



The Loss of Social Identity and its impact on Consumer Brand Choices

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Abstract

Possessions/brands give definition to our identity. The meaning of things become even more nuanced during identity transition. In this study we examine, the impact on brand choices when consumers are at the threshold of social identity loss. This paper studies this issue using the theoretical framework of compensatory consumption using Straussian grounded theory methodology. Our findings indicate the formation of a *brand hierarchy* with four distinct levels of brand consumption. The purpose of brand consumption is primarily for securing the identity loss.

Keywords: Social identity, Brand hierarchy, Brand choice

1. Introduction

“We may impose our identities on possessions, and possessions may impose their identities on us” (Belk, 1988, p. 141). There are two streams of research in consumer behavior that are in close conjunction with each other. The first area of research focuses on broad conceptual issues surrounding consumers and their sense of self (Levy, 1959; Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1982; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994; Souiden, M’Saad & Pons, 2011; Toth, 2014). On the other hand, a more granular approach breaks down the relationship between identity issues and consumption to examine the different aspects of self-identity on consumer behavior (Belk, 1988; Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Wheeler et al., 2005; Vignoles et al., 2006; Berger & Heath, 2007; Gao et al., 2009; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). Thus, consumer research has vividly established the link between identity and consumption (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1989; Reed II et al., 2012).

Extant literature expounds on the connection between identity and consumption indicating a need to study the reciprocity in this relationship (Thompson & Loveland, 2015). This gap in the literature set the stage for separately exploring and examining identity-consumption linkage in the context of migration. We focus on migration as a determinant of identity consumption linkage for

two reasons. First, migration is a significant global socioeconomic phenomenon. Second, migration is a common trend among the young population who migrate from one city to another or country to another to acquire better education and job (Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Kalantaryan & Salamońska, 2019; Granderath et al., 2021). In India, where this study is set, there are an estimated 450 million internal migrants (De, 2019). The official data (NSSO-64th round) states that nearly 17 per cent of children migrated for reasons associated with education (0-18 years).

The objective of this study is to understand “how does academic migration change consumption and identity when combined with novel lifestyles, exposure, and newfound aspirations?” The other objective is “what is the impact of migration on brand consumption?” We address these research objectives by formulating the following research questions.

- a) What happens to consumer identity upon migration?
- b) How does their existing identity influence their consumption?
- c) what relationship emerges upon the identity-consumption interface?

These research questions would provide critical insights for a) targeting migrant youth and b) formulating suitable brand communication strategies for them.

2. Background and Conceptual Model

The Japanese say, “Humans have three faces.” The first face we show to the world, the second we offer to our close family and friends, and the third we never show anyone. It is the most authentic reflection of oneself. Proverbially, identity is a multi-faceted concept. This research applies the construct of identity as “any category label to which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what a person in that category looks like, thinks, feels, and does” (Reed II et al., 2012, p.1). “People engage in consumption behavior to construct their self-concepts and to create their identity.” In addition to subtle consumption choices, consumers adopt “transformational consumption choices” (Kleine et al., 2009) for identity overhaul. Research expounds identity expression through consumption and identity-consumption reciprocity. identity has been commonly connected to material consumption and acquisition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; R. Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 2007a, 2011; Escalas, 2013; Reed II, 2004; Wilska, 2002). Consumption is used externally for identity expression and internally for self-completion (Dittmar, 2011; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Reed II, 2004; Sirgy, 1982). But when someone is torn between

different paths of behavior, where the underlying identities attempt to guide the identity in different directions, how will consumption resolve the dichotomous situation? The research uses compensatory consumption as an important theoretical framework to explain the context of research. The concept of compensatory consumption is based on the idea that all psychological phenomena start with a feeling of inferiority that drives a person to overcome perceived inferiorities such as lack of power or self-esteem. The various sources of identity threats were either seen in the realm of social identity or personal identity. Most of the studies argued that compensatory consumption was a response to an unstable cognitive state. The elicited response to offset these threats was a host of consumer consumption strategies. Using objects, brands, and places was a typical response to off-set identity threats (Abdalla et al., 2016). Brands become an important tool to help create identity narratives by anchoring oneself in the consumer goods (Gabriel, p.77-78). The study builds on the concept of compensatory consumption and use of brands to off-set identity loss.

3. Research Methodology

In this research our interest was twofold. First, we wanted support for our objective that there was an undercurrent of identity loss upon migration. With this aim in mind, we used the procedure of in-depth interviews from the probable sample. Secondly, after understanding the existence of erosion of identity, we tried to understand how does identity impact their choice of brands.

This research used Straussian Grounded Theory as the research methodology. To explain the rationale for choosing Grounded theory, we use Crotty’s (Crotty, 1998, p.4) research framework (Table1.). The philosophical position of this research aligns closely with subjectivist epistemology. From an ontological standpoint, we believe that reality exists but cannot be fully understood in binary terms.

