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Paweł Krasa¹ , Oleg Gorbaniuk^{2,3} , Magdalena Kolańska-Stronka⁴ , Karolina Czarnecka⁴, Kinga Czyż¹, Tomasz Karski¹, Agnieszka Krajewska⁴, Paweł Pamuła¹, Dajana Synowiec¹

¹⁾ *John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland*

²⁾ *Institute of Psychology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland*

³⁾ *Casimir Pulaski University of Radom, Radom, Poland*

⁴⁾ *University of Zielona Gora, Zielona Gora, Poland*

Corresponding author – Paweł Krasa, pawelkrasa95@gmail.com

The impact of self-esteem on the perceived brand added value to self-image

Abstract: The presented article consists of two studies (correlation and experimental) on the importance of self-esteem for the perceived value added by a brand to a consumer's self-image. Both studies were conducted online, using the snowball method, controlling for participants' gender and product categories. The correlation study showed that consumers, with an increase in self-esteem understood as a trait, look for more positive traits in brands and fewer negative traits to incorporate into their self-image by purchasing the brand. In addition, they confirmed that brand preference is mainly related to the qualities possessed, which the consumer can confirm by purchasing the brand. The experimental study showed that people with lowered self-esteem perceive more positive traits in brands that they can incorporate into their self-image by purchasing the brand, and there were no differences in confirming positive traits and avoiding negative traits that are associated with the brand. The new measurement of the perceived value of a brand to a consumer's self-image, used, allowed the identification of specific areas of brand image sensitive to a consumer's self-esteem.

Keywords: *self-esteem, congruence, typical brand user imagery, brand added value, experiment*

INTRODUCTION

The authors of the theory of self-concept building, assumed that material objects carry symbolic potential to confirm and expand the current self-concept (Gollwitzer et al., 1982; Belk, 1988). According to congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982, 2018), a consumer who feels an internal congruence with a brand image or a typical brand user (TBU) in terms of existing characteristics (real self-image) or desired characteristics (desired self-image) will prefer a brand the more the congruence with one or the other image is higher. However, the theory is mainly descriptive rather than explanatory, as congruence is the result of deeper psychological mechanisms that may refer to self-regulatory motives of the self (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Sedikides et al., 2015).

Researchers over the past few decades of research on congruence theory (Sirgy, 2018), have proven the sig-

nificant and practical importance of the relationship between a consumer's self-image and the brand image or TBU. They found that a higher sense of congruence between one's self-image and TBU image, translates into purchase intention (Landon, 1974; Zogaj et al., 2021), product evaluation and brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006), satisfaction and commitment (Japutra et al., 2021) and brand preference (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). In other studies, it has been shown that traits associated with the TBU image are associated with various needs, including the need for security (Gorbaniuk et al., 2016). The vast majority of studies on congruence theory have been cross-sectional correlational studies that have focused on finding moderators of congruence between consumer self-image and TBU (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). However, few of the experimental studies have shown that perceived self-TBU congruence depends on the private or public situation in which the decision is made (Kleijnen



et al., 2005), self-awareness (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2015), time perspective (Tan et al., 2019), and the influence of advertising on the perceived value of the TBU image (Kolańska & Gorbaniuk, 2021). In addition to the above studies, there have also been attempts to look for factors determining the associations associated with a typical brand user. So far, it has been shown that the associated characteristics depend on the type of packaging (Wakefield et al., 2008) and the slogans used in advertising (Kolańska & Gorbaniuk, 2021). It was also found that a change in the public's image of TBU determines self-esteem: consumers who feel a greater connection (congruence) with the brand respond with reduced self-esteem when faced with negative information about the brand (Cheng et al., 2012). However, no studies were found that focused on trying to test the basic assumptions of congruence theory (Sirgy, 2018) regarding the importance of self-enhancement and self-verification motives. Both motives, determine congruence at the level of the desired self and the current self, respectively, and as researchers point out (Sedikides et al., 2015; Swann et al., 1987), both motives depend on momentary self-esteem, which regulates their operation allowing them to maintain a stable self-concept.

The current research, aims to test whether the manipulation of self-esteem affects perceived traits in comparisons with the typical user, and thus whether it has a significant effect on congruence with the image of the typical user in terms of desirable traits (self-enhancement motive), confirmed traits (self-verification motive) and undesirable traits (self-protection motive). Both studies, were undertaken in light of a new conceptualization of the perceived symbolic value of a brand to a consumer's self-image (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021), which was developed based on the assumptions of congruence theory (Sirgy et al., 1997), the cybernetic model of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990) and the SCENT-R motive concept (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Sedikides et al., 2015).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Self-esteem, self-image, self-concept and the relationship between them

Nair (2016) in his work separated the self-esteem construct from self-image. He considered self-image to be the actual state of knowing who we are at the moment. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is an opinion about that knowledge. In other words, self-image determines self-esteem in this case. Thirty years earlier, other researchers (Markus & Nurius, 1986) pointed to a similar relationship between self-concept and self-esteem, explaining that self-concept is what we currently know about ourselves in isolation from what we desire or want to avoid in our self-concept.

However, research is not limited to the one-way relationship between self-esteem and self-image. As researchers have shown (Swann et al., 1987), people with positive self-esteem respond differently to self-reported information (self-image) compared to those with low self-

esteem. In the cybernetic model (Carver & Scheier, 1990), as well as congruence theory (Sirgy, 2018), it is assumed in turn that self-esteem is a regulator between self-image (real self) and desirable and undesirable traits, as mentioned by the authors in their study (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021). Sedikides indicates that self-motives are related to self-esteem taken as a trait and state (Sedikides, 2021; Sedikides et al., 2015), similar reports appeared years earlier among other researchers treating self-esteem more as a state (Swann et al., 1987) or as a trait (Gollwitzer et al., 1982) in terms of the relationship of self-motives and self-esteem.

In the present study, it is assumed that self-image and self-concept are treated identically as defining the degree of physical and psychological characteristics possessed (who am I?), while self-esteem concerns judgments about oneself and their evaluation (how do I feel about who I am?). It is assumed that self-esteem both as a trait and a state can be linked to regulating the relationship between self-motives: self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Gorbaniuk et al., 2021).

A symbolic brand value and Self-TBU congruence

The symbolic value of a brand takes on different meanings, depending on the field of research, and can refer to the economic, social, functional, hedonistic and altruistic spheres (Gallarza et al., 2011), with the first three spheres, appearing most often (Kolbl et al., 2020). In the classical sense, the added value of a brand is the ratio of subjective benefits to subjective losses (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996), however, this is limited only to its physical aspects, related to the product itself. In contrast, the symbolic value of a brand is part of the brand image (or TBU), which is a set of associations about the brand (Keller, 1993). The symbolic value added by a brand, therefore, refers to the subjective perception of a particular brand by an individual consumer, which means that the consumer, upon seeing a logo, name or other distinctive element (such as the shape of the packaging) indicating a particular brand, gives it a symbolic value that allows it to distinguish between two products with similar value of functional benefits. This conclusion is confirmed by a study on the perception of a typical smoker of a particular brand (Wakefield et al., 2008), whose image became poorer with the perception of brand-specific elements, such as the color of the packaging, the font of the logo and, ultimately, the name itself.

