Symbolic Consumption and Consumer Identity: An Application of Social Identity Theory to Car Purchase Behaviour

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Abstract

This study applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) to consumer behaviour, and examines how individuals use the product category of cars as a mechanism to create and maintain their social identity. Five car dealership managers and 22 new car owners were interviewed, and 85 new car owners were administered a quantitative survey. Participants did undertake social identification based on car ownership. SUV owners, in particular, identified with their ownership in-group more than other car owners. Cars were used for purposes of social categorisation and for esteem-enhancement.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour; Consumer decision-making; Consumer identity

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Introduction

Everyday life in the western world has become dominated by the individual's relationship with consumer goods (Miles, 1998). With seemingly unlimited choice, and relative wealth, shopping and consumption have emerged as major leisure activities (Ger and Belk, 1996; Phillips, 2003). Indeed, Stearns (2001, p. ix) states that 'we live in a world permeated by consumerism'. Increasingly, acts of consumption are being said to be driven not only by practical needs but also by consumers' desires to make statements about themselves in relation to others (Benson, 2000; Dittmar, 1992; Kadirov and Varey, 2006; Moynagh and Worsley, 2002). Piacentini and Mailer (2004) refer to processes of 'symbolic consumption', whereby individuals use products as mechanisms to create, develop and maintain their identities (see also Phillips, 2003). Clammer (1992) argues that this is true even of the most mundane consumption choices, which can reflect an individual's identity, tastes and social position (see also Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Slater, 1997). Hence, there has been a burgeoning interest amongst social scientists in the relationship between identity and consumption (Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1999; Hogg and Michell, 1996; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Phillips, 2003; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Solomon, 1983; Wattanasuwan, 2005).

In trying to understand modern consumption decisions, Dittmar (1992) describes a 'symbolic-communicational' link through which the symbolic meanings of material possessions communicate aspects of their owner's identity to themselves and to others. Ger and Belk (1996, p. 295) similarly note that consumption is a 'communicative act crucial to the constitution of self'. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002, p. 531) state that 'consumers seek "positional" goods to demonstrate group membership, to identify themselves and mark their position'. Thus, the symbolic meanings of possessions can be integral in expressing not only one's own identity and membership of social groups, but also in perceiving the identity of others (Belk, 1988; Christopher and Schlenker, 2004; Dittmar, 1992; Solomon, 1983). Lury (1996, p. 13) states that material possessions are 'a means of making visible and stable the basic categories by which we classify people in society'. Material possessions can therefore symbolise and communicate not only the personal qualities of an individual but also his or her group membership, social status and social position (Dittmar, 1992; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Material objects, in this regard, embody a system of meanings, which, upon consumption, can be used by individuals as an outward expression of their identity, and as a means of signifying group membership and identification (McCraken, 1988; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Douglas (1997) further argues that consumers define themselves in contrast to others, that is, they identify themselves in terms of what they are not. Thus, individuals use consumption to give themselves a sense of belonging as well as an affinity with others who make similar statements to, and about, themselves. In this sense, as Moynagh and Worsley (2002, p. 294) state, 'shopping is a struggle to define not what one is, but what one is not'.

Despite these observations, much consumer behaviour research has failed to take into consideration the influence of the social environment, and in particular the social identities through which consumers make their decisions (Briley and Wyer, 2002; Grier and Desphande, 2001; Maldonado, Tansuhaj and Muehling, 2003). Attention has certainly been given to possessions being reflections of *personal* identity and self-concept (Aaker, 1997; Maldonado *et al.*, 2003; Sirgy, 1982). Yet, the consumption of goods as a reflection of *social* identity has not attracted significant consideration, thus calling for further investigation. Hogg

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and Terry (2000) and Jenkins (2008) have identified a renewed interest in academic literature in relation to how the self is defined by group membership. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a social psychological theory of inter-group relations, group processes and the social self. The central tenet of SIT is that individuals classify themselves and others into social categories – in- and out-groups – and that these classifications have a significant effect on human interactions (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Hogg, Terry and White, 1995; Tajfel, 1982). Under SIT, social identity is maintained through evaluative comparisons between relevant in- and out-groups (Hinkle and Brown, 1990).