Table 1 Sample Selection Criteria for Final Sampling

Criteria	Rationale
Age Group: 17-22 years	Consumption (brands) provides a natural link to their identity, symbolizing their personality and group membership (Chaplin & John, 2005)

Education: Undergraduates	Educated youngsters (aged 20-25) are upwardly mobile (Hubacek et al., 2007).
Native place: Tier II/III cities	Significant increase in migration from Urban-Urban areas (Census 2011)
Sample size: 19	Based on theoretical saturation

4. Sampling and Data Collection

Theoretical sampling was used throughout the research. The initial data collection was done with 12 focus group respondents. The purpose of the initial data collection was to provide initial categories to carry out the study at a more significant level. The final sample comprised 19 undergraduate students from University of Delhi. In-depth interviews with students took place either a) face to face on campus in their new natural setting or b) over the phone with the participants at home. Nineteen interviews were conducted, comprising 13 males and six female respondents aged 19-22 years. The interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes for each participant.

5. Result(s)

The research questions yielded interesting findings. Upon analysis of codes, sub-themes and themes from the interviews, we found an evident loss of identity among the students. The coding paradigm showed several factors acting together leading to loss of identity. The figure (Fig 1) below shows the causal condition, intervening condition leading to identity loss. Factors such as cultural differences, lack of exposure and feeling of self- inadequacy accounts for tremendous erosion of identity.

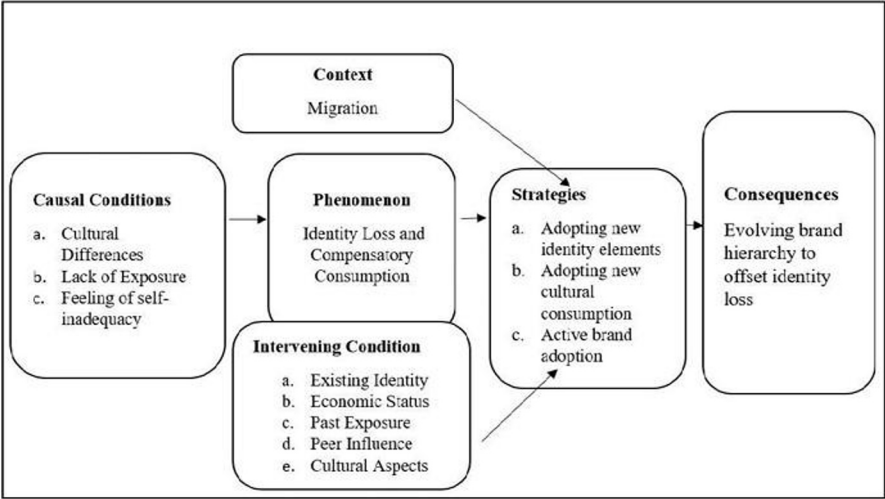


Fig 1. Framework of Identity Loss

Further the results suggest that to overcome the identity loss, consumers immerse into brand consumption at varying levels. Curating the results give us an indication of formation of a brand hierarchy with four distinct levels namely *brand association/awareness*, *brand affinity*, *brand attachment* and *brand aspiration*. Each level is characterized by different features such as brand association was closely related to introduction to new brands or first time exposure to brands. while brand affinity was related to subtle fondness for brands, brand attachment was fierce liking for brands. The top most sentiment was brand aspiration. The unique feature about brand aspiration was that it emanated at all the levels. The consumer who was new the brand world also harbored expectations to move up the ladder. The ardent brand user also nurtured a brand wishlist. The evolution of a brand hierarchy was an outcome of identity loss. The consumers found a securing identity after using brands and it was a part of the concept of compensatory consumption.

6. Research Contributions

The research findings from this study put forth two significant theoretical contributions to consumer behavior literature. The first is the emergence of a substantive theory of ‘identity loss and compensatory consumption.’ The second is the ‘brand attachment hierarchy’ model. Past research has established the link between some generic threats (mortality, intelligence) to identity

leading to changes in consumption behavior (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004a, 2004b; Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005). Additionally, the threats have been studied categorically in the social and personal identity domain using the self-discrepancy theory (Mandel et al., 2016). We demonstrate through our findings that identity threat is a part of identity loss experienced by consumers in the novel context of migration. It widens the concept of identity threats by including multiple social and personal identity threats acting upon an individual simultaneously. We assume that the theory of identity loss and compensatory consumption is generic and could be replicated in other geographies in the context of migrant consumers. Another significant theoretical contribution is the brand attachment hierarchy model. However, the concept of brand attachment is widely discussed in consumer literature (Thomson et al., 2005; Kessous et al., 2015). The evolution of a four-step hierarchy is a new addition to existing literature. It presents the idea that brand attachment gets initiated with brand affinity. These two levels, in order, show the development of identity brand relationships in the novel context of migration. Besides, theoretical contribution the present research provides significant implications from a managerial perspective. Migrant students form many college students in Tier I cities like Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and other educational hubs. A deep understanding of migrant student behavior would always help brand and marketing managers target these groups in a more planned manner.

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