Researchers referring to congruence theory for many years focused mostly on the positive value added by brands to a consumer's self-image (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012), ignoring the aspect of negative traits associated with the brand, which were accentuated by few researchers (Bosnjak, 2010; Bosnjak & Rudolph, 2008). Relatively more recent studies (Gorbaniuk et al., 2017), have shown that negative traits account for nearly 30% of the typical user's image associations. This means that research on congruence themes may have ignored the important domain of congruence between consumer image and TBU. In our own research, it was assumed that the

traits associated with the typical user may refer to both desirable and confirmed traits, according to the classical congruence measurement (Sirgy, 1982; Swann et al., 1987), and undesirable traits associated with the typical user, which stem from the motive of protecting the self-image (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Bosnjak & Rudolph, 2008; Gorbaniuk et al., 2021).

Another problem of congruence research, relates to the lack of explanation of the deeper process of congruence itself which is limited only to the congruence effect between consumer characteristics and TBU associations (Sirgy et al., 1997). The motives of self-enhancement and self-verification, as assumed by congruence theory (Sirgy, 2018), only differentiate whether the comparison is about the desired (self-enhancement) or current (self-verification) self-image with a typical brand user. However, there is a lack of definition of how exactly this process takes place, and whether it can be activated within a single motive or multiple motives? Whether there is congruence at the level of the desired or actual self is ultimately an effect of the congruence process and not the process itself. The mechanism of congruence can be explained by the theory of symbolic self-completion (Gollwitzer et al., 1982), which points to the importance of the process of comparing the current self-concept to external standards. Perception of discrepancies between the desired standard (ideal self-image) and the currently existing conception (real self-image), triggers emotions that can manifest as lowered self-esteem, which then triggers self-regulatory processes. Symbolic self-completion refers to positive standards as bridging the gap between who I am and who I want to be (Gollwitzer et al., 1982), and thus mainly concerns the self-enhancement motive. On the other hand, according to self-regulation processes (Carver & Scheier, 1990), the desire motive activates a positive feedback loop that, on the basis of repeated comparisons, allows one to determine the difference between the desired (ideal) self and the actual (real) self. In addition, the cybernetic model also emphasizes the importance of avoidance motives as an important part of building a self-concept (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Which means that in addition to a desire for the ideal, people try to escape from a negative vision of themselves, which is helped by the self-protection motive.

The motives of self: self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection, can be an important determinant of the congruence process (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021). These motives, are related to self-esteem (Sedikides et al., 2015; Swann et al., 1987), which regulates the processing of external information. This means that the consumer, at the time of purchase, can make comparisons with the typical user in terms of both desirable traits (self-enhancement), confirmed traits (self-verification) and undesirable traits (self-protection), which ultimately determine the correspondence between the consumer's self and TBU as high or low. Thus, consumers' self-esteem should be associated with a change in the perceived value of the brand to the consumer's self-image, and thus should determine a change

in the congruence effect in terms of comparisons of the desired self, current self and undesired self with the typical brand user. However, to date, there is a lack of research to test the relevance of self and self-esteem motives to congruence processes in the consumer's comparisons with the typical brand user.

Perceived brand value mediates the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference

The main goal of congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982) was to explain the mechanism of consumer decision-making, which coincided with the classical theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954). A person, by making comparisons with other people (or TBUs), seeks to construct a better and clearer self-concept. Congruence, however, is the result of the processes of comparisons of consumer traits with TBU, however why comparisons occur within desirable, possessed and also non-possessed traits. Researchers (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021), suspect the importance of self-motives: self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection, as the main determinants of the comparison process. However, there is a lack of research directly referring to self-motives and how a change in them can translate into the congruence process.

According to the theory of self-completion (Gollwitzer et al., 1982), self-esteem has a behavior-regulating function, as those with lower self-esteem in some aspect of life seek to complete the missing element of self-concept by purchasing or acquiring some object (or brand). Moreover, self-esteem regulates both the self-enhancement and self-verification motive (Swann et al., 1987), with self-enhancement-driven individuals (high self-esteem) more likely to confirm positive traits rather than add them, while those with lower self-esteem were more likely to focus on negative traits. Additionally, self-esteem should regulate the self-protection motive (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), as it is the opposite of self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2015). Based on the above concepts and also the cybernetic model (Carver & Scheier, 1990), which assumed the existence of two main motives of desire and avoidance. Our own research was conducted in accordance with a new conceptualization of the perceived value of a brand for self-image (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021), in which the authors assume the existence of three possible mechanisms governing the congruence process: striving for new positive traits (desireble self), confirming existing traits (actual self), and avoiding the addition of new negative traits to the self-image by purchasing the brand (undesirable self). Thus, the following hypotheses were posited for the correlational cross-sectional study:

H1. Consumers perceive different brand value for self-image depending on self-esteem.

H1a. Consumers with low self-esteem perceive more positive qualities that a brand can contribute to self-image than consumers who have high self-esteem.

H1b. Consumers with higher self-esteem will perceive a higher affirming value of the brand than consumers with low self-esteem.

H1c. Consumers with higher self-esteem will perceive more negative attributes that a brand can bring to a consumer's self-image.

Ultimately, the goal of congruence theory itself was to predict consumer behavior, mainly in terms of broad brand preference (Sirgy, 2018). In turn, researchers have shown that congruence of positive traits has a positive effect for increasing brand preference (Shujaat et al., 2018):

H2. Positive traits added (H2a) and confirmed (H2b) are positively associated with brand preference, while negative traits added (H2c) are negatively associated with brand preference.

H3. The perceived importance of a brand to a consumer's self-image mediates the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference.

The conceptualization of the correlational study is presented in Figure 1.

Impact of self-esteem on symbolic brand value

As the author of congruence theory himself pointed out, the motives of the self are important for the perceived change in the discrepancy between the current self and the desired self (Sirgy, 1982, 2018). This assumption was in line with the proposal of the self-regulation model (Carver & Scheier, 1990), in which the authors indicated that the global self-concept is dependent on the processes of striving for the desired standard and avoiding the undesired standard. Moreover, according to the SCENT-R model (Sedikides et al., 2015; Sedikides & Strube, 1997), self-esteem as a state also guides the process of self-regulation, informing the person whether there are discrepancies between the standard and the current self-image. Positive or negative self-esteem, provides a reference point for processing information from the environment and prompts the person to confirm or deny it as inconsistent with the current self-concept (Swann et al., 1987).

