Branded Clothing and the Self: A Qualitative Meta-analysis on the Psychological and Identity-Based Dimensions of Brand Consumption

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	The current qualitative meta analysis aimed to investigate the relation between branded clothing and self. Drawing up on six empirical studies, the investigator identified three dominant themes through thematic analysis **(1) Identity Construction Through Brand Consumption**, indicating how individuals use branded clothing to express social status, belongingness, and public identity; **(2) Gender Differences in Brand-Based Self-Expression**, where women demonstrate higher symbolic engagement with brands influenced by social expectations, while men show preference for functional value; and **(3) Self-Expression and Personal Identity Alignment**, which underscores the significance of self-congruity, brand loyalty, and expressive consumption in reinforcing self-concept. The findings suggest that branded clothing functions as a medium of symbolic communication, linking self-perception with social representation. By integrating psychological and consumer perspectives, this review provides insight into how branded fashion contributes to the construction and reinforcement of self-identity within contemporary consumer culture.

INTRODUCTION

Clothing serves as a aid for self-expression, and it is a medium through which humans communicate their identity, personality and even social understanding. According to Kaiser (1997), clothing functions

as a "second skin," and it enables individuals to manifest their internal self to the external world. By expressing , they not only projecting their inherent interests and values but also their affiliations with particular cultural groups. In the case of shopping culture, people tend to use and prefer branded clothing since they consciously or unconsciously carry a symbolic meaning to their clothing brands and they use this to define their social identity (Kaiser, 1997).

One of the key aspect of fashion and clothing is that individuals tries to express themselves through their attire. The variations found in dressing styles reflect the unique psychological traits of different people , which enables the individual to convey their mental structure through fashion choices effectively. The brands have received attention from the consumer psychologist, as they represents the brand's presence in consumer's lives. The research in this area has found that brands has the potential to significantly impact consumers. For instance, a strong brand can improve evaluations and can demand a premium price (Sprott & Liu, 2016). The usage of Luxury bands can offer the consumers a felling of pride , prestige and exclusivity which goes beyond the functional aspects of non-luxury bands (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988).

The psychological impact of branded clothing is relevant in the current scenario as the brands serves as the extension of self identity. Dittmar (2008) suggests that branded items helps individuals to fulfill their psychological needs like status, self confidence and belonging. The psychological impact of branded clothing is especially relevant in today's consumer society, where brands are seen as extensions of self-identity. Research by Dittmar (2008) suggests that branded items offer a tangible way for individuals to fulfill psychological needs, such as the desire for status, self-confidence, and belongingness. People often develop emotional attachments to brands, which can evoke a sense of comfort, familiarity, or aspiration. These attachments enhance self-concept and allow individuals to manifest desired personality traits through their brand choices (Dittmar, 2008).

In examining branded clothing and its relation to self, it is evident that clothing serves as more than mere attire and this systematic review, the investigator is exploring how all the branded clothing consumption is related to self.

Method

Search Strategy

The qualitative meta analysis aimed to synthesize the research findings which reflects on the relationship between branded clothing and self. In order to identify the relevant studies the investigator conducted a

detailed search on databases like Google Scholar, Pubmed, Semantic scholar as the primary databases. The investigator made use of targeted key words such as "branded clothing and self," "self-brand connection," "symbolic consumption and identity," and "self-perception through fashion brands" in order to capture studies relevant to the topic under study. were used to capture a range of studies related to the topic. Initially, 15 studies were identified that explored how branded clothing is connected to self.

Selection Criteria

After selecting the studies, investigator refined the selection and selected studies were screened based its relevance and finally six studies were selected , each of them meeting the following criteria:

1. **Alignment with Review Objectives**: the study should focus on the branded clothing's influence or impact on one's self

2. **Study Design and Methodology**: Only empirical studies were included, which comprises of experimental designs, surveys, qualitative interviews, and mixed-method approaches.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. The studies which focus on branded clothes and it's relationship with self

2. Empirical research are included in the study which make use of different research methods like qualitative, qualitative or mixed.

3. Studies that are published in peer-reviewed journals.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. The theoretical papers, literature reviews, or conceptual articles

2. Studies which focuses on functional aspects of branded clothing and not on the psychological functions are excluded

3. Non-peer-reviewed sources or non-scholarly publications..

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

The final data were extracted from the selected studies and the details includes authors, publication year, sample characteristics, methodologies, and primary findings. The data extraction enabled the investigator

to compare the study results and aids in h8ghlighting how branded clothing affects diff3erent aspects of self.

