypothesized that individuals hold an “actual” and an “ideal” self; individuals strive to embody the characteristics of their ideal self, whereas they see their current range of behavioral characteristics representing their actual self. Rogers postulated that psychologically healthy individuals search internally for self-validation, whereas unhealthy individuals rely on others’ approval; “neurotics often distort the content of their self-concepts into beliefs that do not match their experiences, often to win others’ approval” (Rogers, 1959).

The self-concept serves as both a memory system and as a tool for cognitive processing (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). It helps individuals interpret, store and remember information and experiences relative to themselves. As stated earlier, the complexity of the self-concept makes it a difficult construct to measure; researchers inevitably investigate different aspects of the self-concept. Most research measures the “working self-concept:” the aspects of the self-concept that are made salient by the given experimental situation (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). The self-concept may be both constant and variable; the stability of the self-concept relies on a multitude of factors, including environmental factors (such as social context) and individual differences (such as self-esteem and personality).

Markus and Kunda (1986) suggested that the self-concept is both stable and malleable. Since the self-concept embodies the entirety of the beliefs one holds true of him or her self, it undoubtedly stores a wide range of information. Markus and Kunda proposed that the self-concept includes all of our self-conceptions, those that are comparable as well as those that are complementary. These self-conceptions include our “good self,” our “bad self,” our “feared self,” and our “desired self,” among others. Markus and Kunda (1986) defined our “working self-concept” as a portion of the whole of the self-concept, “a temporary structure consisting of elements from the collection of self-conceptions, organized in a configuration determined by ongoing social events.” Similarly, Marsh and Yeung (1998) proposed that the self-concept is not “hierarchically organized,” it consists of independent storage systems that are relevant to different social situations. Each storage system within the self-concept comes into conscious mind when pertinent environmental factors are present. Consequently, it is important for researchers to remember that information that is self-reported may not necessarily be more “self-

defining,” it may just be at the forefront of our minds due to context and therefore more readily available (Brewer and Hewstone, 2004).

Markus and Kunda (1986) examined the stability of the self-concept as it encountered “challenging” information. They hypothesized that when an individual’s “core self-conceptions” are threatened, they are determined to restore that self-conception. Markus and Kunda (1986) manipulated participants’ thoughts on how unique or common they are, compared to other individuals. They then used three tactics to measure individuals’ motivations to restore their threatened self-concepts. Participants were asked their opinions on a subject. They then received false feedback in which they were told their opinions were either very similar to or very different from a group of confederates’ opinions. It was hypothesized that this would make participants feel like they were either “too common” and bland or “too unique,” bordering on strange. Markus and Kunda predicted that individuals would be motivated to restore their self-conceptions that had just been “challenged” by false feedback.

After the presentation of challenging information, participants were first asked to generally describe their self-conceptions; they were simply asked to describe how unique or similar they view themselves, relative to others. Markus and Kunda predicted that individuals would attempt to restore their threatened self-conceptions by describing themselves in terms that contradict the false feedback they received. However, the researchers found no differences in the terms individuals used to describe their degree of similarity and uniqueness to others, such that individuals who were manipulated into feeling they were “too common” did not describe themselves as any more similar or unique to others than individuals who were manipulated to feel “too unique.” Next, participants were given an opportunity to provide word associations to different personality characteristics or behaviors related to social uniqueness or commonness.

Markus and Kunda (1986) found that individuals who were given the false feedback that their opinions were very similar to the group of confederates' assigned more negative word associations to the behaviors related to being socially similar. Vice versa, participants who were given false feedback that their opinions were very different from the group of confederates' provided negative word associations to the behaviors exemplifying social uniqueness. Lastly, in a social comparison task participants were asked to judge their similarity or uniqueness to basic reference groups. The participants that were manipulated to feel very unique rated themselves as more similar to others in the reference group whereas participants that were manipulated to feel very similar to others rated themselves as more unique or different from others in the reference group.

The fact that the participants used similar language, regardless of condition, when they were initially asked to generally describe their similarity/uniqueness qualities may imply that these concepts are "core" self-conceptions, that they are relatively stable self-conceptions, even when confronted with challenge. However, the participants did attempt to re-affirm their threatened self-conceptions more subtly when they were given an opportunity to provide positive and negative word-associations to behaviors and when they were given an opportunity to compare themselves to others in a social comparison task. In this sense the self-concept appears to be a malleable construct.

Markus and Kuna (1986) uncovered two important incidences that increase our understanding of the human self-concept. One, the finding that individuals *are* in fact motivated to re-affirm their threatened self-concepts, but not when they are explicitly asked to. Two, the need for self-concept measures to explore the range of behavior associated with self-concept definition. Measures that generally ask about self-conceptions may not be sufficient in capturing

how individuals regulate their working self-concepts in response to varying social situations. Depending on how researchers choose to assess the self-concept, the self-concept may be regarded as stable or malleable. The relative stability of the self-concept may also depend on individual differences such as self-concept clarity.

### **Self-Concept Clarity:**

Research shows that individuals differ in the content of their self-thoughts, but also in the clarity of their self-thoughts. The variable, Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) was developed and defined by Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley and Lehman (1996) as “the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996). Campbell et al. (1996) emphasized that self-concept clarity, SSC, is a characteristic of people’s beliefs about their self-concepts; it is much less broad than the term “identity;” and although it is related to other characteristics such as self-esteem and many of the Big Five personality traits; it is a separate and unique personality construct. Campbell et al. (1996) set out to create a self-concept clarity scale to assess whether SCC is a stable trait that can be accurately measured through self-report methodology. Additionally, Campbell et al. (1996) examined the relationship between clarity and a variety of other personality traits. Before Campbell et al. (1996) established self-concept clarity as a quantifiable construct; she investigated the different ways individuals organize and store self-knowledge.