To date, however, no studies have been found in the field of self-TBU congruence that verify the assumption of the importance of self-esteem for perceived congruence. Researchers (Cheng et al., 2012), showed that self-esteem is dependent on perceived brand-consumer congruence for positive or negative brand information. Individuals who

felt stronger brand congruence were more likely to ignore negative information about a brand, which is consistent with the results of Swann and colleagues (1987). Perceiving a stronger congruence with a brand is a necessary element for incorporating it into one's own self-concept, which in classical self-image theory was called expansion of the self (Belk, 1988). Thus, people who perceive greater congruence between their own self-image and the brand image/TBU, feel greater psychological discomfort when faced with negative information about the brand, as this can be a threat to their ego. In recent years, there have also been studies that have found that self-esteem regulates the process of brand congruence in relation to autobiographical memory (Mandal, 2020). They showed that people characterized by higher self-esteem strive to maintain their current self-image by wanting to change their previously chosen brand to one that is more compatible. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem had no motivation to change brands.

Although according to congruence theory, self-motives and self-esteem should interact with the perceived congruence of a consumer's image with that of a TBU or brand (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Gorbaniuk et al., 2021; Sirgy et al., 1997), researchers have not verified this assumption using methods that allow causal inference. Current research suggests that congruence is both a moderator of the relationship between information (positive or negative) about a preferred brand and consumer self-esteem (Cheng et al., 2012), and is dependent on the consumer's global self-esteem (Mandal, 2020). There is a lack of conclusive research that treats self-esteem as an independent variable determining the perceived congruence between a consumer's self-image and TBU image, as self-esteem can also be understood as a situational variable based on attributive, social and physical aspects (Heather-ton & Polivy, 1991). The purpose of the present research is to try to verify the assumption of the importance of self-esteem for perceived conformity (Sirgy, 2018) and to answer the question of what characteristics reflecting the motive of self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021) depend on momentary self-esteem?

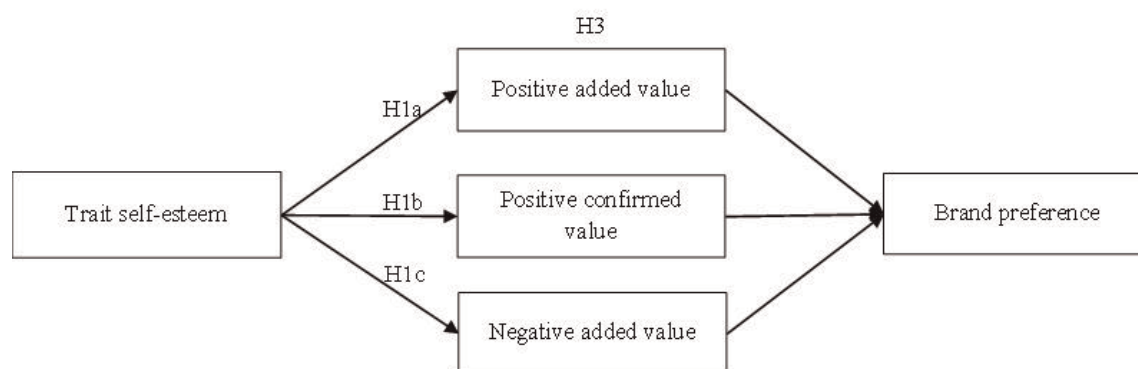


Figure 1. Conceptualisation of the correlation study

H4. Lowering a consumer's momentary self-esteem will influence a greater desire to add positive traits through brand purchases.

Alternatively, consumers with reduced self-esteem should perceive to a greater extent in the brand the positive qualities they can add to their self-image. This effect is directly indicated by the concept of completion of self (Gollwitzer et al., 1982) and the model of self-regulation (Carver i Scheier, 1990), as these individuals should strive to reduce the discrepancy between how they currently see themselves and their ideal self-image.

H5. An increase in a consumer's momentary self-esteem will influence a greater willingness to affirm positive traits already in place by purchasing a brand.

As research on self-esteem motives has shown (Swann et al., 1987), people with a positive self-concept are more likely to seek confirmation of positive information about themselves. In addition, as Mandal (2020) showed, higher self-esteem is associated with the desire to confirm one's identity through a particular brand. Thus, individuals whose self-esteem will increase should seek to confirm their current self-image, indicating that the purchase of a brand confirms the positive qualities that already exist in the consumer's self-image.

H6. An increase in temporary self-esteem will result in a greater desire to avoid negative traits that may be added by the brand.

According to the motives of self-validation and self-improvement (Swann Jr, 2005), people with low self-esteem seek to validate themselves through greater acceptance of their negative traits and make decisions that confirm their existence. In contrast, people with higher self-esteem are driven by the principle of self-improvement by which they may be more willing to avoid adding traits to their self-image that pose a threat (see Sedikides et al., 2015).

H7. There is an interaction between product category and the impact of self-esteem on the perceived value added by the brand.

Given that product category is important to perceived brand value (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021) and congruence itself (Parker, 2009; Miller & Mills, 2012), it was expected that the impact of self-esteem would vary by product category.

Figure 2 shows the conceptual model of the experimental study.

STUDY 1: CORRELATION STUDY

Participants and stimuli

In the correlational study, 182 people between the ages of 20 and 58 participated ($M = 29.68$; $Me = 26.00$; $SD = 8.52$) of whom 50.5% were men. Of the four categories, we obtained two equal samples (30.2%) of those interested in buying laptops and coffee, and two smaller samples of those interested in buying cosmetics (23.1%) and shoes (16.5%). The categories were selected based on previous research (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021), choosing those with similar symbolic value. The resulting sample allowed the detection of 9% or more of explained brand preference variance ($R^2 \geq .09$) with a power of $1 - \beta = .80$ and an error of $\alpha = .05$ for the main mediation model, where ten mediators were considered in parallel.