After the data extraction, the investigator conducted a thematic analysis in order to identity recurrent themes and sub themes across the studies. The thematic analysis helped the researcher to identify and explain how all branded clothes influence an individual's self concept and related self process. The themes emerged are as follows: identity construction through brand consumption, gender difference in brand based self expression and self expression and personal identity alignment. Each theme and its sub-themes are discussed in detail in the results and discussion sections.

RESULT

Table 1 Data extraction table

SL NO	AUTHOR & YEAR	TITLE	SAMPLE	METHOD	MAJOR FIDNINGS
1	dos Santos César, J. L., & Tateo, L. (2024	The use of branded clothing in identity development and social relations between adolescents	Adolescents	Qualitative (interviews & narrative analysis)	Adolescents use branded clothing to negotiate identity, gain peer acceptance, and express individuality within social contexts. Demonstrates how brand consumption aids identity construction and enhances social belonging.
2	Michel, G., Torelli, C. J., Fleck, N., & Hubert, B. (2022)	Self-brand values congruity and incongruity: Their impacts	Adult consumers	Quantitative— survey and structural modeling	When consumers perceive congruity between their self-values and brand values, it enhances self-expansion and positive

1. **Identity Construction Through Brand Consumption**

Social Identity and Status: Branded clothing acts as a tool for individuals, especially adolescents, to assert social identity and status, helping them connect with peers and gain admiration (1, 5).

Public Identity and Self-Concept: Brands serve as semiotic symbols through which people express values and create a public self-image, allowing them to shape societal perception (5).

		on self-expansion and consumers' responses to brand			brand respon… incongruity psychological and negative at…
3	Elliott, R., & Wattanasuwan, K. (1998	Brands as symbolic resources for the construction of identity	Adult consumers	Conceptual-empirical framework	Brands serve resources thro… consumers co… express their id…
4	Oflazoğlu, S. (2017)	The Role of Gender in the Construction of Self Through Fashion Brands	Male and female consumers	Mixed-method	Women exhib… and relational while men… functional performance-or… associations
5	van der Westhuizen, L. M., & Kuhn, S. W. (2023)	Handmade clothing consumption as a means of self-expression	Adult consumers	Qualitative (thematic analysis)	Clothing enables indi… express crea… explore multipl…
6	Hapsari, L., & Adiwijaya, M. (2014)	The relationship between self-congruity, brand relationship quality, and brand loyalty	Consumers of fashion brands	Quantitative—correlational	Self-congruity brand relation… and strength… loyalty.

2. **Gender Differences in Brand-Based Self-Expression**

Symbolic vs. Functional Brand Use: Women tend to engage in more symbolic consumption, using fashion brands to express their identity and social status, while men often focus on the functional aspects of clothing rather than its symbolic meaning (4).

Social Influence on Brand Perception: Women's brand choices are more influenced by social perceptions and how others might view their choices, whereas men generally prioritize personal preference over societal opinions when selecting brands (4).

3. **Self-Expression and Personal Identity Alignment**

Alignment with Self-Image (Self-Congruity): Preference for clothing brands that reflect one's self-image fosters a sense of self-congruity, enhancing the perceived quality of the consumer-brand relationship (6).

Negative Reactions to Brand Incongruence: When brands act in ways that are symbolically incongruent with their established identity, it can lead to negative emotions and even brand rejection among loyal customers (2).

Expressive Consumption: Individuals use branded clothing as a means of self-expression, projecting aspects of their personality and identity to those around them (1, 3).

Transformation and Multiplicity of Self: Clothing choices allow individuals to explore and present multiple facets of their identity, supporting their desire for transformation and self-reinvention (5).

DISCUSSION

The relationship between an individual's clothing brand preference and self is a complex subject which comprises the involvement of various factors like psychological, social and even cultural dynamics. The current research aimed to uncover this particular relationship and three major themes were emerged namely: *Identity Construction Through Brand Consumption*, *Emotional Connection and Brand Loyalty*, and *Gender Differences in Brand-Based Self-Expression*. Each of the emerged themes provides insights about how all individuals utilize brand as an aid for self expression, identity formation and social positioning.This discussion synthesizes these themes, interpreting how they interrelate and influence self-perception, social interactions, and consumer loyalty. Through the results the investigator gained deeper understanding of how how brand preference shapes, and is shaped by, the self.

The theme identity construction through brand consumption deals with how all individuals make use of such clothing brands to project their identity.and communicate their status. By wearing a branded clothing, it enables individuals to construct a social self and helps them to aligns themselves with particular vales and groups which actually reinforce their self identity or self concept. . In the reviewed studies, clothing brands were identified as semiotic tools that carry cultural meanings, allowing individuals to selectively express who they are (or aspire to be) through their brand choices (1, 5). For instance, Santos César and Tateo (1) showed how adolescents use branded clothing to navigate social circles, positioning themselves for peer admiration and social belonging. This behavior aligns with social identity theory, which posits that people derive self-esteem from their membership in social groups and seek to affirm their belonging through visible symbols, such as clothing brands.

Public identity, as noted in Berger's study (5), also plays a significant role, as brands allow individuals to shape how they are perceived by society. By wearing certain brands, individuals broadcast traits they associate with the brand, such as sophistication, modernity, or activism. This phenomenon ties into the concept of the "extended self," where possessions (in this case, brands) become part of one's identity. As people integrate branded clothing into their self-concept, they actively construct a public identity that aligns with their self-image and social aspirations. This finding resonates with the symbolic interactionist perspective, which asserts that people communicate and negotiate their identity through social symbols. In this case, clothing brands become symbols that help reinforce and project personal values.

The second theme, **Gender Differences in Brand-Based Self-Expression**, explores how brand consumption differs by gender. Women are more inclined toward symbolic brand use, employing fashion brands to express identity and communicate social status. Kavoura et al. (4) illustrate that women use brands to convey personality traits and values, suggesting that their brand preferences are often shaped by social influence. Women's brand choices are more affected by societal perceptions, reflecting how others might view their choices. This tendency aligns with social constructionist theories, which suggest that cultural norms and expectations shape identity; in this case, societal expectations influence women to use brands for identity expression.

In contrast, men's brand preferences lean toward functionality over symbolism. They prioritize personal preferences and utility in brand selection, placing less emphasis on social perceptions. This gender-based distinction highlights how brand use reflects different identity management strategies: women's choices are influenced by external perceptions, while men's choices are often more personally driven. This

finding underscores the impact of gender norms on brand-related behavior, with women feeling more compelled to align their clothing with social ideals than men.

The third theme, **Self-Expression and Personal Identity Alignment**, reveals how brand preferences align with individuals' self-concepts. **Alignment with Self-Image (Self-Congruity)** is a key component, as individuals are drawn to brands that mirror their self-image, enhancing their connection with the brand (6). This alignment fosters self-congruity, wherein brand characteristics reinforce an individual's self-image, creating a sense of validation and belonging. The attachment to brands that reflect personal identity plays a crucial role in brand loyalty, as consumers develop emotional bonds with brands that resonate with their self-concept.

Conversely, when brands deviate from this alignment, it can trigger **Negative Reactions to Brand Incongruence**. Sayin and Gürhan-Canlı's study (2) found that consumers with high self-brand connection feel betrayed when a brand behaves inconsistently with its established image. This symbolic incongruence disrupts self-congruence and may lead to brand rejection, as it conflicts with the consumer's self-concept. For loyal consumers, brands become more than products; they are integral to their identity, making brand loyalty susceptible to perceived inconsistencies.

This theme also encompasses **Expressive Consumption**, where individuals use brands as a medium to express facets of their personality and identity. Branded clothing serves as a tool for self-expression, enabling individuals to project aspects of themselves to others. This expressive behavior is particularly evident in people who value brand associations that communicate their uniqueness and identity. Additionally, **Transformation and Multiplicity of Self** is reflected in how clothing choices allow individuals to explore and present multiple facets of their identity. The ability to switch between different brand styles supports personal reinvention and identity exploration, aligning with the dynamic nature of self-identity and the desire for transformation.

Overall, these themes reveal that clothing brand preference is a significant vehicle for identity expression and self-affirmation, influenced by gendered social expectations, emotional connections, and the alignment of brand values with personal identity.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the preference over branded clothing is intertwined with self identity which actually acting as a social signal, a way of personal expression and identity reinforcement. The brands act as a bridge between self concept and public identity as it influences how individuals see themselves

and how they are perceived by others. This complex relationship between clothing brands and identity underscores the powerful role brands play in shaping consumer psychology, highlighting how deeply embedded they are in the construction and reinforcement of personal and social identities.

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