In four studies, Campbell (1990) investigated the connection between self-esteem and self-knowledge. Campbell (1990) asked participants to indicate how well a list of bipolar personality traits described their personalities. Participants specified how well each trait described them on a 7-point scale and then indicated their confidence in that self-description on a

5-point scale. Campbell found that high self-esteem individuals were more likely to select the extreme scores, like one or seven, whereas low self-esteem individuals were more likely to endorse more ambiguous scores, such as two or three, in selecting how well traits describe their personality. Additionally, high self-esteem individuals were more confident in their responses than low self-esteem individuals. In a second study, Campbell measured the temporal stability of trait ratings. Participants rated how well certain adjectives described their behavior in social situations; two months later, subjects rated themselves on the same characteristics. Campbell (1990) found that the self-ratings of high self-esteem individuals were more temporally stable than those of the low self-esteem individuals, such that the ratings of high self-esteem individuals changed less over time than the ratings of low self-esteem individuals.

Based on the hypothesis that self-beliefs that are more clearly and confidently stored in one's self-concept will produce behavior that is consistent with these beliefs, Campbell (1990) examined the consistency between individuals' generalized beliefs about their personality and their situation-specific behavior. Participants that indicated general self-concept beliefs in a pretest were brought into the lab to participate in a "dyadic interaction" activity and then rate their behavior in that situation. The general self-concept ratings and situation-specific self-concept ratings differed less and were more highly correlated for high self-esteem individuals than low self-esteem individuals. In a final study, Campbell (1990) tested the "internal consistency" of participants' self-ratings by asking participants to endorse a list of traits as either "me" or "not me." Opposite trait pairs were distributed throughout the list (such as careless and careful) to examine participants' consistency in responses. Campbell found that the responses of high self-esteem individuals were more internally consistent, such that high self-esteem individuals' "me" and "not me" responses to the opposite trait pairs were more coherent than

low-self esteem individual' responses. Additionally, low self-esteem participants took longer to answer the questions, and rated their responses with less confidence (on a 7-point scale) than high self-esteem individuals.

This correlation between self-concept knowledge and self-esteem may explain some lasting confusion in self-esteem research. In psychological research, it has remained somewhat unclear as to why the valences of individuals' self-perceptions do not differ as a function of self-esteem. That is, individuals who display high self-esteem generally indicate positive feelings about the self, as expected; but individuals who display low self-esteem indicate self-reflections that are just as positive (Campbell et al., 1990). Self-esteem level, therefore, does not differ as a function of the *content* of self-thoughts; rather, self-esteem level differs as a function of the *clarity* or consistency of these self-thoughts, as revealed by Campbell's (1990) research. Low self-esteem individuals do not have negative self-thoughts, they are just less certain about their self-thoughts than high self-esteem individuals. Overall, high self-esteem individuals, compared to low self-esteem individuals, show more confidence in their self-descriptions, are more willing to use extreme responses when describing their personalities, show more stable or consistent self-descriptions over time and show more congruence between general self-descriptions and situation-specific behavior (Campbell et al., 1990).

Campbell et al. (1996) developed a self-report inventory to test whether self-concept clarity is a stable trait that can be measured via self-report methodology. Overall, the researchers found the scale to be both reliable and valid through evidence of high internal consistency and construct validity.

Campbell et al. (1996) created five versions of a test battery and varied the location of the SCC items between versions; through analysis of variance, the researchers found that SCC scores

were invariant across the five versions of the test battery. Principal components and maximum likelihood factor analyses yielded results that indicate the items reliably measure one single factor: “generalized clarity.” The researchers found an average alpha reliability of .86, indicating the scale’s excellent internal consistency. To assess the criterion-validity of the self-concept clarity scale, Campbell et al. (1996) re-used Campbell’s (1990) “unobtrusive methods” of measuring clarity that assessed temporal stability and internal consistency of participant’s self-descriptions. To assess temporal stability, the experimenters had participants rate themselves on a list of 16 adjectives they had rated themselves on four months earlier. The researchers assessed the internal consistency of the scale by asking participants to endorse a list of 56 statements as either “me,” or “not me.” Embedded within this list were pairs of opposite adjectives. Internal consistency was measured by measuring participant’s consistency of responses to the opposite pairs. Finally, they administered the SCC scale to assess its temporal stability. Researchers found great criterion-validity evidence for the SCC scale; compared to individuals low in clarity, individuals high in clarity were more consistent in their “me,” “not me” responses to opposite pairs, and their responses to the list of 16 adjectives changed less over the 4 month period.

Evidence suggests that the scale reliably measures one single personality construct (SCC) through self-report methodology. Campbell et al. (1996) also found a positive correlation between self-concept clarity and extraversion and a negative correlation between SCC, neuroticism and depression. Additionally, the researchers found that the SCC scale is negatively correlated with the public self-consciousness scale, such that those who demonstrate low clarity demonstrate high public self-consciousness. This suggests that individuals who lack self-concept clarity may be more concerned with how their behavior is interpreted by others.

Guadagno and Burger (2007) investigated individual differences in self-concept clarity. Guadagno and Burger (2007) postulated that the degree to which self-information influences behavior differs as a function of the situation as well as the individual. Guadagno and Burger hypothesized that individuals high in self-concept clarity would be more likely to rely on self-information rather than information from others when making behavioral decisions. Their hypothesis is based off of the definition of self-concept clarity: that people high in clarity have clear, organized representations of their self-concepts, which makes their “self-information” more easily accessible.