Operationalisation

The added value of a brand has been operationalized with an expanded version of the tool (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021), which allows assessing the subjectively perceived value of a brand to a consumer's self-image in terms of new desirable traits (sophistication, responsibility, sociability), confirmed positive traits (sophistication, responsibility, sociability), and added undesirable traits (haughtiness, old-fashionedness, stinginess, and boorishness). Based on a suggestion by the author of congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982), a determination of trait importance was additionally added to the measurement. Each dimension was augmented with one additional adjective that was synonymous with the other three (Appendix A). Initially, participants determined the importance of a trait on a scale of 0 (not important) - 3 (very important). This step, aimed at determining the total of features more or less important to a given participant without activating the image context of a typical brand user. In other words, this measurement was applied even before the brand was selected and manipulated to be strictly about the perceived importance of each item, so that subjectively unimportant features could be excluded from the measurement of desirable and

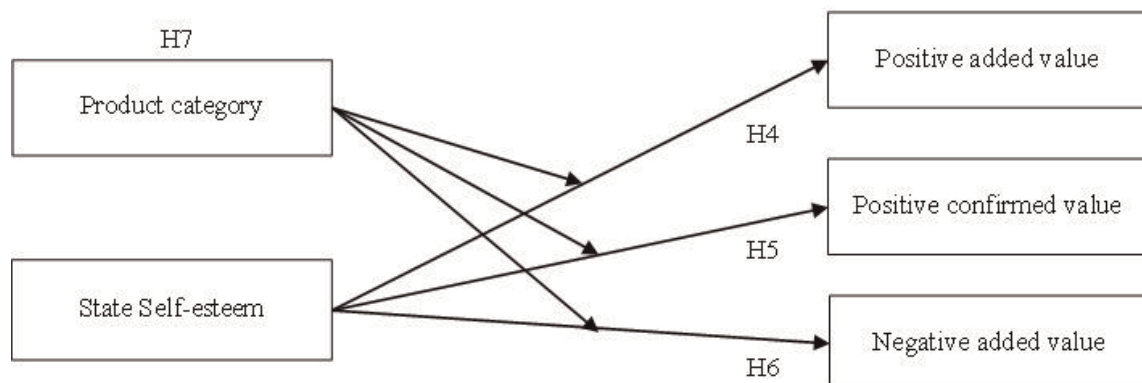


Figure 2. Conceptualisation of the experimental study

undesirable features. Which also preliminarily reduced the adjective list and allowed a more accurate measurement of what is important to the consumer. In the second step, they were asked to imagine a shopping situation and a typical user of brand X, which allowed them to refer to all the characteristics on a scale of having them by TBU from 0 (no) to 3 (definitely yes). The second stage of measurement, aimed at capturing the content associated with the image of a typical user of a given brand in the mind of the surveyed consumer. Participants then determined the degree of desirability (for positive traits) or undesirability (for negative traits), also responding on a scale of 0 (no) to 3 (definitely yes), with questions not including traits that received a zero on the TBU association scale. Step three, allowed for the rejection of traits associated in the image of the typical user that have no subjective significance in changing the (positive or negative) perceived self-concept. Finally, participants determined the degree to which they currently possessed a given trait, also on a scale of 0 (no) to 3 (definitely yes). The tool, along with the formulas used, is presented in Appendix A.

Self-esteem was operationalized with a Polish adaptation of the SES (Rosenberg, 1965; Dzwonkowska et al., 2007). The scale was shortened to six self-esteem markers (Appendix B). Internal consistency achieved a satisfactory result ($\alpha = .77$).

Brand preference was measured by three questions relating to overall preference for brand X, recommending the brand to friends, and willingness to purchase the brand in the future ($\alpha = .91$). The scale is presented in Appendix B.

The direct measurement of congruence (Sirgy et al., 1997), consisted of three items for measuring the congruence of the user's self-image with the desired self-image ($\alpha = .93$), actual self-image ($\alpha = .93$), and undesired self-image ($\alpha = .96$), which was included due to the value of negative traits for congruence (Bosnjak & Rudolph, 2008) and the existence of negative associations with TBU (Gorbaniuk et al., 2017). The scales are presented in Appendix B.

Procedure

The survey was conducted online using a variety of media such as Zoom, Meet Google or MS Teams, depending on the participants preferences and capabilities. In order to avoid the interviewer effect, data were collected by five interviewers (three men and two women) who had undergone a thorough course of procedure. Participants were selected non-randomly, using the snowball method, with participants' gender controlled (50/50). In addition, the age of the participants was controlled, in order to be able to generalize the results to the general consumer population. Participants were not paid for participating in the study.

Before measuring the variables, participants were asked to identify recognizable brands from among those presented on the screen, which were assigned to each product category (see Appendix C). The researcher then randomly selected one of the indicated brands for the

survey. The participant was asked to answer five sets of questions included in a questionnaire to measure the importance of the brand to self-image. The participant was shown the test brand and then asked to imagine the average user of that brand (Appendix C). The measurement was then continued on TBU-associated traits and desirable, possessed and undesirable traits using the same n trait descriptors. Finally, participants filled out questionnaires to measure direct congruence, self-esteem, and brand preference.

Results

In Table 1, correlation analyses between self-esteem and brand preference and brand symbolic value and direct measurement of congruence between consumer and TBU are presented. Analyses were conducted using Spearman's correlation coefficient due to the strongly skewed distributions of brand symbolic value indicators. When comparing correlation coefficients for product categories, results close to the limit of statistical significance ($p < .10$) were also interpreted due to small sample sizes.

According to hypothesis H1a: consumers with low self-esteem perceive more positive qualities that a brand can contribute to their self-image than consumers who have high self-esteem. The results of correlation analyses for the relationship between self-esteem and positive value added (Table 1), did not support the hypothesis. It turned out that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and the addition of a responsibility trait, and this effect is also found in the coffee and cosmetics categories.

However, hypothesis H1b was confirmed, which postulated that consumers with higher self-esteem would perceive higher confirmatory brand value than consumers with low self-esteem (Table 1). Positive relationships were obtained between the attributes of responsibility and sociability and consumers' self-esteem, which indicated that as self-esteem increased, the intensity of confirmation of these attributes through product purchase increased. These effects were confirmed for the coffee and cosmetics categories, and biased relationships were found for the footwear category for the qualities of sophistication and responsibility.

Analyzing the results for negative value added (Table 1), only the negative effect on the overall sample for the trait of stinginess was confirmed. This means that as self-esteem increases, consumers are concerned that the product will add the trait of stinginess to their self-image. In addition, specific effects for individual product categories were also captured. As it turned out, an increase in self-esteem is associated with a more frequent fear of adding boorishness to one's self-image with the purchase of a laptop. The purchase of shoes is associated with a fear of adding stinginess to self-image along with an increase in self-esteem. For the purchase of coffee, there was a significant effect of fear of adding stinginess to self-image with increased self-esteem, and a biased relationship regarding fear of adding boorishness with higher consumer self-esteem. It was also noted that the potential correlation was reversed for brands in the cosmetics category whose

Table 1 Correlation analysis of the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference with brand added value and direct self-TBU congruence by product category