Reed (2002) points out that the social identity paradigm can be adopted for consumer research and contends that it provides a useful perspective for any such research that implicates some study of the self. There is a limited but growing literature relating SIT to consumer behaviour. For example, Kleine, Kleine and Kernan (1993) and Laverie, Kleine and Kleine (2002) discussed the influence of social identity on consumer attitudes and judgements. Others have investigated the influence of social identity and salience to advertising responses (Forehand and Deshpande, 2001; Forehand, Deshpande and Reed, 2002); the impact of social identity on ad processing (Maldonado et al., 2003); the impact of social identity on the creation of nostalgic possessions (Sierra and McQuitty, 2007); the perseverance of identity-based judgements (Bolton and Reed, 2004; Reed and Bolton, 2005), and the effect of social identity on age-related purchase decisions (Grimmer and Webber, 2008). Reed (2002, 2004) has more specifically discussed the link between SIT and consumer behaviour. Notwithstanding these efforts, SIT remains an under-utilised perspective in consumer research (Reed, 2002).

Given that identity may be expressed through many types of consumption, research has also been conducted on the visible consumption of products such as clothing, sunglasses and homes (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004; Sadalla, Vershure and Burroughs, 1987). However, significant attention has not been given to motor vehicles. Despite anecdotal consensus that cars express characteristics of identity, academic research in this area has been minimal to date (Dant and Martin, 2001; Froud, Johal, Leaver and Williams, 2005). This is a shortcoming, as the motor vehicle provides a myriad of social statements about the owner, who they are, and, just as importantly, who they are not (Moynagh and Worsely, 2002; Tomlinson, 1990). Indeed, Hogg and Michell (1996) recognised that the image-laden messages communicated by car brands are important. These symbols can be used by a variety of consumers to establish membership of social groups, or to signal aspirations to belong to particular social groups. Hence, it is of interest to investigate the symbolic properties of cars as mechanisms for identity construction of consumers from a SIT perspective. The aim of this study is thus to investigate the potential of SIT for self-concept based consumer research and to explore the symbolic properties of a particular consumption product, namely, the car. The research is exploratory in nature and will apply SIT to consumer behaviour by examining how individuals use cars as a mechanism to create and maintain their social identity.

Method

Data collection involved qualitative interviews with five managers of car dealerships (four males, one female), and 22 new car owners (thirteen males, nine females) who had all purchased a car within the last six months. In addition, 85 new car owners were administered a quantitative survey: 44 males and 41 females, with 37.6 percent aged between 25-34 years, 18.8 percent between 35-44 years, and 16.5 percent between 45-54 years. Letters were sent to managers of car dealerships seeking assistance and inviting them to participate in individual interviews. New car owners were recruited for interview via a snowballing method with the

assistance of one of the car dealerships; a small number of potential participants were identified by car dealers and then asked to nominate others they knew who had recently purchased a new car. Surveys were provided to the same car dealership, with new car buyers asked by the dealership to complete and return questionnaires via reply paid envelopes.

The interview schedule, for both managers of car dealerships and new car owners, was divided into sections, comprising car purchasing behaviour, symbolic properties of cars, and the social identity properties of cars, including for social categorisation and comparison. The format was semi-structured and in order to conduct an interview that most resembled an open, relaxed and naturalistic conversation, the order of questions was not fixed. A process of convergent interviewing was followed, such that when two succeeding interviews yielded very little new data, the process concluded (Dick, 1989).