Through three experiments, Guadagno and Burger (2007) demonstrated that self-concept clarity differs as a function of both the person and the situation. In one of their experiments, participants were first asked to complete a self-concept clarity scale. Following that, participants were asked to complete a bogus personality test and then were randomly assigned to either receive false feedback about their results on the personality test or no feedback. Individuals in the “false feedback” condition were led to believe the bogus personality inventory measured his or her “basic social orientation-type” and that they are the “helpful” type. They were led to believe the experiment was over and then they were individually given the opportunity to help a confederate who dropped her papers in the hallway on their way to the debriefing room. Participants with clear self-concepts did not vary their helping behavior as a function of feedback, such that those individuals high in clarity who received feedback about their helpfulness did not help the confederate any more or less than those individuals high in clarity who did not receive feedback. However, helping behavior did vary as a function of feedback for individuals low in clarity, such that those participants low in clarity who received feedback about their helpfulness helped the confederate more than those individuals low in clarity who did not

receive feedback about their helpfulness. Guadagno and Burger (2007) provide evidence that individuals low in self-concept clarity are more likely to rely on social influences when making behavioral decisions, compared to individuals high in self-concept clarity who seem to rely more on their “self-information” when making behavioral decisions.

More recent research demonstrated that self-concept clarity might shelter individuals from the impacts of self-evaluative information. In two studies, Guerrettaz, Chang, Hippel, Carroll and Arkin (2014) investigated whether SCC moderates the effect of evaluative information on self-perceptions. In their first experiment, researchers intended to make either the positive or negative self, salient in participants’ minds. Participants were asked to either list their own positive characteristics, that they “would keep to be the person they want to be,” or their negative characteristics, that they “would change to be the person they want to be.” Next, participants were presented a list of 100 traits (50 positive and 50 negative) and were asked to indicate, as quickly as possible, the extent to which each trait describes them. They then completed state self-esteem and mood measures (self-concept clarity and chronic self-esteem had been measured in a pre-screening). After writing about their positive characteristics, participants low in SCC reported higher state self-esteem and mood. State self-esteem and mood did not differ as a function of condition for participants high in SCC, such that participants who wrote about their positive characteristics did not indicate higher state self-esteem or mood than those participants high in SCC who wrote about their negative characteristics.

In Guerrettaz et al.’s (2014) next experiment, participants interacted in social groups for fifteen minutes. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they would like to spend more time with each individual in that group. Researchers then pretended to score results and presented participants with false scores (either high or low scores out of 100), that participants

were told represented the extent to which others in the group wanted to get to know them better. Participants then completed measures of self-esteem feelings so that researchers could gauge the valence of participants' working self-concept after social feedback. Lastly, participants were asked to write a brief essay describing their characteristics, for a social networking site. Researchers scored the personal essays on the extent to which individuals "self-promoted." Guerrettaz et al. (2014) found that participants low in SCC who received favorable social ratings self promoted themselves more than participants low in SCC who received negative social ratings. No difference was found in self-promotion of high SCC individuals, such that high SCC individuals who received positive social ratings were no more likely to self-promote than high SCC individuals who received negative social ratings.

The implications of this research are extremely pertinent to SCC research. Guerrettaz et al. (2014) showed that individuals form both their emotional states and self-perceptions differently, based on SCC. This research may indicate that individuals' self-concepts can be "compartmentalized" or "integrated" in organization. The self-concepts of high SCC individuals may be integrated, such that these individuals hold a clear, comprehensive, vision of their whole self, whereas the self-concepts of low SCC individuals may be compartmentalized, such that these individuals hold separate images of the different versions of their self (good self, bad self etc.). These specific organization differences appear to affect individuals' affective responses to self-evaluative information; they may moderate perception of self-evaluative information in other contexts as well.

The self-concept and self-concept clarity are constructs that have been widely researched throughout many domains of psychology. Previous research has investigated how self-concept clarity moderates our behavior in response to feedback about the self (Guadagno & Burger,

2007; Guerrettaz et al., 2014), but no research has investigated how self-concept clarity may specifically be related to consumer behavior. Today, consumer behavior researchers are interested in learning about a wide variety of individuals' consumptive behaviors including how individuals choose their products among the diversity of existing alternatives, how the environment influences individuals' consumptive decisions, and much more. Self-concept clarity is relevant to consumer behavior research as individuals make all of their decisions, including their decisions as consumers, by referencing their self-concept or the beliefs they hold true of themselves. As stated earlier, if psychologists were able to understand the ways individuals differ in how they organize, store and retrieve self-information (self-concept clarity), they may be better equipped to understand human motivation and behavior as a whole, including humans' consumptive behavior. Just as previous research has displayed that individuals' social behavior differs as a function of self-concept clarity, individuals' consumer behavior may differ as a function of self-concept clarity.

### **SCC & Consumer Behavior:**

It is well known throughout consumer behavior research that personalities as well as the way individuals want to be viewed by others can be defined through product association. "There has long been an implicit concept that consumers can be defined in terms of either the products they acquire or use, or in terms of the meanings products have for them or their attitudes towards products" (Tucker, 1957, p. 139). The products one associates him or her self with indicate aspects of their self-concept to the public, regardless of whether this is the individual's intention or not. According to Holman (1981), a product can serve as a "communication device" through three avenues: visibility in use, variability in use and personalizability. The product usage must

be noticeable to the public and there must be leeway, for the usage to differ as a function of individual personality.

Levy (1959) was among the first to argue that the self-concept plays a significant role in an individual's consumptive behavior. Feeling good about the self, or feeling worthy, is a basic and healthy human goal. The self-concept makes an effort to feel good or defend itself in times of anxiety (Brewer & Hewstone, p.9, 2004). Therefore, it makes sense that individuals guide their behavior towards protecting and enhancing the self-concept. Individuals' consumptive behavior enhances and reflects the self-concept "through the consumption of goods as symbols" (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967).

It is evident that our surroundings, especially the segments of our surroundings that we regard affectionately, define our personalities and identities and shape the content of our self-concepts. Belk (1988) proposed that psychologists would not be able to grasp an understanding of consumer behavior until they understood the meaning of individuals' deep attachments to possessions. Belk believed that if psychologists can gain a better understanding of how our possessions define us, psychologists will not only gain awareness of consumer behavioral patterns, they will gain an understanding of how our consumer behavior shapes our identities, self-perceptions and behavior in other settings (Belk, 1988).

Belk described the "extended self" as everything that a person can describe as "me" or "mine." The extended self includes our body, experiences and thoughts, as well as our family members, friends, in-groups, locations, possessions and much more. This philosophy has been clear since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. William James wrote: "Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked" (James, 1890.) McCarthy (1984) resolved that sometimes when we

repeatedly encounter and interpret something as “mine” we also start to believe that that object is actually “me.” Belk asserted that our possessions greatly contribute to our sense of self; he cited Goffman’s, (1961) as well as Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson’s (1976) research to exemplify his statements.

Goffman demonstrated that individuals feel a lessened “sense of self” when they involuntarily lose their important possessions. Goffman (1961) studied individuals that were hospitalized to psychiatric institutions and stripped of all former personal belongings. While they were given new belongings in these institutions, they reported feeling they were not the owners of these new possessions, they were merely “users” of these possessions; they felt standardized and stripped of their unique personalities because they had lost their possessions (Goffman, 1961). This research illustrates the important role personal possessions play in not only contributing to one’s self-concept but also informing, or reminding one of his or her self-conceptions. A person feels much more secure and content when they are in possession of their personal belongings that remind them of who they are, or reflect their self-concept in some way.

Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson (1976) studied individuals who had involuntarily lost important possessions due to theft or robbery. They found that individuals described their bereavement process for the loss of important possessions in similar terms that they described unexpectedly losing loved ones (Rosenblatt, Walsh & Jackson, 1976). The researchers suggested their findings imply that the loss of important possessions and the loss of important people both indicate loss of a part of the self. This research exemplifies that human beings are intensely connected to and reliant on possessions in the same way they are to other human beings to feel complete and content.

As human beings, understanding who we are as individuals is a difficult task. It is not uncommon for individuals to search externally, rather than internally, for answers about who they are. Through consumer behavior research, psychologists have learned a great deal about how individuals form their self-perceptions, not only as consumers but also as social beings. Belk (1988) suggested that a human being's desire for possessions is ironic. In simple terms, Belk believed that people want more stuff in order to expand their "sense of self," yet one of the only strategies individuals use to understand their 'self' is through observations of what they have. Again, Goffman's (1961) conclusion that individuals who are institutionalized feel a loss of identity, exemplifies Belk's allegation. Individuals who involuntarily lose their possessions feel they have lost part of their identity. This shows that possessions not only contribute to our self-concept by "extending our self", they also serve as feedback apparatuses that remind us of the contents of our self-concept or who we are. Belk suggested that possessions serve as "extensions of our selves" through their potential to convince others, as well as ourselves of the type of person we are.

Another way individuals search externally to understand their self is through understanding others' opinions of them. Belk asserted that other human beings serve as a "mirror" through which we see and understand ourselves. Belk (1978) studied the impact an individual's "visible consumption" has on the impressions others form of them. In his study (1978), participants were told to imagine they were aiding the NYPD in identifying the owner's of possessions that had been lost or stolen and returned to the police department to be given back to owners. Participants were given the content of an individual's lost items and were asked to create a description of that person. They were told that the list of items they were given had already been returned to the owner and that the purpose of this study was actually to compare

participants perceptions of the owners of the items to the actual characteristics of the owners to see how accurate their perceptions could be, based off the list of items.

Belk found that perceivers used the content of an owner's possessions to make judgments about the owner, but only if the perceiver had previously formed an image of these products. Likewise, perceivers used the image of the owner to make inferences about the products on the list, provided that the perceiver had previously created an image of the product-user (Belk, 1978). Belk summarized his findings to describe general social and consumer behavior: the observer may make inferences about the nature of another individual's possessions based off of their personality; or, vice versa, they may infer about the individual's personality based off the nature of their possessions, depending on which information is more readily available to the observer at the time (Belk, 1988).

The way our possessions contribute to our sense of self varies throughout the lifespan. Belk mentioned Erikson's "identity crisis" developmental stage. In this stage, adolescents seek to understand who they are as individuals before progressing further in life. Montemayor and Eisen (1977) studied adolescents and found that in response to being asked to describe who they are, adolescents in their early teenage years were more likely to include their name, their possessions, and their locations in their responses than were older adults. This suggests that adolescents are more likely to incorporate possessions into the content of their self-concepts than older individuals.

Belk provided the field of consumer research with his opinions, supported by empirical research, that possessions play an important role in defining self-conceptions. More recent research provides evidence that whole brands may be incorporated in, and help define the contents of individuals' self-concepts. Escalas and Bettman (2003) define "self-brand

connections” as connections that form when individuals use brand associations to illustrate parts of their self-concept to the public. Specifically, Escalas and Bettman (2003) studied the role reference groups and aspiration groups play in facilitating individuals’ self-brand connections. Just as Belk proposed that consumers might look at what they have, or what they own, to help understand who they are, Escalas and Bettman proposed that consumers use brand associations to gain self-knowledge and affirm their self-beliefs.

In their study (2003), Escalas and Bettman illustrated that brands used by reference groups and aspiration groups can become connected to individuals’ mental representations of their self; furthermore, individuals use these brands to define and construct their self-concepts. Escalas and Bettman conducted a pre-test on a college campus to generate 10 popular brands. In their experiment (2003), Escalas and Bettman asked participants to list existing social groups on campus and then indicate the likelihood that each of these groups would use the 10 popular brands. Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they feel they already belong to each social group (reference groups), or the extent to which they desire to belong to each social group (aspiration groups). Finally, participants rated the degree to which they felt *personally connected* to each of the 10 brands (self-brand connections).

Their results showed that a given social group’s brand usage affects an individual’s self-brand connections, but only to the extent that the individual perceives themselves to be a member of that group, such that individuals who believe they are a member of a group that uses a certain brand indicate self-brand connections with that brand. Additionally, the degree to which a person aspires to belong to a given social group moderates the effect of the group’s brand usage on the participant’s self-brand connection, such that individuals who desire to belong to a social group that uses a certain brand are more likely to indicate a self-brand connection with that brand.

Escalas and Bettman's (2003) research not only provides evidence that individuals form self-brand connections in the first place; it highlights the role of reference groups and aspiration groups in facilitating the formation of these connections. Escalas and Bettman (2003) proposed that consumers choose products by using a prototype-matching strategy. Before choosing a product, or brand, consumers imagine the typical user of this brand and affirm that this prototype matches their perception of their current self-concept or the self-concept they aspire to possess. Individuals' self-brand connections differ as a function of social groups; these connections may also differ in strength.

**Brand Attachment:**

More recent brand research has enquired deeper into the concept of self-brand connections and the ways in which brands become incorporated into our self-concepts. Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005), proposed that individuals might form emotional attachments to brands. It is well known in the field of psychology that it is a basic human need to create strong bonds or attachments to other human beings. The early psychologist, John Bowlby, emphasized that infants need human attachment figures for survival purposes. These attachment figures meet our belonging and safety needs and they also help shape our identities. According to Bowlby (1979), these attachments start in infancy and persist through adulthood as we form romantic relationships. When individuals experience external stressors, they typically seek comfort in the attachment object; when the attachment object is not present, this creates internal anxiety. Just as Belk (1988) proposed that our possessions become integral parts of our self-concept, the way other human beings do, Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) explored the idea that we can form emotional attachments to brands that are similar to our emotional attachments to other people. Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) proposed a construct that reflects consumers' emotional

attachments to brands; they developed a reliable, valid 10-item measure that reflects consumer brand attachments.

It is important to define brand attachment as Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) did. Brand attachments are related, but independent to other marketing structures. Brand attachments differ from brand attitudes in several ways. Consumers who are attached to a brand are likely to have a favorable attitude toward the brand, but the existence of a favorable brand attitude does not entail a brand attachment. Brand attachments develop over time, as a consumer interacts and experiences a brand. Brand attachments, unlike brand attitudes, are accompanied by strong emotional feelings. An attitude towards a brand is quite simply an evaluative feeling toward the brand; one can have a favorable attitude toward a brand without ever having interacted with the brand. Brand attachments are more meaningful than are brand attitudes as brand attachments are profound to our lives or sense of self. Brand attachments often develop through memories that link the brand to the self. Just as individuals who have strong attachments to other human beings are committed to that person, brand attachments imply a level of commitment and willingness to preserve the relationship. If an individual indicates a favorable attitude toward a brand, it does not mean that individual is committing to preserving a relationship with the brand. If a better alternative were to be offered, a favorable brand attitude would not predict a consumer's loyalty to a brand, the way a brand attachment would. Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) also emphasized the conceptual differences between brand attachments and brand satisfaction. Brand satisfaction is likely to correlate with brand attachment, but brand satisfaction does not predict brand attachment, such that two individuals who are equally satisfied with a brand may differ in the strength of their emotional attachments to that brand.

### **The Current Research:**

Previous research on self-concept clarity and social influence has concluded SCC is a characteristic that moderates sensitivity to social feedback, such that individuals high in SCC are less likely to change their behavior based on social feedback than are individuals low in SCC (Guadagno and Burger, 2007). Belk (1988) found that our possessions may become so deeply incorporated into our self-concepts that we use our possessions as information sources to provide meaning to our lives and help us answer the question “Who am I?” Similarly, we can form self-connections with brands (Escalas and Bettman, 2003) that are so strong we feel emotionally attached to brands (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005) and include these brands in our self-concepts.

The current research builds off of prior SCC and brand attachment research. In this study, we explore how SCC moderates the effects of social feedback on brand attachments. Since our attachment-brands can be incorporated into our self-concepts, we predict that individuals high in self-concept clarity, who have a well-defined, organized sense of self, will be less susceptible to negative social feedback about their attachment-brand and more likely to rely on “self-information” when making decisions. On the other hand, individuals low in self-concept clarity, who are less confident in their self-thoughts, will be more susceptible to social feedback and therefore more likely to change their opinions towards their attachment-brands based on others’ opinions.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Fifty-eight Union College students (48 females and 10 males) ranging in age from 18 to 22 years took part in the study either to receive out of class activity hours for psychology courses or to receive monetary compensation.

**Procedure**

First, participants entered the research lab and were asked to complete an informed consent form. Next, participants were led to believe the study was being conducted simultaneously in two on campus lab locations and that they would have to wait a moment for the researcher to ensure the participants in the other lab were ready to begin. The researcher emphasized the importance of participants in the two labs starting simultaneously, as participants between the two labs would be communicating via computer program during the study. Participants waited while the researcher ostensibly called the other lab, telling the supposed other researcher they were all set to begin. The researcher then warned each participant that there had been technical difficulties with the lab computers all day and the computers hadn't been saving information properly. They were asked to inform the researcher if the computer program displayed any errors in saving their responses. Next, participants entered their individual cubicle and read instructions that informed them they would be taking part in a study that was concerned with identifying Union College students' opinions on various brands. The instructions told participants that they would be asked to indicate a brand they feel attached to and that their brand would be broadcast to a participant in the other lab, who would have the opportunity to comment on that brand; then, they would have the opportunity to comment on the brand the other participant indicated.

First, participants were asked to "indicate the clothing brand to which they feel the most attached or feel best represents who they are as a person," and then to explain why they feel attached to this brand, in a few brief sentences. They then filled out a brand attachment scale regarding how they related to that brand (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005). They were then told their response was being transmitted to the computer of a participant in the other lab. They

were then randomly assigned to receive either positive feedback on their brand: “I love this brand. People that wear it usually look good in it and generally have good fashion taste. Whenever I see someone wearing it, it sounds silly, but I really can’t help but think they’re probably pretty cool” or negative feedback on their brand: “I don’t really like this brand. People wear it just to fit in. Maybe it used to be cool but now it’s just boring and unoriginal. When I see people wear it I just kind of ask myself why...” They were led to believe this feedback was coming from a participant in the other lab. Participants then received an error message from the computer. As instructed, participants informed the researcher of the error and the researcher updated them that unfortunately the computer was being “glitchy” after all and did not save their initial responses. The researcher informed participants that she would enter an override code and hopefully the computer would save their responses this time. Participants again indicated their attachment to their preferred brand.

Participants were then led to believe that the brand another participant indicated an attachment to was being broadcast to their computer. All participants were told that the other “participant” had indicated “Rick Panache Sunglasses,” a fictitious brand, as his or her favorite. Participants were asked to indicate their opinions on this brand by filling out the same Brand Attachment scale (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005) they previously filled out for their own brand.

Lastly, participants were told there was extra time left so they were asked to fill out a pilot study for another participant’s research. At this point, participants were asked to complete the self-concept clarity scale (Campbell et al., 1996).

## **Results**

We first checked to make sure that the three attachment scale items correlate such that we could combine them together to create one composite variable. Our Cronbach's alpha tests revealed an alpha of .87 for the first attachment scale, .88 for the second attachment scale. Because the alphas were greater than .7, we knew the items in each scale measured one single variable: Brand Attachment. After recoding appropriate items on the SCC scale, our Cronbach's alpha test revealed an alpha of .76, which indicated that all items in this scale measured one single variable: self-concept clarity.

Next, we assessed the extent to which the social feedback condition (positive or negative) influenced the change in participants' self-identified brand attachments. We computed a new variable: change, by subtracting the first attachment indications (pre-feedback) from the second attachment indications (post-feedback). Positive numbers indicate that participants' attachments got stronger from time one to time two, negative numbers indicate participants' attachment got weaker and a score of 0 would indicate their attachment towards the brand did not change at all after feedback. We found a marginal effect of social feedback on change in brand attachments,  $t(56)=1.93, p=.06$ , such that the brand attachments of participants in the negative feedback condition were weakened by the feedback ( $M=0.59$ ) and the brand attachments of participants in the positive feedback condition were strengthened by the feedback ( $M=0.62$ ).

Next, we assessed the extent to which SCC moderated the effect of social feedback on change in brand attachments. There was a main effect of condition  $F(1, 54) = 3.35, p = .07$ , such that the brand attachments of participants in the negative condition were weakened by the feedback ( $M = 0.55$ ) and the brand attachments of participants in the positive condition were strengthened by the feedback ( $M=0.61$ ). There was no main effect of self-concept clarity  $F(1,54) = 1.04, p = .31$ , such that low SCC individuals did not change their brand attachments

( $M= 0.29$ ) any more or less than high SCC individuals ( $M= 0.36$ ). Additionally, these effects were not qualified by a condition x SCC interaction,  $F(1,54) = .05, p= .83$ .

### **Discussion**

Self-concept clarity is an individual characteristic that affects people's behavior in a variety of social situations. People low in self-concept clarity are susceptible to believing false feedback; they are more likely to rely on others' opinions to guide their behavior or aid their formation of self-perceptions, whereas people high in self-concept clarity trust their own opinions of themselves that are clearly-defined and well-organized in their self-concept (Guadagno & Burger, 2007). Just as self-concept clarity is relevant to social influence research, SCC may also moderate individuals' consumer behavior. The current research investigated whether self-concept clarity could predict an individual's susceptibility to change their opinion based on social feedback.

In the current research, we examined whether SCC would moderate the effect of social feedback on brand attachments. Participants were asked to indicate the brand they feel most attached to and then indicate the extent of their brand attachment. They were randomly assigned to receive positive or negative feedback about this brand and then re-report attachment to this brand. We measured participants' degree of self-concept clarity to check if this moderated the effect of social feedback on stability of brand attachments. We predicted that people higher in SCC would be less susceptible to negative social feedback and more reliant on the content of their self-concept in making decisions; therefore, we hypothesized that people lower in SCC would be more likely to change their brand attachment indications based on social feedback. The hypothesis was not supported. As expected, participants who received positive social feedback were more likely to re-indicate a stronger attachment towards their indicated brand after

feedback than were participants who received negative feedback. However, this effect was not moderated by self-concept clarity, such that the effect of social feedback on attachment differences did not differ between participants high and low in self-concept clarity.

### **Implications**

Previous research has indicated that individuals' susceptibility to the impacts of social feedback differs as a function of self-concept clarity. High and low SCC individuals form their self-perceptions through distinct processes; low SCC individuals are more reliant on others' judgments whereas high SCC individuals are more confident in their own opinions. Although the current research did not find a statistically significant interaction between SCC and social feedback on brand attachments, SCC may moderate consumer behavior in other contexts. Understanding how SCC relates to consumer behavior will be beneficial for both marketers and consumers. If marketers understood that SCC is a personality variable that moderates individuals' susceptibility to social influence, they could develop strategies to specifically target low SCC individuals through advertisement.

### **Limitations**

The first major limitation of this study is that, whereas the predicted change in brand attachment after feedback was observed, the hypothesis that SCC would moderate this effect was not. A variety of factors may have contributed to our failure to find evidence for our hypothesis. Most obviously, there may have been no effect to find; self-concept clarity simply may not moderate the effect of social feedback on brand attachments. Previous research (Guadagno & Burger, 2007; Guerrettaz et al., 2014) has found evidence that self-concept clarity moderates the effect of social influence on behavioral decisions, but this effect may not be applicable to decisions regarding brand attachments.

Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of observed effect is the sample that was used for this study. This study was conducted using a convenience sample of Union College undergraduate students. It is possible that college students have not yet developed strong brand attachments. Individuals may not develop strong loyalties until later in life. Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) emphasized the difference between brand attitudes and brand attachments. Attachment brands are significant to our sense of self and are more likely to be incorporated in our self-concept than brands we simply feel favorable attitudes towards. In this study, participants were asked to pick the brand they feel most attached to, however this does not imply they actually hold an emotional attachment to the brand. Therefore, the social feedback manipulation may not have affected these individuals the way we had hoped; hearing feedback about a brand one simply likes or dislikes is not as psychologically meaningful as hearing feedback about a brand one feels a self-connection or strong emotional attachment to.

Additionally, the sample we used may have been aware of the deceptive aspects of our study. Our sample included both upperclassmen participants and participants that had previously taken upper-level psychology courses such as Research Methods in Psychology. There were three deceptive aspects of this research. One was that participants were led to believe they were being connected to other participants taking the study in a lab in Lippman Hall, another academic building, and that they were being broadcast those other students' responses to their brand attachment indications. Upperclassmen students may have been skeptical of this, as experiments are not normally run in a computer lab in Lippman Hall. Additionally, students familiar with psychological research methods may have been aware that deceiving participants to believe they are communicating with other humans, when they are actually receiving computer responses, is a relatively common psychological research strategy to observe social behavior in lab settings. The

second deceptive aspect of this study was that participants were told the computers were “being glitchy;” hence, they were asked to re-report their brand attachment responses after receiving the brand feedback from the “other participant.” Again, students familiar with psychological research methods may have been skeptical that they were asked to re-report their answers just after receiving positive or negative feedback about their brand. It may have been clear to these participants that the researchers were screening for a change in response pattern based on social influence. Lastly, we led participants to believe the self-concept clarity scale was not part of the “Consumer Brands” study, that it was a pilot study for another student’s research. Again, psychology students who are aware of research deception strategies may have known that this “pilot study” was actually part of the same study and was used for the purpose of measuring the relationship between a personality variable and behavioral pattern. The artificial nature of this study seemed like the most clear way to measure the moderating effect self-concept clarity might have on attachment decisions, but the study’s sample might have hampered our results.

Following the manipulation of variables, participants were asked if anything about the study seemed suspicious. Fifteen percent of participants indicated some level of suspicion and twelve percent accurately identified the deception. Lastly, as is the nature of student-run research on college campuses, the sample size was very small. Perhaps limiting this study to a sample of non-psychology freshman students, who are less familiar with both the structure of Union College’s academic buildings and psychological measurement strategies, and running the study on a larger sample might provide support for our hypothesis

Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of observed effect is the weak manipulation of social feedback. We did find that social feedback affected participants’ brand attachment indications, such that after feedback, participants who received positive feedback re-

indicated stronger attachments and participants who received negative feedback re-indicated weaker attachments. However, the effect of this manipulation did not reach traditional levels of significance. The fact that the social feedback seemed to be delivered by a stranger and relayed through a computer, may not have been as persuasive or psychologically meaningful as feedback delivered by someone the participant cares about, or by an in-person confederate.

The methodological choice of relaying social feedback through the computer is also an overall limitation of the study. Even if we had found the effect we had hoped to, the artificial nature of our manipulation would have affected the generalizability of our results. That is, if we found significant results, we could have suggested that people high and low in SCC react to “social feedback” differently and this affects their brand attachments accordingly, however this is not necessarily true. Even if the fake social feedback did make individuals change their behavior in a lab setting, it would not necessarily mean that real-world social feedback would make them change their opinions in the same way. In fact, perhaps beyond high school, outright verbal attacks on one’s choice in clothing are rare; therefore the social feedback we created in the lab is not the best representation of real-world social feedback about brands. It is more plausible that the opposite kind of feedback, more indirect social feedback such as lack of compliments or subtle aversive behavioral reactions to clothing, make individuals change their brand attachments more than outright verbal attacks. Again, changing the manipulation of social feedback by using human confederates rather than computers could lessen this limitation.

### **Directions for Future Research**

An initial step for future research would simply be to create a study that will discover the effect we had hoped to. Of the many issues discussed above as plausible reasons for the lack of observed effect, the possibility that our sample had no or very low brand attachments may be the

most critical. As discussed above, if participants receive feedback about brands they merely hold favorable attitudes towards, this feedback is less likely to challenge the content of their self-concepts than brands they feel emotionally attached to, as attachment brands actually contribute to the content of self-concepts. Additionally, it may be the case that college students are young and still figuring out their identities; therefore they are less likely to feel strong brand loyalties. This could be fixed by running the study on an older population of individuals that have better defined self-conceptions and loyalties. However, if a similar study were to be run on another convenience sample of college students, an interesting opportunity for future research would be to broaden the scope of the research to include all brands, rather than only clothing brands. Many individuals do not care about clothing or fashion brands. For the current study, we chose to limit the brand responses to clothing brands so that the social feedback conditions would be applicable to every participant's response. A larger proportion of individuals are likely to feel and report a strong brand attachment if their options are not limited to clothing brands; other attachment brands may include automobiles, food products, technology brands, sunglass brands, housewares, sneakers and more. Still, some individuals probably do not feel any sort of brand attachment, such that no brand contributes to, or helps define their self-concept; those participants should not be included in this future study. Hence, it would be useful to generate the sample for this study by running a pre-test to ensure that only participants who indicate strong emotional attachments to brands are included as participants. If we can ensure that participants' initial brand attachments are strong and meaningful, the hypothesis that feedback will resonate with participants' self-conceptions and affect their behavior accordingly may be more plausible.

Another pathway for future research would be to investigate whether SCC moderates the effect of social influence on individuals' actual consumptive decisions. Whereas the current

research investigated brand attachments, this avenue for research would be valuable to the world of consumer psychology, as it would have real-world implications. Such a study could be modeled off of the methodology used by Guadagno and Burger (2007), who measured the effect of social influence on “helping” and “honesty” behavior. To conduct this study, participants would be told they are taking part in a study investigating the relationship between personality type and ‘type of consumer.’ Participants would complete a variety of personality inventories (with an SCC scale embedded within the inventory) as well as questionnaires related to consumer behavior. Participants would be told the inventory reveals what ‘type of consumer’ they are. After participants complete the questionnaires they will be asked if they want to have their test scored and receive feedback about which of the five ‘types of consumers’ they are. Participants will be randomly assigned to receive one of two kinds of feedback, either that they are the type of consumer concerned with exuding high-class and status, or that they are the type of consumer concerned with practicality and comfort. (Both ‘types of consumer’ will be revealed in a positive light so that participants feel the ‘type of consumer’ they are, is a favorable type). Lastly, participants will be asked to go through a list of products and indicate which products they admire or would be likely to buy. The purpose of this study will be to see if SCC moderates the effect of social influence on participants’ actual consumer *behavior*. Based off of the definition of self-concept clarity, that high SCC individuals have well-articulated self-conceptions we would expect high SCC individuals to rely on self-information when making decisions and low SCC individuals to allow others’ opinions to guide their behavioral decisions. It would be hypothesized that individuals low in SCC would be more likely to let the false feedback guide their decisions about products, such that they will choose products that are in-line with the ‘type of consumer’ they were just told they are, whereas high SCC individuals will

make decisions about products based on the accurate self-information they have about the type of consumer they are.

A third avenue for future research would be to assess whether other individual differences moderate the effect of social feedback on brand-attachments. Future studies that utilize the same, or similar methodological strategies as the current study, could assess whether self-esteem moderates the effect of social feedback on brand attachments. Previous research (Campbell, 1990) found an association between self-esteem and self-concept clarity, such that individuals high in SCC display high self-esteem and individuals low in SCC display low self-esteem. We would expect to find that high self-esteem individuals would be less affected by social feedback and less likely to change their brand attachments than individuals low in self-esteem. A second individual difference that could moderate the effect of social feedback on brand attachments is preference for consistency. Whereas some individuals may be inclined to remain consistent in their actions, others may not mind appearing inconsistent. We would expect to find that individuals who have a strong preference for consistency would be less likely to change their brand attachments after social feedback than individuals who display a weak preference for consistency.

A fourth avenue for future research would be to assess boundary conditions for this effect. It may be the case that social feedback only affects individuals' brand attachments when individuals receive feedback from in-group members. A future study could test this by ensuring that a participant and a confederate (who delivers feedback) are part of the same "in-group" and can relate to one another. This could be done using similar methodology to Guerrettaz et al. (2014); participants (as well as confederates) participate in social interactions. Following the social interaction, participants are separated into individual cubicles and rate the confederate on a

range of scales: how similar they are to the confederate, how much they respect their fashion taste, how much would like to get to know them better etc. Then they are led to believe the confederate is interacting with them on the computer, and they deliver and receive brand attachment information and feedback, similar to the methodology of the current study. We would hypothesize that we would see the effect of feedback on brand attachment for individuals who rate the confederate as similar to them, or someone they want to get to know better, and we don't see the effect for individuals who have less in common with the confederate.

### **Conclusion**

While some research exists that demonstrates how self-concept clarity moderates the effect of social influence on behavior, little research has examined how self-concept clarity relates to consumer behavior. Our research attempted to fill this gap by assessing if SCC moderates the effect of social feedback on the strength of brand attachments. Further research is necessary to conclude how SCC may influence consumer opinions or consumer behavior.

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