	Self-esteem					Brand Preference
	Laptops (<i>n</i> = 55)	Shoes (<i>n</i> = 30)	Cosmetics (<i>n</i> = 42)	Coffee (<i>n</i> = 55)	Total (<i>N</i> = 182)	Total (<i>N</i> = 182)
Positive Added Value						
Sophistication	.01	.17	-.09	.06	.06	.54***
Responsibility	.09	.00	.28*	.51***	.28***	.19**
Sociability	.15	-.07	-.01	.06	.04	.11
Positive Confirmed Value						
Sophistication	.07	.27†	.11	.03	.10	.52***
Responsibility	.06	.27†	.26*	.35**	.25***	.47***
Sociability	.13	.10	.20†	.26*	.19**	.38***
Negative Added Value						
Haughtiness	.20	.04	-.09	.10	.10	.34***
Old-Fashionedness	-.04	.01	.20†	-.03	.04	-.37***
Boorishness	-.28*	-.05	.00	-.19†	-.10	-.43***
Stinginess	-.17	-.49**	.05	-.33**	-.22**	-.52***
Direct Self Congruence						
Desires self	.16	-.09	-.19	.09	.03	.09
Actual self	.06	.08	-.03	.01	-.01	.37***
Undesired self	-.13	-.06	.05	-.17	-.11	-.07

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. One-way significance tests were applied; † $p < .01$ – adopted only for separate categories due to smaller samples.

purchase could be associated with a greater fear of adding old-fashionedness to the self-image as the consumer's self-esteem decreased. This means that the postulated correlation in hypothesis H1c: consumers with higher self-esteem perceive more negative traits that a brand can bring to a consumer's self-image, was partially confirmed in the self-study.

The correlation analyses conducted on the relationship between perceived brand value and brand preference (Table 1), showed statistically significant correlations within most attributes. It turned out that positive value addition in terms of sophistication and responsibility were positively associated with brand preference, with the effect being stronger for sophistication, while sociability addition was not associated with brand preference ($p = .074$). In contrast, all affirmed traits were positively and statistically significantly associated with brand preference. Adding undesirable traits was negatively associated with brand preference for old-fashionedness, boorishness, stinginess, while positively for the trait of haughtiness. This means that perceiving brand values such as adding positive traits sophistication and responsibility, affirming all positive traits, and adding haughtiness are associated with an increase in brand preference. In contrast, perceiving symbolic brand value in terms of old-fashionedness, boorishness and stinginess is associated with a decrease

in brand preference. The collected data supported hypothesis H2: positive traits added (H2a) and confirmed (H2b) are positively associated with brand preference, while negative traits added (H2c) are negatively associated with brand preference.

In addition, Table 1 shows the results of correlation analyses for the classical congruence measure, which was also tested in the self-study. As it turned out, self-esteem was not significantly correlated with any of the direct measures. Preference, on the other hand, was only positively related to actual self, meaning that perceiving greater congruence between a consumer's actual self and a typical brand user is associated with an increase in preference.

To verify the mediation hypothesis (H3), an analysis was performed using macro PROCESS 4.1 (Hayes, 2022), in which two mediation analyses were conducted. Model 4 from Hayes' method was used along with the bootstrap 5000 method. The predictor in the model was always self-esteem understood as a trait, the predictor variable was brand preference, while the mediators were the traits of perceived brand value or direct measurement of congruence for a specific consumer motive: positive value added (self-enhancement motive), positive value confirmed (self-verification motive) and negative value added (self-protection motive) (Figure 3).

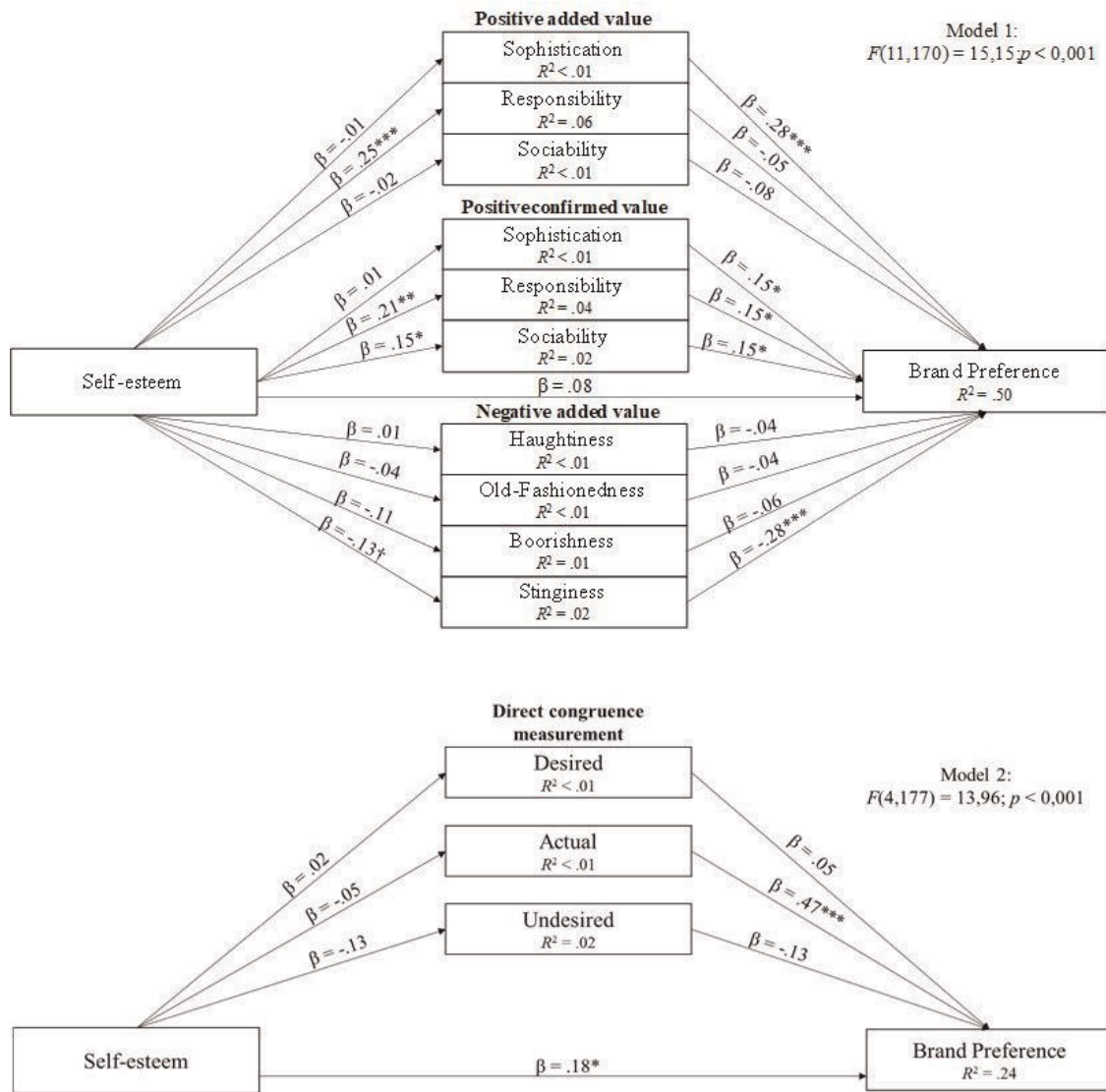


Figure 3. Perceived added and confirmed brand value as a mediator of the relationship between consumer self-esteem and brand preference