The quantitative survey of new car owners (which was pilot-tested on a sub-sample of 12 car owners) first asked participants to list the car that they had recently purchased and then, using a six-item self-typicality measure developed by Kashima, Kashima and Hardie (2000), canvassed the extent to which they felt similar to other owners of that type of car. Self-typicality is the perceived similarity between the self and the in-group, and the measure required participants to rate statements such as 'I am like most of the other owners of this type of car in many respects' on a five-point Likert scale anchored from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Cronbrach's Alpha for the self-typicality scale was 0.896, revealing a high level of internal consistency. The survey then asked for participants' general opinions regarding certain aspects of car ownership relating to social image, social identity, and categorisation and social comparison. Participants were asked to indicate on a five point Likert scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding cars as being important to social image (four items), identity (five items), categorisation (four items) and social comparison (two items). Three further items related to participants' own purchase behaviour. The survey concluded by asking participants to provide some basic demographic data. Not all of the data collected is analysed in this paper.

Results and Discussion

Interview Findings

New car owners were asked if they felt similar to the people who drive the same car as they do, with two-thirds agreeing, for example, 'The type of people who drive cars like mine generally are stereotyped into people who are quite resourceful and adventurous, and I like to consider myself to be a part of that stereotype'. When asked if they compared themselves to people who drive the same type of car that they do, two-thirds agreed. One participant noted, 'Indubitably [*sic*], you would have to…you tend to compare yourself to others, your like category'. Another stated, 'I suppose you would like to say no, but on some level you do, being very honest, its human nature to. I think you identify with them…they are similar people as you'. Some comparisons were also seen to be a source of positive self-esteem, for example, 'I guess it's to check out to see if they're projecting the same social image as I am through that car…"he's the adventurous kind of outback chap, he's like me, he's a good bloke", that kind of thing'.

All participants agreed that cars are an expression of a person's social identity, for example, 'Without a doubt…you have your professionals in their expensive BMWs and Mercs, outdoorsy people in their Subarus, farmers and their utes…it definitely is the case'. Three-

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quarters stated that their car expressed their social identity. For example, 'I think it does, I think the way that I'm viewed by others is definitely reflected in the car', and, 'I can have the best of both worlds, a car that's alright for my industry and business but also is part of me as well'. There was less agreement over the extent to which this was a conscious process.

Overall, participants noted that when people have the capacity to buy the car they want, they will most likely purchase a car that expresses their social identity. As one car dealer commented, 'If [cars] weren't important [consumers] would all buy simple cars and drive them until they wouldn't go anymore'. Most participants gave examples of people presenting particular social identities, for example, 'The guy driving a late model Subaru sports wagon with roof racks and kayak cradles and wearing a polar fleece…having the little sideburns and stuff…he's presenting an image of a guy who on the weekends is a bit of a outdoor hard-man who goes and recreates in nature', and, 'The real estate agent turning up in the compact yet stylish European car wanting to portray the exact image is very, very important'.

All car dealers stated that they felt cars express something about their owner. Examples were provided of when consumers come to car showrooms they see a particular car, and '…some will say "yes that's me"…you hear it so often'. All new car owners were aware of the symbolic nature of cars and situations in which they could communicate aspects of the owner. One new car owner noted that when in a professional situation with his car, he would often be embarrassed about it and sometimes state that his car was being repaired or that this was not his work car so as to clarify the perception others may have developed. Another participant stated, 'I don't drive [my car] some places and I don't drive it to some meetings, because the people there don't need to know I drive [that particular car]…I do that consciously at times'. The new car owners who felt that their car expressed their social identity stated that they were more confident about themselves when driving their car, thus indicating the congruence between how they see themselves and the symbolic properties of their car in expressing their identity to others.

All car dealers stated that people engage in categorisation based upon car ownership, for example, 'People do have perceptions of where you belong depending on what you drive'. All new car owners but one acknowledged that they consciously engage in categorisation based on cars, for example, 'I think everyone likes to…pigeon-hole people a bit and so if you drive this car that means you belong to this group therefore I will get along with you; if you drive this sort of car you belong to this type of social group, I don't get along with those types of people'. When asked how they made these classifications, participants tended to categorise others in contrast to themselves and stated that it was human nature to do so. This is typified in the following responses: 'You might judge them on socio-economic grounds through the car they drive and the cleanliness of that car, whether that is founded or not, that is what humans do'; 'It's usually a negative judgment that I will make on them', and, 'I do classify people, I know that for a fact, especially when I see these hotted-up cars or the hoons'.

Half of the new car owners compared themselves with other drivers, especially drivers of cars they would not be seen driving. For example, 'Yes, I would make sure I wasn't one of those people, I never want to be like that, no'. Those who stated they compared themselves to other drivers, seemed to do so for self-esteem purposes, for example, 'Yes, I do, and I think that sort of strengthens [me] that you go "oh, they've got that", [I'm] not like them…not the type of people I would really associate with', and, 'I wouldn't like to be seen driving around in a really old beaten up old car because I feel that would be conveyed to society that I'm down and out and not successful and as society views people who are successful with greater worth it would be projecting to society that I'm not worthy of their love and attention'.

Survey Findings

Self-typicality scores ranged from 1.33 to 4.67 (out of a possible five), with a mean of 3.05 (SD = 0.77). Of the total sample, 44 percent scored above three, indicating that these participants identified with others who drove the same car and perceived themselves to be similar with and typical of, such in-groups. A one-way ANOVA tested differences in self-typicality scores across car ownership categories. Categories for car ownership were adapted from the 'Roy Morgan Asteroid Version 4 Car Classifications' to produce four groups for the purposes of analysis: small ($n = 27$), medium/large/sport ($n = 19$), luxury/prestige ($n = 11$) and SUV ($n = 28$). There was a significant difference in the self-typicality scores across these groups ($F(3,81) = 3.930$, $p<.05$). *LSD* post-hoc testing revealed that self-typicality scores differed significantly between SUV and small car owners, and SUV and medium/large/sport car owners. Thus, SUV owners were more likely to feel similar to others who drive the same car than they did to other car owners, except those who drive luxury/prestige cars.

Self-typicality scores were correlated with items regarding aspects of car ownership. Self-typicality was found to be positively correlated with **'The social image of a car will influence a person's decision to purchase it'** ($r(85) = 0.24$, $p<.05$); **'Do you feel your car is important in maintaining your sense of who you are?'** ($r(85) = 0.29$, $p<.01$); **'Do you judge people by the car they drive?'** ($r(85) = 0.26$, $p<.05$), and **'Do you consider social image when purchasing a car?'** ($r(85) = 0.37$, $p<.01$). Those participants who felt similar to, and typical of, their in-group were more likely to consider a car's social image and feel that their car is important in maintaining their own identity. High self-typicality participants were also more likely to judge people by the car they drive.

Conclusion

The study found that individuals engaged in processes of social identification based on car ownership to locate themselves in society and for purposes of esteem-enhancement. The study also found that individuals who use cars to consciously enact their social identity will select and purchase a car with symbolic meanings that are congruent with their self-image(s). The results of this study illustrate the influence of the social environment and, in particular, the social identities through which consumers make their decisions. Thus, the research has demonstrated the value of applying SIT to consumer behaviour. The findings are consistent with those of O'Cass and McEwen (2004) who found that items such as sunglasses and fashion clothing, particularly those brands regarded as being of higher status, were consumed conspicuously, and specifically to project a certain self-image or indeed to 'fit in'. Froud *et al.* (2005), in their study of British motoring behaviour, found that cars were used as symbols of identity and social status, especially high-status brands such as BMW or Jaguar or Mercedes, as was indicated in our interviews. But they also added the caveat that identity is not the *only* concern that a car buyer will have, and stressed the importance of considering constraints such as income and capacity, a point also noted in our interviews. Thus, car consumption may 'generate multiple, overlapping identities around a continuum of choice, constraint and risk' (Froud *et al.*, 2005, p. 125). This study was intended to be of a specific group of consumers and so the sample was not meant to be representative of the wider population. Nevertheless, understanding the processes by which products come to symbolise social identities and consumption groups may assist marketers in influencing and further confirming social images and meanings via marketing communications. In this sense, consumers may be induced to see their social identities as linked to a particular product, and its symbolic cues, and make their purchase decisions accordingly.

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