Note. Model one tests congruence based on measuring the perceived value of the brand to the consumer's self-image (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021); model two tests direct congruence (Sirgy et al., 1997; Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The presented results of mediation analyses for the new method of perceived brand value for self-image seen in model one (Figure 3), showed that self-esteem was positively associated with confirming responsibility and sociability. In addition, relationships with adding responsibility and boorishness were confirmed. This means that as self-esteem increases, consumers are more likely to want to add responsibility to their self-image, affirm responsibility and sociability, and avoid adding boorishness by purchasing the brand. Positive relationships were also found between brand value and brand preference. It turned out that consumers preferred a brand more if they perceived the brand's potential to affirm all positive qualities: sophistication, responsibility and sociability. In addition to this, consumers preferred more a brand that could bring more of the desirable trait of sophistication into the self-image, which the consumer did not possess to a sufficient degree for himself. In addition, it was confirmed that brands were

less preferred if they could bring the trait of boorishness to the consumer's self-image. No direct relationship was found between consumer self-esteem and brand preference. The first model was statistically significant and explained 50% of the variance in brand preference.

The second model (Figure 3), tested the mediating effect of the classic congruence measure. It found that self-esteem was not associated with any of the congruence measures, regardless of whether it related to desired, actual or undesired characteristics compared to the typical brand user. Moreover, it was found that only actual self was significantly related to brand preference, meaning that consumers who perceive greater congruence with the typical brand user on existing characteristics are more likely to prefer the brand. A direct relationship between self-esteem and brand preference was also confirmed. The resulting model was statistically significant and explained 24% of the variance in brand preference.

Analysis of the results shown in Figure 3 and Table 2, partially confirmed hypothesis H3, which postulated that the perceived importance of a brand to a consumer's self-image mediates the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference. It turned out that confirming responsibility and sociability, as well as adding stinginess mediated the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference. No significant mediation was found for added positive traits and for direct measurement of congruence.

STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Participants and stimuli

In the experimental study, 399 people between the ages of 18 and 60 took part ($M = 27.81$; $Me = 25.00$; $SD = 8.00$) of whom 53.6% were women, seven people did not specify their age. Of the product categories tested, which were considered in study one, relatively equal proportions of people interested in buying particular brands within the category were obtained (Table 3). The resulting sample allowed the detection of 6% or more

explained variance of dependents variables ($R^2 \geq .06$) with a power of $1 - \beta = .80$ and an error of $\alpha = .05$ using MANOVA in comparisons of experimental groups.

Operationalisation

To measure the perceived importance of brand for self-image, Gorbaniuk and colleagues' (2021) measure of perceived brand value for self-image was again used, in an identically modified version to the correlational study (see study 1).

Self-esteem was measured using an abbreviated version of the SES (Rosenberg, 1965; Dzwonkowska et al., 2007), however, in this version the instruction was changed to refer to situational self-esteem, as suggested by the authors of the adaptation ($\alpha = .83$).

The remaining variables (i.e., direct congruence and brand preference) were measured in the same manner as in the correlational study. The reliability indices obtained, indicated very good internal consistency for undesired congruence ($\alpha = .96$), desired congruence ($\alpha = .96$), actual congruence ($\alpha = .95$) and brand preference ($\alpha = .92$).

Table 2 Standardized indirect mediator effects in the relationship between self-esteem and brand preference

Mediators	β	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Positive Added Value				
Sophistication	.001	.019	-.039	.040
Responsibility	-.013	.015	-.043	.016
Sociability	.001	.008	-.014	.018
Positive Confirmed Value				
Sophistication	.002	.012	-.023	.026
Responsibility	.032	.019	.001	.073
Sociability	.023	.014	.001	.054
Negative Added Value				
Haughtiness	.001	.007	-.011	.020
Old-Fashionedness	.002	.010	-.015	.026
Boorishness	.007	.016	-.023	.041
Stinginess	.037	.023	.001	.090
Direct Congruence				
Desired self	.001	.013	-.029	.027
Actual self	-.025	.039	-.102	.048
Undesired self	.017	.026	-.084	.067

Table 3 Proportions of surveyed consumers within each product category and study condition

Product	Control		Negative		Positive		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Coffee	17	22.7%	40	25.2%	40	24.2%	97	24.3%
Cosmetics	19	25.3%	37	23.3%	41	24.8%	97	24.3%
Laptops	17	22.7%	40	25.2%	43	26.1%	100	25.1%
Shoes	22	29.3%	42	26.4%	41	24.8%	105	26.3%
Total	75	100.0%	159	100.0%	165	100.0%	399	100.0%

Procedure

Similar to the correlative study, the experimental study was conducted using online communication platforms. After a brief interview, the participant was given one of twenty brands that he or she recognized and were in his or her field of interest to evaluate.

The participant then performed a self-esteem manipulation task (Appendix D), which was authoritative in nature due to the situation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring the survey to be conducted in an online format. A program was prepared, created using the Visual Studio 16 computer environment. The participant's task was to rank seven general statements according to his subjective assessment in terms of their relevance to his behavior or attitudes in life. Before starting the task, the participant was given the following instruction: „Now you will perform a short task in which you have to order the seven statements according to rank from most agreeable to least agreeable to what you think about yourself. The program will then display to you what kind of person you are based on this ranking.” Regardless of how the participant arranged the statements in question, there was a random selection for a condition that increased self-esteem or decreased self-esteem. In either case, the next step featured a brief description about the subject, which related to the participant either positively (the description related to very positive inner qualities, such as hardworking) or negatively (the description related to negative inner qualities, such as laziness). In the preceding instruction, the participant learned that the description was the result of arranging previous statements in a particular hierarchy, which nicely reinforced the personal content of the message. An additional reinforcing effect was a smiling or sad emoticon and a normal distribution with an indication of positive in green (above +1.5 SD) or negative in red (below -1.5 SD). The control group received no feedback on this task (see Appendix D). After completing the entire survey, the interviewers had a brief conversation with the participant explaining the purpose of the research: „We know from colloquial observation that consumers often go shopping in order to improve their mood. One of your first tasks was designed to lower or raise your temporary self-esteem. From a psychological point of view, the goal of the study was to see if brand preference is dependent on a temporary change in a consumer's self-esteem.” In addition, the researcher made sure that the participant understood that the task was in no way related to the participant's competence.

The manipulation was followed by an interview on the perceived added value of the brand to self-image using Gorbaniuk and colleagues' tool (2021), identical to study 1. The participant then answered questions on self-esteem, brand preference and direct congruence independently (in the form of an uploaded link). Finally, in the case of the group with reduced self-esteem, a brief interview followed during which the purpose of the study and the manipulation used to negate the effect of reduced self-esteem were explained.

A mixed method was chosen since they wanted to make the answers of most questions independent of the interviewer's effect (especially regarding self-esteem), while measuring perceived brand value (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021) is currently too complex a measurement method, so measuring by interview method relieved the participant of the additional task of learning how to fill out the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Manipulation check

To verify the effects of the experimental manipulation, individuals from each condition were compared in terms of the intensity of self-esteem understood as a state. The analysis was carried out using the one-way ANOVA.

Analyzing the effect of the self-esteem manipulation, there were statistically significant differences between the groups, $F(2,391) = 14.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. A pairwise comparison of groups using the contrast test, showed that those in the self-esteem-raising condition ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 0.89$) had statistically significant higher scores than those in the self-esteem-lowering condition ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 0.96$, $p < .001$). In addition, statistically significant differences were found between the control condition ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.12$) and the self-esteem lowering condition ($p = .028$) and the self-esteem raising condition ($p = .032$). This means that a self-esteem manipulation effect was obtained as a condition that persisted throughout the study period.

Hypotheses check

In order to verify the set research hypotheses in the experimental study, two-way MANOVA were performed, in which the independent factors were the experimental condition (negative vs. positive) and the product category (laptops vs. coffee vs. cosmetics vs. shoes), while the dependent variables were: 1) positive added value (sophistication, responsibility, sociability), 2) positive confirmed value (sophistication, responsibility, sociability), 3) negative added value (haughtiness, old-fashionedness, boorishness, stinginess). In addition, an identical 2-MANOVA analysis was conducted to trace the effects of self-esteem and product categories on direct measurement of congruence (ideal self, real self, undesired self). Analyses were conducted on ipsatized data for each product category to remove the variance introduced by category into the perceived value of the brand to the consumer's self-image, allowing for a „pure” effect of self-esteem and interaction. The results are shown in Table 4.

The results of the analyses only confirmed hypothesis H4, which postulated that a decrease in a consumer's temporary self-esteem would influence a greater willingness to add positive attributes through brand purchase (Table 4). It turned out that for participants in whom a state of decreased self-esteem was introduced, the perceived value of the brand in terms of adding responsibility and

Table 4 An influence of self-esteem on the perceived added value of the brand to the consumer self-image

Dependent variable		Negative Self-esteem	Positive Self-esteem	SSES effect		Category x SSES	
		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>p</i>	η^2
Positive added value	Sophistication	0.09 (1.79)	-0.08 (1.54)	.366	<.01	.996	<.01
	Responsibility	0.33 (2.48)	-0.32 (1.77)	.007	.02	.533	.01
	Sociability	0.29 (2.16)	-0.28 (1.16)	.004	.03	.756	<.01
Positive confirmed value	Sophistication	-0.14 (2.83)	0.14 (3.43)	.452	<.01	.449	.01
	Responsibility	-0.19 (3.37)	0.18 (3.76)	.358	<.01	.865	<.01
	Sociability	0.07 (3.66)	-0.07 (3.89)	.719	<.01	.220	.01
Negative added value	Haughtiness	0.03 (1.01)	-0.03 (0.92)	.552	<.01	.721	<.01
	Old-Fashionedness	0.03 (0.91)	-0.03 (0.59)	.483	<.01	.923	<.01
	Boorishness	0.06 (1.20)	-0.06 (0.63)	.276	<.01	.723	<.01
	Stinginess	0.00 (0.95)	0.00 (0.96)	.987	<.01	.450	.01
Direct congruence	Desires self	-0.07 (1.52)	0.07 (1.57)	.429	<.01	.894	<.01
	Actual self	0.08 (1.34)	-0.08 (1.51)	.336	<.01	.478	.01
	Undesired self	0.07 (1.43)	-0.07 (1.56)	.393	<.01	.636	.01

Note. SSES – Self-esteem as a state.

sociability characteristics deviated upward from the average results of the entire group. This means that a decrease in self-esteem is associated with an increase in the desire to add positive qualities by purchasing the brand. In contrast, those with increased self-esteem were found to have a negative deviation in their scores from the average. This, in turn, means that those with higher self-esteem perceive less value in terms of positive attributes added to their self-image.

Observing the results in Table 4, no significant differences were found in terms of confirmed positive traits (H5), added undesirable traits (H6) and the interaction between product category and self-esteem (H7). Moreover, it was also found that there was no significant effect of the self-esteem manipulation on the change in the congruence between the consumer's self-image and that of the typical user in the congruence classic measure.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A correlational study confirmed that self-esteem was positively associated with perceiving more positive traits in a brand that a consumer can add or confirm in self-image. In addition, an increase in self-esteem was associated with a higher frequency of perceiving undesirable traits that can be incorporated into the self-concept when a brand is purchased. These results, are fully consistent with the findings of research on the concepts of self-enhancement and self-verification (Swann et al., 1987) and the assumptions of the SCENT-R model regarding the motives of self-enhancement and self-protection (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Sedikides et al.,

2015). The experimental study, on the other hand, confirmed that lowering a consumer's self-esteem significantly influences the perception of more positive qualities that can be added to the self-image through the purchase of a brand, which is consistent with the concept of symbolic self-complement (Gollwitzer et al., 1982). What was not confirmed, however, were differences in the positive value affirmed and the negative value avoided that can be added by the brand. It turned out that regardless of the positive or negative effect on consumer self-esteem, the differences between the experimental groups were insignificant, meaning that self-esteem does not determine the confirmation of positive traits and the avoidance of negative traits, even though there is a significant correlation between these traits. These results, appear to be inconsistent with previous research on the desire to confirm identity through brand purchase (Mandal, 2020) and confirmation of a positive self-concept (Swann et al., 1987) through the pursuit of positive traits (desired and confirmed) versus the avoidance of negative traits. The lack of an effect of self-esteem on greater willingness to avoid positive negative traits to self-image is also inconsistent with conceptions of self-motives, in which it has been argued that individuals with higher self-esteem seek to avoid exposure to the self-enhancement motive (Swann Jr, 2005), which translates into an increase in the self-protection motive (Sedikides et al., 2015).

A potential reason for the lack of an effect of self-esteem influence for the motives of self-verification (affirming positive traits) and self-protection (adding undesirable traits) is the proximity of the concept of self-esteem to the motive of self-enhancement whose improve-

ment, according to Sedikides and colleagues (2015), is the overriding goal of all actions and therefore of the other motives to enhance a positive self-concept. This effect seems to be confirmed by the discrepancy between correlational and experimental studies. In the case of the correlational study, consistent results were obtained for the motives of self-verification and self-protection, where participants with higher self-esteem were more likely to affirm themselves by purchasing the brand and fear the addition of undesirable traits (Swann et al., 1987; Carver & Scheier, 1990). In contrast, the expected effects were not obtained for the self-enhancement motive, which may have been related to the relatively high self-esteem of all subjects. On the other hand, a manipulation of self-esteem (an experimental study) confirmed that creating a discrepancy between the positive standard (self-enhancement) and the current self-concept translates into perceived greater value added by the brand (Gollwitzer et al., 1982).

Managerial implications

The present research, focused on self-esteem which can be modified by a message emitted from the screen, reflecting in part advertising practices. Despite the relatively weak effects resulting from a single exposure of the manipulation, these results confirm the possibility of creating a message in the form of a general message relating to the consumer's personal qualities, which can activate existing deficiencies in self-concept. Previous research (Gorbaniuk et al., 2016; Kolańska & Gorbaniuk, 2021) has confirmed that TV ads and tangible products of specific brands have the symbolic potential to complement each other. Advertisements convey what a brand's TBU represents, in turn, this information automatically triggers a loop of comparisons between the consumer's self-concept and the features of the TBU perceived in the advertisement. Adding to this present research, it can be surmised that highlighting, in an advertising message, the potential differences between a potential consumer and a brand's TBU, can reinforce a brand's desire or preference.

Limitations

Despite the earnest efforts of the researchers, both surveys had to be conducted in an online format, which may have reduced participant engagement. Additionally, the surveys did not focus on quota selection of consumers by age, making at least half of the participants in both surveys a student-aged sample. As a result, the resulting symbolic meaning of the brand for self-image may have been distorted by the different characteristics of students' needs compared to consumers with full-time jobs, families and their own homes. An equally important factor limiting inference is the fact that this research is based only on a single measurement in an imagined shopping situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The research presented here provides insight into the relationship between self-esteem and symbolic brand value and their potential translation into brand preference.

They confirmed that a brand can be associated with both positive and negative attributes, and that these have different meanings for brand preference. In addition, it was shown that self-enhancement as a state is close to the understanding of the self-enhancement motive, indicating that it is possible to manipulate various self-motives on the part of the consumer to modify perceived characteristics in the brand as relevant in comparisons with the typical brand user. Also, it has been confirmed that the new method (Gorbaniuk et al., 2021) allows more accurate conclusions to be drawn about comparisons with TBU in terms of what features are relevant and independent of product category.

Future research should focus on trying to replicate in a stationary form and as close to a natural shopping situation as possible. In addition, the present research focused on global self-esteem, while the operationalization of brand value for consumer self-image was based on a tool focusing on self-motives. Thus, it is worthwhile in the future to attempt to manipulate the level of individual motives in order to ascertain their relevance to the added, affirmed and avoided brand value.

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APPENDIX A

PERCEIVED BRAND VALUE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CONSUMER SELF-IMAGE

	Polish	English	W	TBU	P/N	R
0	odważny	brave				
0	nieśmiały	shy				
1	elegancki	elegant				
2	wyniosły	haughty				
3	odpowiedzialny	responsible				
4	staroświecki	old-fashioned				
5	towarzyski	sociable				
6	zaniedbany	neglected				
7	nadmiernie oszczędny	cheeseparing				
8	modny	trendy				
9	zarozumiały	conceited				
10	rozsądny	reasonable				
11	przestarzały	outdated				
12	wesoły	cheerful				
13	niechlujny	sloppy				
14	skąpy	stingy				
15	stylowy	stylish				
16	chwalipięta	swanky				
17	solidny	robust				
18	staromodny	old-fashioned				
19	sympatyczny	likable				
20	prostacki	simpleton				
21	sknera	scrooge				
22	ma klasę	classy				
23	szpanerski	dashing				
24	dokładny	thorough				
25	stary	old				
26	pogodny	pleasant				
27	zapuszczony	frousy				
28	dusigrosz	cheapskate				

Note. W – weight of feature without consumer context; TBU – noticing a feature in the typical brand user image; P/N – added positive or negative value, depending on the adjective; R – confirmation of features. For each column, the scale was four-point: 0 - no, 1 - rather yes, 2 - yes, 3 - definitely yes. Items numbered "0" were treated as buffers to practice the response scale. The following formulas were used to calculate the indices:

$$\text{Positive Added Value: } \sum \frac{W * TBU * (P - R)}{4}$$

$$\text{Positive Confirmed Value: } \sum \frac{W * TBU * R}{4}$$

$$\text{Negative Added Value: } \sum \frac{W * TBU * (N - R)}{4}$$

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRES TO MEASURE INDICATORS OF TEST VARIABLES

Items	Scale						
Direct Desired Self Congruence							
Would you want to be similar to a typical user of [category] brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Would you like to share many of the same characteristics as a typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Would you want to be like the typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Direct Actual Self Congruence							
Are you actually similar to a typical user of [category] brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Do you currently have many things in common with a typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Are you actually like a typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Direct Undesired Self Congruence							
Would you like to avoid being associated with a typical user of x brand shoes?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Would you like to avoid having many things in common with a typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Would you like to avoid being like a typical user of brand x?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Brand Preference							
Would you buy [category] of brand x in the future?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Would you recommend [category] brand x to your friends?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Does [category] brand x compare favourably with competing brands?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
State self esteem							
I believe that I currently have many positive qualities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I believe that I do not currently have many reasons to be proud of myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like myself at the moment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Recently I have been feeling useless.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
At the moment, I consider myself to be at least as valuable as others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
At the moment I would like to have more self-respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Trait self esteem							
I believe that I have many positive qualities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I find that I don't have many reasons to be proud of myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sometimes I feel useless.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I believe that I am a valuable person at least as much as others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I wish I had more self-respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

APPENDIX C

Men



Women



AVON



AVON



acer



acer



adidas



adidas



APPENDIX D

EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION

First step – buffer task:

Items to be ordered for the respondent (before exposure of the manipulation shown in the figure)		
	Polish version	English translation
1	Oceńm, że w większości swoich codziennych obowiązków jestem osobą konsekwentną.	I rate myself as a consistent person in most of my daily responsibilities.
2	Przeważnie czuję, że panuję nad sytuacją.	I mostly feel I am in control of a situation.
3	Widzę związek przyczynowo-skutkowy w sytuacjach, które mnie spotykają.	I see a cause and effect relationship in the situations that confront me.
4	Imponują mi takie cechy jak wytrwałość, konsekwencja.	I am impressed by qualities such as perseverance, consistency.
5	Uważam, że człowiek może mieć kontrolę nad większością rzeczy, którego go w życiu spotykają.	I believe that a person can have control over most things that happen to them in life.
6	Na ogół wiem czego chcę.	I generally know what I want.
7	Cenię ludzi, żyjących bez strachu.	I value people who live without fear.

Second step – manipulation:

