DAVID SPROTT, SANDOR CZELLAR, and ERIC SPANGENBERG*

Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) is a generalized view of brands in relation to the self, with consumers varying in their tendency to include important brands as part of their self-concepts. The authors develop an eight-item scale to measure BESC and demonstrate that it captures a consumer's general engagement with brands. This scale successfully predicts consumers' differential attention to, memory of, and preference for their favorite brands. Brand engagement in self-concept is also related to differential brand loyalty, with high-BESC consumers being less price and time sensitive regarding their favorite brands than low-BESC consumers. The authors discuss the usefulness of this construct for marketing research.

Keywords: self-concept, self–brand connection, brand attitudes, brand preferences, brand equity

The Importance of a General Measure of Brand Engagement on Market Behavior: Development and Validation of a Scale

Exploring connections between consumers and their brands, scholars have demonstrated that self–brand connections exist and can lead to favorable brand attitudes (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005). Prior research on these self–brand connections has predominantly focused on the linkage between a specific brand and a consumer’s self-concept. We propose that consumers vary in their general engagement with brands, and we examine the nature and importance of consumers’ tendencies to include important brands as part of their self-concept. We call this generalized individual difference “brand engagement in self-concept” (BESC). We develop a measure of this new construct, demonstrate its nomological relevance, and show that consumers vary substantially in the degree to which they incorporate brands as part of their self-concept. We then examine how BESC affects important aspects of brand-related knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

BESC

During the past decade, branding research has given considerable attention to the different forms of relationships between consumers and brands (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Chaplin and John 2005; Escalas 2004; Fournier 1998; Terrasse 2006). The current research contributes to this domain by exploring differences between consumers with respect to their general engagement with brands. To do so, we propose the BESC construct, defined as an individual difference representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves. Our conceptualization builds on self-schemas to investigate the role of brands in the self-concept.

Self-concept can be viewed as a set of self-schemas representing stable knowledge structures about the self that organize incoming self-related information and help people make sense of themselves in their environment (Markus 1977). People vary in their tendency to possess particular self-schemas, and this variation leads to differential attitudes and behaviors toward objects relevant to those schemas (Markus 1983; Markus et al. 1982). For example, Sentis and Markus (1986) show that consumers with a strong masculine self-schema described fragrance brands in more accentuated gendered terms and held sharply different brand preferences than those with weaker masculine self-schemas. The underlying assumption of the BESC construct is that consumers vary in their tendency to possess...
brand-related schemas. While some consumers may develop self-schemas about how the brands they use and like are related to the self, others may not develop such schemas. As with other self-related schemas, we expect that differences in BESC are associated with differences in brand-related cognitions, perceptions, and behaviors.

Other research supports the basic notion of BESC, suggesting that differences exist between consumers with respect to their tendency to engage brands in their self-concepts. For example, important variation has been shown in children and adolescents with respect to the number and nature of self–brand connections (Chaplin and John 2005). Scholars have also found that posting brand references on personal Web sites serves self-extension purposes more for some consumers than for others (Schau and Gilly 2003), and researchers have suggested that people vary in their likelihood to engage in identity building and expression through brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Anecdotal evidence is also suggestive of individual differences regarding consumers’ use of favorite brands for self-development; within loyal segments, some consumers are more likely than others to use brand tattoos as a means of identifying with the brand (Lindstrom 2005).

Our conceptualization of BESC broadens existing perspectives on the link between brands and self-concept. Arguably informative to the development of BESC are self–brand connections (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003) and attachment to possessions (Ball and Tasaki 1992). Although respective measurement scales have been used to demonstrate that consumers form connections to particular brands (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003) or objects (Ball and Tasaki 1992), important distinctions exist between BESC and each of these constructs. First, BESC is a generalized tendency to include brands as a part of the self-concept, whereas previous research has assessed connection with a specific brand. For example, the self–brand connection scale (Escalas 2004) measures the strength of the link between the self and a particular brand, while BESC provides a more comprehensive view of the person–brand connection by accounting for the notion that multiple brands are integrated into a consumer’s self-concept. Second, attachment to possessions taps into the extent to which a specific past, present, or future possession contributes to maintaining consumer self-concept (Ball and Tasaki 1992). As such, the attachment-to-possessions scale is not a useful measure of the general links between self-concept and brands, because it focuses on a specific (not necessarily branded) object. Furthermore, attachment to possessions is a construct anchored in materialism—a paradigm distinct from and broader in scope than BESC (Richins 1994, 2004; Richins and Dawson 1992). Although conceptually related to BESC, materialism is conceptualized as a consumer value, “a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one’s life” (Richins and Dawson 1992, p. 308). Possessions may be unbranded products or services, and the value consumers attach to them may not be self-related. Indeed, Richins (1994) shows that though possessions may serve purposes of self-extension or self-expression, such motivations are seldom the main reasons for valuing a possession.

A primary goal of this article is to demonstrate that consumers indeed vary in their propensity to include important brands in their self-concept. We develop a scale to measure the BESC construct and highlight the value of this individual difference variable to research by demonstrating in a nomological framework that BESC affects important aspects of brand-related consumer attitudes and behavior.

### SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND NOMOLOGICAL VALIDITY

#### Scale Development

Following standard procedures (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), we based item generation on a review of relevant branding and self-concept literature streams, which resulted in an initial pool of 36 scale items intended to capture various aspects of brand engagement with the self. Nine scholars evaluated the content validity of each item with respect to our definition of BESC, which resulted in a modified set of 32 items. We administered these items to an undergraduate student sample (N = 430). Item purification using conventional factor analytical iterations resulted in a final BESC scale comprised of eight items anchored by “strongly disagree” (1) and “strongly agree” (7) (see Table 1). Reliability of the BESC scale met conventional standards of internal consistency (α = .94) and intertemporal reliability (ranging between .62 and .78). Details of scale development and psychometric properties appear in the Web Appendix (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrfeb09).

#### Nomological Validity

Although various conceptualizations of self-extension are proposed in the literature, of relevance to the current work is research in psychology that focuses on the social aspects of the self and the extent to which the self-concept is construed with regard to other people. Of two basic approaches to such self-construal, the first, broader approach views the self to be construed around others at a general level (e.g., others in society), giving rise to constructs such as independent versus interdependent self-construal (Singelis 1994) and collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). The second, more focused view holds the self to be construed around a tighter network of other people, including those who are particularly important, such as close friends and/or relatives (Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000; Cross and Madson 1997), and is represented by the construct of relational-interdependent self-construal (RISC; Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000). Overall, we expect weak linkages between BESC and social aspects of the self because brands are not people and consumers do not typically view human beings and brands in the same ways (Aaker 1997; Yoon et al. 2006). Nevertheless, BESC bears some structural similarity to RISC in that both con-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>SCALE ITEMS USED TO MEASURE BESC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I have a special bond with the brands that I like.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Part of me is defined by important brands in my life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I can identify with important brands in my life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My favorite brands are an important indication of who I am.</td>
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</table>
Structures construe the self-concept through personally important entities (people in the case of RISC and brands in the case of BESC). Therefore, we expect a stronger positive association between BESC and RISC than with the broader views of self-construal.

Given that brands are an important dimension of many goods in most societies, we also examine the links between BESC and the value consumers attach to material possessions. As we mentioned previously, BESC is related to, but distinct from, materialism because possessions may or may not be branded and not all consumers may value the self-enhancing role of possessions. Still, recent research indicates a relationship between the two constructs because materialism may be an antecedent to self-brand connections in that materialists can use brands to reduce their feelings of uncertainty in the marketplace (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009). Thus, we expect a positive relationship between BESC and measures of consumer materialism (e.g., Richins 2004). In contrast, we expect that BESC is distinctive from global assessments of the self and overall well-being. Indeed, whether consumers construe their self-concept in terms of brands or some other dimension (e.g., important others), both high- and low-BESC consumers may have clear, positive views of themselves and similarly positive views of life in general. Therefore, we do not predict a relationship between BESC and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al. 1996), general self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965), or satisfaction with life (Diener et al. 1985).

We administered scales that measure BESC and the previously detailed constructs on seven-point scales to four independent undergraduate student samples in exchange for course credit. We also sought additional evidence of BESC’s validity by testing whether the scale is exempt from potential sources of response bias, including social desirable responding (Paulhus 1998) and gender bias (Lindsay and Widiger 1995). Details of the samples and scales collected with each sample appear in the Web Appendix (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrfeb09). We report bivariate correlations between BESC and the other measured constructs in Table 2. Overall, correlation coefficients support the hypothesized relationships. In general, links between BESC and measures of social aspects of the self are weak. Brand engagement in self-concept is unrelated to global assessments of self-concept and well-being captured by general self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and satisfaction with life. Nevertheless, as expected, we observe a significant, positive correlation between BESC and RISC. There is no evidence that BESC suffers from response bias in terms of social desirability and gendered response. Given the correlation between BESC and material values (r = .42), we conducted confirmatory factor analyses to assess discriminant validity between the two constructs (for details, see the Web Appendix at http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrfeb09). The results of these analyses confirm that the BESC and material values scales measure distinct theoretical constructs. This distinction is further examined in terms of predictive validity in one of the validation studies reported subsequently.

**OVERVIEW OF VALIDATION STUDIES**

Our studies validate BESC from various theoretically relevant perspectives. For BESC to be a potentially valuable construct in marketing research, it should affect consumer market behavior in some important respects. If brand engagement indeed captures a unique dimension of the self, this distinctive consumer trait should affect major steps of the typical consumer decision process toward brands, including memory, information processing, preferences, and longer-term market behavior (Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel 2005). A summary overview of our studies from this perspective appears in Table 3.

Study 1 provides direct evidence regarding the underlying premise of BESC—namely, that favorite brands are differentially related to the self—by showing that self-brand associations in memory are stronger for people who are higher (versus lower) in BESC. Study 2 then explores the relationships among BESC, brand choices, and subsequent memory of branded possessions. This study finds that BESC predicts recall of brand names associated with material possessions. Study 3 investigates attention to brand stimuli by showing that BESC can predict consumers’ brand perceptions on the basis of incidental brand exposure in an everyday consumption situation. The influence of BESC on consumer product preferences is explored in Study 4, in which BESC’s influence on product attitudes is dependent on brand attitudes and the presence (or absence) of a brand logo. Brand loyalty in the context of new product introductions is the focus of the final studies and is explored in terms of price (Study 5a) and time insensitivity (Study 5b).

**STUDY 1: BESC AND SELF–BRAND ASSOCIATIONS IN CONSUMER MEMORY**

Increased levels of BESC should result in a greater propensity to include favorite brands as part of the self-concept and, in turn, higher levels of prominence for those brands in memory. Research has shown that the way people view themselves affects how they organize information in memory (e.g., Cross, Morris, and Gore 2002; Greenwald et al. 2002; Markus 1977). Greenwald and Farnham (2000) demonstrate that self-reported gender identity was characterized by weaker/stronger associations between words

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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct Measures</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>r²</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RISC (Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000)</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>.152*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent self-construal (Singelis 1994)</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependent self-construal (Singelis 1994)</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992)</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-concept clarity (Campbell et al. 1996)</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965)</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with life (Diener et al. 1985)</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material values (Richins 2004)</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>.420**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-deception (Paulhus 1998)</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management (Paulhus 1998)</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Bem sex-role inventory: masculinity (Brems and Johnson 1990)</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Bem sex-role inventory: femininity (Brems and Johnson 1990)</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>.146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.
** p < .01.
* r² represents correlation with BESC.
describing the self and words related to masculine/feminine identity. For example, people describing themselves as masculine cognitively associated more quickly with self-related masculine words than feminine words. Similarly, Cross, Morris, and Gore (2002) study cognitive structures associated with the extent to which people include important others in their self-concepts; they find that people who were higher in RISC had memory structures organized around tighter networks of relational concepts connected to the self than those who were lower in RISC. Taken together, this research suggests that differences in self-view lead to distinctive knowledge structures, such that personally relevant objects and evaluations are more uniquely associated with self-descriptive items in memory than objects and evaluations that are less personally relevant. We apply this rationale to BESC and self–brand cognitions. If BESC represents a dimension of consumer self-concept that meaningfully affects brand knowledge, higher levels of BESC should lead to knowledge structures that reflect tighter and more distinctive associations between favorite brands and the self.

We tested this proposition with the most accepted method used to measure relative associative strength in memory—the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). The IAT is a computerized sorting task based on response competition timing. It is based on the rationale that if Concepts A and B are strongly associated in memory, words representing those concepts will be sorted more quickly into a common category “A + B” than into a category combining A or B with an irrelevant concept. For example, people describing themselves as more masculine than feminine would associate self-related words more quickly with words representing male than with words representing female (Greenwald and Farnham 2000). In this example, the so-called compatible task of the IAT would be the sorting of words into the categories of self-or-male and other-or-female, whereas the incompatible task would correspond to the sorting into self-or-female and other-or-male. Relative association strength is reflected by the IAT effect, which is calculated as the difference between mean response times for the incompatible and the compatible tasks. Thus, people describing themselves as more masculine than feminine would produce a positive IAT effect; they would more easily associate self-related words with masculine than feminine items, and they would more easily associate masculine items with self-related words than with words connoting other people.

The IAT can provide unique insight into the links between BESC and brand knowledge. Higher levels of BESC should result in brand knowledge that is more distinctively organized around the self, such that favorite brands are more distinctively related to the self than least favorite brands. Specifically, increasing levels of BESC should be characterized by favorite brands having closer links with the self (as measured by self-related words, such as “me,” “I,” and “my”) than with an unspecified other (as measured by words such as “them,” “they,” and “theirs”). We also expect that as the level of BESC increases, self-related words will be more easily associated with a person’s most favored brand names than associations with their least favored brand names.

**Method**

One hundred sixteen undergraduate students participated in exchange for extra credit. Three weeks before the main study, each participant completed the BESC scale embedded in a larger, unrelated survey. When participants arrived at the laboratory (six at a time), they were seated at a computer and asked to complete an IAT (using Inquisit 2.0), featuring most favorite brands/least favorite brands and self/other as target concepts. Because BESC is defined as a person’s tendency to incorporate his or her own favorite brands into the self-concept, we implemented an idio- graphic IAT (Greenwald and Farnham 2000), in which participants initially entered their five most and five least favorite brand names, which then served as brand stimuli in the IAT. Participants were instructed that they would be taking part in categorization tasks and that they needed to complete the tasks as fast as they could while making as few mistakes as possible. Two learning blocks and four test blocks, each consisting of 20 responses, followed the instructions.
In the learning block, participants learned response keys ("e" and "i") and the stimuli associated with the concepts of self ("I," "me," "my," "mine," and "self"), other ("they," "them," "their," "theirs," and "other"), and most and least favorite brands (self-identified). In the first block, words representing the concept of self or other appeared randomly, one at a time, in the middle of the screen. Each time a word appeared, participants pressed the “e” key if it was a self word and the “i” key if it was an other word. In case of a mistake, an “X” appeared on the screen, and the participant needed to hit the other response key. The second block was the learning phase for the self-entered least favorite brands and most favorite brands. The third block was practice for the compatible task, which combined self−most favorite brands on response key “e” and other−least favorite brands on response key “i”. The fourth block was the actual compatible task block. The fifth block was practice for the incompatible task combining self−least favorite brands on response key “e” and other−most favorite brands on response key “i”. The final block was the actual incompatible task block. We randomized order of presentation of the compatible and incompatible blocks. We saved response latencies in milliseconds for compatible and incompatible blocks and then transformed them following conventional practice (see Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). We computed means of log-transformed response times separately for the compatible and incompatible tasks. For each participant, the difference of means between the incompatible and the compatible tasks served as a measure of the individual self−brand IAT effect.

Results and Discussion

Ten participants did not follow instructions regarding the brand name-entering task (e.g., blanks instead of brand names), resulting in N = 106. Globally, participant responses to the BESC scale (α = .93) reflected an average level of BESC situated above the scale midpoint (M = 4.27; SD = 1.22; t(105) = 2.33, p < .05). Accordingly, we observed an overall positive IAT effect, suggesting that, in general, participants associated their favorite brands with themselves more so than their least favorite brands and that they associated their favorite brands more with themselves than with an unspecified other (M = .27; t(105) = 13.95, p < .01). Importantly, and as we hypothesized, participants’ self-reported BESC scores were positively correlated with their IAT scores (r = .30, p < .01). Thus, increasing levels of BESC were characterized by stronger links between the self and favorite brands, by weaker associations between the self and least favorite brands, and by weaker associations between favorite brands and an unspecified other.

The results of Study 1 strongly support our conceptualization by showing that BESC affects the nature of consumer associative memory in terms of how favorite brand names are related to the self. When consumers think of themselves, their favorite brands are more accessible than their least favorite brands, and they perceive stronger associations between themselves and their favorite brands than between their favorite brands and an unspecified other. Study 1 shows that this tendency increases with higher levels of BESC. Overall, these findings support the conclusion that higher (versus lower) levels of BESC are characterized by relatively closer and more clearly defined memory ties between favorite brand names and the self.

STUDY 2: BESC AND BRANDED POSSESSIONS IN CONSUMER PANTRIES

Although Study 1 supported our expectations, it investigated self−brand associations without reference to concrete consumption patterns. The relevance of the BESC scale to consumer research can be further strengthened by showing that the construct meaningfully affects consumer memory for branded consumer possessions. Incorporating important brands into the self-concept implies that consumers characterized by a stronger (versus weaker) BESC should engage in behaviors that actively create and enhance self-extension through brands. A means of extending the self through objects is acquisition of possessions through purchases, gifts, heritage, and so forth (Belk 1988). To some extent, many brands materialize in tangible products, so a straightforward way to enhance BESC would be through favorite brand product acquisition. For example, if Nike, Canon, and Gillette are important brands for a high-BESC consumer, this consumer is likely to include these brands in his or her self-concept by purchasing them and by suggesting to others that he or she would prefer to receive these brands as gifts. Nevertheless, because most retail products are identifiable branded products, low-BESC consumers may also possess branded items that a high-BESC consumer is likely to possess. Thus, consumers varying in BESC may have comparable pantries in terms of numbers and types of brands they contain. We propose that if brand importance is positively related to BESC, higher levels of BESC will be associated with greater awareness and recall of branded possessions. This proposition is consistent with Keller’s (1993) model that identifies brand recall as an important aspect of customer brand-based equity. We designed Study 2 to test this proposition that the salience of brand names of material possessions increases positively with BESC by investigating consumer recall regarding the presence of branded possessions in their respective personal pantries.

An additional goal of Study 2 was to further establish the discriminant validity of BESC relative to materialism in terms of predicting brand salience effects for material possessions. Investigating this issue in the current context is particularly relevant because an alternative to our hypothesis is that higher levels of BESC do not necessarily lead to better recall for branded possessions. Rather, because higher BESC levels are associated with a stronger degree of materialism, materialists may simply possess more branded products than nonmaterialists. If this alternative hypothesis were supported, BESC would not be predictive of salience regarding branded possessions. In this case, an association between BESC and brand salience could be spurious and would disappear when we control for materialism.

Method

Study 2 focuses on specific types of products within consumer pantries to limit within-sample variation regarding the scope of material possessions. Participants included undergraduate and MBA students from a business school characterized by year-round, on-campus accommodations. Participation was voluntary and required that the participant have a permanent room on campus. The study was presented as research focused on students’ current belongings in their dorm room across a variety of product categories. A total of 56 students completed an initial survey containing the BESC and material values scales, after which they
signed up for a laboratory session scheduled two weeks later. In this session, participants completed a second survey in which they were asked to “take a moment to think about the personal belongings you currently have with you in your room on campus.” They were then asked to focus on items they possessed (including computer/electronics, clothing, home appliances, cosmetics/hygiene, food, and drinks) and to write down the brand names of those items. They were then asked to think of all other items in any other product category other than the previous categories and to report the number of brands remembered. The last three questions pertained to the perceived difficulty of the survey; they were assessed on scales ranging from 1 to 7 (“easy/difficult,” “simple/complicated,” and “done quickly/done slowly”); we examined the average of these items ($\alpha = .74$) to determine whether the task was differentially difficult for lower (versus higher) BESC participants to complete.

Results and Discussion

Perceived survey difficulty was unrelated to BESC scores ($r = .14$, $p = .32$). Total brands possessed were a summation of the number of brands reported in the seven categories ($M = 30.84$, $SD = 11.16$); this total was significantly related to BESC, such that higher BESC scores were associated with a greater number of reported brands possessed ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). This result is consistent with our hypothesis that people at higher levels of BESC would recall more branded products from their personal pantries than those at lower levels of the construct.

As we expected, the BESC and material values scales were significantly correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .01$). Discriminant validity between these two constructs needs to show not only that BESC is a better predictor of the number of brands in possession but also that BESC is predictive of the number of brands beyond any effect attributable to material values. The materialism scale was not correlated with the number of brands reported ($r = .15$, $p = .28$). Importantly, the partial correlation between BESC and the number of brands reported remained significant after we controlled for material values ($r = .36$, $p < .01$).

These results indicate that BESC is a meaningful predictor of the extent to which consumers recall currently owned brands. Study 2 provides further evidence of discriminant validity between BESC and material values. The positive relationship between materialism and BESC indicates that high-BESC consumers may possess more material possessions than low-BESC consumers. However, our findings also indicate that consumers with higher levels of BESC pay increased attention to brands of material possessions, as evidenced by a better recall of the brand names of products they own.

**STUDY 3: BESC, INCIDENTAL BRAND EXPOSURE, AND RECALL**

Studies 1 and 2 showed that higher levels of BESC are associated with distinctive self–brand associations and a stronger likelihood of recalling branded possessions. Next, we examine the potential effect of BESC on consumer responses to brand marketing stimuli. Study 3 tests the basic assertion that consumers with stronger BESC are more likely to attend to brands during incidental exposure to everyday life situations that contain branded goods.

Our conceptualization of BESC suggests that high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers are more likely to incorporate brands into their self-concepts through specific actions. Basic information processing holds that the first step in such a process is brand perception—that is, when consumers perceive incoming brand stimuli. In subsequent search for their favorite brands, high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers should be more likely to consider any new brand information (i.e., selectively attending to branded goods) because such information may be perceived as more diagnostic regarding favorite brands. Thus, even incidental exposure to brand information for high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers should result in better recall of that information. Study 3 tests this proposition in the common setting of encountering and deriving impressions with regard to unknown others.

When first encountering unknown others, people attend to various pieces of information (including facial features, body dimensions, and clothing) to make categorizations and form first impressions (Fiske and Neuberg 1990). At similar levels of information processing, we propose that higher levels of BESC lead to increased attention to brand-related information associated with others. For example, people with high (versus low) BESC should pay more attention to and better recall brand names of clothing worn by people they encounter for the first time. Brands seen in such settings may or may not be the perceiver’s favorite brands and therefore may either positively or negatively affect overall first impressions of the person associated with the brands.

**Method**

Forty-two undergraduate students participated in this lab study in exchange for course credit. We measured BESC several weeks before the main study ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.16$). The main study was disguised as research about photograph-based impression formation (i.e., to “better understand how you form impressions of people on the basis of viewing photographs”). Three photos featured one female and three male students in casual attire at a picnic (pictures are available from the authors on request). Each model wore some combination of branded polo shirts, T-shirts, shorts, pants, or sneakers. We selected stimuli from photos taken specifically for this study with the goal of having brand names and logos visibly, but not too obviously, featured on the six identifiable brands of clothing (Adidas, American Eagle, Nike, Polo Ralph Lauren, Puma, and Quiksilver). After viewing each picture for 20 seconds, participants evaluated people in the photos on a series of seven-point items regarding first impressions (“dislikable/likable,” “incompetent/competent,” and “unhappy/happy”; $\alpha = .82$) and overall attitudes (“bad/good,” “unpleasant/pleasant,” “negative/positive”; $\alpha = .91$). Next, participants listed thoughts used to form their impressions, with the number of thoughts used as a measure of participants’ depth of processing. Participants then reported recalled clothing brands. To conclude, they were asked if they were familiar with any of the people in the photographs.

**Results and Discussion**

Overall, participants reported above-scale midpoints for impressions ($M = 5.28$, $SD = .84$) and attitudes ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.15$) regarding people in the photos (none were
familiar with those in the photos). Level of BESC did not affect these overall impressions ($r = .10, p = .53$) or attitudes ($r = .10, p = .55$). In addition, level of BESC did not affect participants’ depth of information processing ($r = .03, p = .78$). As we hypothesized, higher levels of BESC were associated with more brand names recalled ($r = .43, p < .01$). Thus, our results suggest a shift in attention to brand-related aspects of the pictures based on viewers’ levels of BESC, independently of their level of information processing.

We hypothesized that higher (versus lower) levels of BESC would lead to more attention in incidental exposure of not only favorite brands but also other brands. To enable the processing of new stimuli regarding their favorite brands, high-BESC consumers need to pay greater attention to all brand-related stimuli than low-BESC consumers. Study 3 supports this assertion by showing that higher levels of BESC are associated with increased recall of incidental brand stimuli.

**STUDY 4: BESC AND ATTITUDES TOWARD OVERTLY BRANDED PRODUCTS**

Study 3 showed that BESC affects consumer attention to incidental brand exposure. Study 4 further investigates the differential effect of BESC on consumers’ responses to brand stimuli in the context of evaluating branded products. Although many approaches of informing consumers about the branded nature of goods exist, manufacturers most often feature a brand name, logo, or other symbol on their offerings. Study 4 examines how BESC affects consumer responses to these brand identifications. Consider how widely the visibility of brand logos varies across manufacturers of clothing or how a single manufacturer may vary the way the brand is identified across or within product lines. For example, the size and visibility of the Ralph Lauren pony changes within the same line of clothing from modest to very large. Similarly, the name Boss sometimes appears on that company’s offerings, and sometimes it does not appear at all. Variation in brand identification occurs for different reasons, including the notion that overtly branded products are particularly appealing to certain market segments. These customers not only have favorable attitudes toward the brand but are also willing to “advertise” for the brand by using overtly branded goods. Study 4 investigates whether such branding strategies are more appropriate for consumers with positive brand attitudes and higher (versus lower) levels of BESC.

A brand’s customer base likely comprises different segments of people who share the common characteristic of favorable brand attitudes. Several individual differences may account for the varying preference for products from favored brands that are overtly branded. Brand engagement in self-concept is one individual difference variable that is likely to moderate the link between brand attitude and attitude toward an overtly branded product. High-BESC consumers are likely to integrate brands toward which they hold favorable attitudes into their self-concepts. For these consumers, featuring a visible name or logo on products for a favorite brand is more likely to serve as an expression of personal identity. For low-BESC consumers with favorable brand attitudes, however, overtly expressing brand identification is less important because they are less likely to include brands in general in their self-concept. Thus, for consumers with favorable brand attitudes, higher levels of BESC will be associated with more positive attitudes toward overtly branded products than less conspicuously branded products. However, consistent with our conceptualization of BESC as a propensity to include favorite brands in the self-concept, we do not expect such a differential effect of BESC on attitudes toward more or less conspicuously branded products for consumers with unfavorable brand attitudes. Thus, we propose that global brand attitudes moderate the relationship among BESC, brand visibility, and product preferences.

**Method**

We assessed BESC for 153 undergraduate students, who received partial course credit one month before the experiment ($\alpha = .92; M = 4.19, SD = 1.21$). We randomly assigned participants to two conditions (brand visibility: brand logo presence versus absence for two clothing products). Participants received a booklet that ostensibly constituted a survey regarding the offerings of a sports retailer. Focal products of Ralph Lauren socks and a Nike cap were evaluated along with three filler products. For each item, we provided a photo with information related to brand name, fabric, colors, sizes, and other attributes (e.g., machine washable). Thus, participants in both conditions knew the brand name of all products, but only in the brand-logo-present conditions did the logo appear on the product. After viewing the photo, participants evaluated each product on three seven-point scales (“bad/good,” “worthless/worthwhile,” “useless/useful”; $\alpha = .85$); the average of these items served as an overall product attitude measure. Participants’ attitudes toward the focal brands were the average of two seven-point scales (“bad/good,” “unfavorable/favorable”; $r = .96$).

**Results and Discussion**

Participants reported above-midpoint attitudes toward both Ralph Lauren socks ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.09$) and the Nike cap ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.26$). To test our hypotheses, we estimated multiple linear regression models for each product following Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure. We regressed product attitude on BESC, brand attitude, brand visibility, and all two- and three-way cross-products. Theoretically, we expected a positive, significant three-way interaction. We mean-centered data on all scaled independent variables and modeled brand visibility as a dummy variable ($0 =$ logo absent, and $1 =$ logo present). Regression model results appear in Table 4.

Both regression models produced significant effects that were consistent with our conceptualization of BESC. In both cases, positive brand attitudes led to more positive product attitudes; this effect was qualified by a positive three-way interaction among BESC, brand attitude, and brand visibility. The positive signs of this interaction suggest that if brand attitude is positive and the brand logo is present, higher BESC levels will lead to more favorable product attitudes. To probe this interaction further, we calculated product attitude estimates in the experimental conditions for participants with negative versus positive brand attitudes across low versus high levels of BESC (one standard deviation below and above scale means). As supported
by a regression slope test, low-BESC consumers’ product attitudes remained unaffected by the presence or absence of a Polo brand logo when they had positive brand attitudes (t(152) = –.35, not significant [n.s.]). In contrast, high-BESC consumers who liked the brand had more favorable attitudes toward the socks when the Polo logo was explicitly present than when it was absent (t(152) = 2.13, p < .05). Figure 1, Panel A, graphically illustrates these effects. We found a similar pattern of slope tests for the Nike cap: Low-BESC consumers’ product attitudes remained unaffected by the presence or absence of a Nike logo when they had positive brand attitudes (t(152) = 1.26, n.s.); in contrast, high-BESC consumers who liked the brand had more favorable attitudes toward the cap when the Nike logo was explicitly present than when it was absent (t(152) = 2.99, p < .05).

Overtly branded products of favorite brands (compared with products with no brand markings) arguably bear more meaning for and are more appealing to people who are more likely to engage in self-extension through brands. Study 4’s results support this idea; consumers with higher (versus lower) levels of BESC and more favorable brand attitudes evaluate overtly branded products more positively than products that do not feature visible brand identification.

**STUDY 5: BESC AND PATTERNS OF BRAND LOYALTY**

Our previous studies showed that BESC influences important aspects of consumer brand knowledge, brand perceptions, and brand attitudes. Study 5 investigates whether BESC predicts aspects of brand loyalty. We explore two dimensions of loyalty: price sensitivity regarding new product introductions by a person’s favorite brand (Study 5a) and time sensitivity regarding a delay in a brand’s new product introduction (Study 5b).

Branding literature provides grounds for the assertion that the potential for a brand to play a self-defining role can be viewed as adding to perceptions of brand value, much like a nonattribute component of a brand’s equity (Keller 1993). This additional equity may lead to increased brand loyalty and more inelastic demand (Kapferer 2008; Keller 1998). Thus, we propose that because high-BESC consumers attach greater value to favorite brands than low-BESC consumers, they are more likely to reflect greater brand loyalty. We tested this proposition in two experiments employing a scenario about new product introductions in the DVD player market.

**Study 5a: BESC and Price Insensitivity**

**Method.** This study examined whether high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers would be less sensitive to price increases for their favorite brands. We conducted a pretest to determine price levels for the main study and included 30 undergraduate student participants (who received course credit), who began by reporting perceptions of the DVD player market and reading the following description:

Imagine you have recently read in the newspaper that a new portable DVD technology will soon be available. The new technology features significant improvements in terms of image, sound quality, shock resistance, and overall reliability. It will also make a portable DVD player much lighter and easier to handle. The technology was developed by a group of electronics manufacturers who will all offer products based on the new technology in the near future. Your favorite brand of electronics will also market the product in around three months. Please take a moment to think what the potential prices for these new portable DVD players would be at the major retailers.

Participants then estimated the price for low-, mid-, and high-priced versions of the DVD player (respectively, M = $161, M = $247, and M = $418). Given that new technologies often do not enter the market at a low price, and after consulting DVD player pricing at the time of the study, we chose midpriced ($245) and high-priced ($415) players, consistent with the pretest.

For the main study, 62 participants first completed an ostensibly unrelated marketing survey that included the BESC scale (α = .91; M = 4.34, SD = 1.10). They were then told that they would be participating in another study regarding a “new product being considered for introduction in the marketplace.” We randomly assigned participants to the two pricing conditions in which they read the same product description used in the pretest; the only difference was the last sentence indicating product price: “The anticipated price of the new DVD player offered by your favorite brand is $245 ($415).” Participants then reported their attitudes toward the new product on the same three attitudinal items we used in Study 4 (α = .86). We assessed purchase intentions with the question, “Assuming you wanted to purchase a portable DVD player, what is the probability that you would purchase the described player?” (seven-point scale anchored by “highly improbable” and “highly probable”).

**Results.** We estimated two multiple linear regressions following Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure, with continuous BESC and price level as a dummy variable ($245, D = 0, and $415, D = 1) serving as independent variables. In the first regression, we regressed product attitude on BESC (t(61) = –1.21, n.s.), price (t(61) = –3.27, p < .01), and the BESC × price (t(61) = 2.92, p < .01) cross-product (R² = 0.325).
.20). In the second regression, we regressed purchase intention on BESC (t = –1.49, n.s.), price (t(61) = –2.51, p < .05), and the BESC × price (t(61) = 2.41, p < .05) cross-product (R² = .10). The significant, positive interaction terms in both models indicate that, as we expected, higher levels of BESC are associated with more positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions for the highly priced product. Figure 1, Panel B, graphically illustrates these effects, with product attitude and purchase intention estimates for low- versus high-BESC participants (one standard deviation below and above the mean on BESC) for each of the two price conditions. Slope tests showed that high-BESC participants’ brand attitudes (t(61) = .90, n.s.) and purchase intentions were unchanged, regardless of price condition (t(61) = 1.28, n.s.), while low-BESC participants’ attitudes (t(61) = –3.39, p < .01) and purchase intentions (t(61) =
but your favorite brand will not be available for the first year of production. The first brand to market the product is a brand that you have never heard of before. Your favorite brand of electronics will also market the product, which was less familiar. Brand engagement in self-concept should be predictable of brand loyalty in this setting, such that high-BESC consumers would be willing to wait longer for their favorite brand to market a new offering than low-BESC consumers. Conversely, low-BESC (versus high-BESC) consumers would be willing to defer purchase of a currently available competing brand only if the waiting time for their favorite brand is short.

Method. Participants included undergraduate students (N = 126), who received course credit for participation. We administered the BESC scale first as part of an unrelated survey (α = .93; M = 3.63, SD = 1.25). In the main study, we randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions related to waiting time for their favorite brand: one versus three versus six months. We implemented this manipulation in a scenario similar to that of Study 5a, the only difference being the last three sentences, which read as follows: “All brands will market their portable DVD players at around the same price (approximately $400) during the first year of production. The first brand to market the product is a brand that you have never heard of before. Your favorite brand of electronics will also market the product, but your favorite brand will not be available for one [three, six] month(s).” Participants were asked to take their time, imagine themselves in the scenario, and respond to a seven-point scale measuring willingness to wait (1 = “buy the currently available brand now,” and 7 = “wait one [three, or six] month(s) and buy my favorite brand”).

Results. We modeled regression equations involving continuous BESC and the categorical variable of waiting time following Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure. We mean-centered BESC and modeled waiting-time conditions with two dummy variables (one month: D1 = 0, D2 = 0; three months: D1 = 1, D2 = 0; six months: D1 = 0, D2 = 1). We regressed willingness to wait on BESC (t(125) = –1.87, n.s.), D1 (t(125) = –3.33, p < .01), D2 (t(125) = –2.08, p < .05), and the BESC × D1 (t(125) = 3.42, p < .01) and BESC × D2 (t(125) = 2.06, p < .05) cross-products (R² = .17). We graphically illustrate willingness-to-wait estimates for low- versus high-BESC participants (one standard deviation below/above the mean on BESC) in each of the three waiting-time conditions in Figure 1, Panel C. Slope tests showed that compared with the one-month condition, high-BESC participants’ brand attitudes were unchanged whether the waiting time was three (t(88) = .03, n.s.) or six (t(81) = –.06, n.s.) months. However, compared with the one-month condition, low-BESC participants showed lower willingness to wait when waiting time was three (t(88) = –4.81, p < .01) or six (t(81) = –2.86, p < .01) months. (We observed no difference in willingness to wait between the latter two conditions for low-BESC participants [t(80) = 1.59, n.s.].)

The main effect of waiting time suggests that, in general, for an innovative electronics offering, consumers prefer buying a currently available competing brand immediately rather than waiting to buy their favorite brand in the future. Consistent with our hypothesis, however, the significant, positive interactions suggest that higher levels of BESC are associated with greater willingness to wait for the favorite brand of product for both three- and six-month conditions.

Discussion

Study 5 provides evidence for the link between BESC and indicators of brand loyalty. Study 5a showed that higher prices for a new product are less likely to affect attitudes and intentions of high-BESC consumers than of low-BESC consumers. Study 5b found that high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers are willing to wait longer for a new offering from their favorite brand. Thus, the BESC construct meaningfully affects purchase-related intentions regarding consumers’ favorite brands.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates the nature and importance of BESC—a general tendency for some consumers to engage their favorite brands in their self-concept. Overall, our work provides important new insights into the proposition that consumers can and do create links between brands and their self-concepts. The empirical findings indicate that BESC is valuable for the field of marketing because it meaningfully affects brand-related consumer constructs, including brand knowledge, attention, preference, and loyalty. In the subsequent discussion, we outline major areas for investigation in which the BESC construct may prove fruitful and detail implications of BESC for brand managers.

BESC and Branding Research

Brand engagement in self-concept should prove useful in expanding on a variety of brand-related research questions. An area of inquiry is to investigate not only how high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers behave toward their favorite brands but also how they respond to their least favorite brands. Study 1 scratches the surface of this issue by finding that high-BESC consumers not only associate themselves with their favorite brands but also psychologically distance themselves from brands that are not “part of me.” For example, consider a photographer whose most favorite brand is Nikon and least favorite brand is Canon. Provided that this person has a high BESC level, is his or her self-concept more (or less) defined by the favorite brand or the least favorite brand? Further research should investigate this issue by examining the role of most favorite/least favorite brands in defining the self-concept of high-BESC consumers.

Further research could also build on our findings related to incidental brand exposure. In Study 3, we demonstrated that higher BESC levels were associated with differential attention to brands under conditions of incidental exposure. However, the perceptual processes behind this varying
attention need additional investigation. Given that participants’ reported attention level was independent of their level of BESC, we can hypothesize that high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers focused their attention on the brands without extra cognitive effort. In such circumstances, it might be that higher levels of BESC lead to more effortless, automatic attention to brand stimuli in the environment, without the consumer being aware of this process. Additional research could check this assumption, for example, in the context of point-of-purchase materials, for which consumer attention to and visibility of brand stimuli substantially vary. Relatedly, scholars may benefit by investigating the moderating role of BESC on consumer responses to brand placement in entertainment programming, with the expectation that high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers will better remember brands placed in such mediums.

Another area of research pertains to BESC and the study of brand logos and symbols. Study 4 indicates that those loyal consumers may have positive attitudes toward a brand, only high-BESC consumers may fully appreciate and purchase the brand’s products with overt brand identification; for low-BESC consumers, such products are likely to be less attractive. Furthermore, high-BESC consumers are expected to desire other such products from their favorite brands. From a retailing perspective, it could be highly effective to group such branded products in a specific store location or in a special Web site. We would expect that as consumer BESC levels increase, increasing the number of favorite brands displayed would lead to more favorable consumer responses to the store or Web site. Another area of inquiry in this domain pertains to brand extensions and brand alliances. For example, higher levels of BESC may lead to more consumer resistance to new offerings associated with brand identifications other than those used by the favorite brands. Testing these brand strategies is a promising avenue for further research involving the BESC construct.

**BESC and Self-Concept**

Given that the self is integral to BESC, investigations focused on consumer self-concept and BESC merit further research. Extant literature suggests that there are two basic motivations for developing links between a person’s self-concept and objects, including self-consistency (Sirgy 1982) and self-enhancement (Beggan 1992). Research exploring these two basic motivations in the context of BESC could prove insightful. For example, our conceptualization implies that self–brand image congruity should be a more salient aspect of brands for high-BESC (versus low-BESC) consumers. Furthermore, it would likely prove useful to explore alternative manifestations of the self-concept (e.g., future self, ideal self, actual self) in relation to BESC to determine whether brands have more or less of an influence for differing views of the self. Research could also focus on how BESC develops over time and whether there are intergenerational influences regarding this formation (Olsen 1995).

Further research should also explore how BESC is related to other self-constructs shown to correlate with the measure in the current research. For example, our research found positive correlations between BESC and RISC (Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000). The RISC paradigm suggests that people differ in their propensity to include important others in their self-concept, and this differential propensity has the ability to influence various social psychological processes. In particular, high-RISC (versus low-RISC) people are more likely to consider the consequences of their decisions on others, tend to describe themselves and close friends in terms of similar traits and values, and rely less on personal consistency as a source of mental well-being (e.g., Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000; Cross, Gore, and Morris 2003; Cross, Morris, and Gore 2002). Although the object of focus differs for RISC (people) and BESC (brands), the concepts share some structural similarity. By investigating the joint effects of these two constructs in consumer settings, we can further our understanding of the similarities and differences in the ways people view others and brands, a topic of much recent interest (Yoon et al. 2006). In addition, exploring the interaction between BESC and RISC may prove fruitful for understanding the social aspects of brand-related consumer behavior (e.g., development of brand communities).

**Managerial Implications**

Although prior research has focused on a consumer’s singular connection with a specific brand, the global approach of BESC demonstrates a general tendency of some consumers to construe their self-concept in terms of their favorite brands. Our empirical studies illustrate that simply being the favorite brand of a segment does not mean the same thing for all consumers. Indeed, our results show substantial variation among consumers in their level of engagement with their favorite brands. As prior research has suggested (e.g., Schau and Gilly 2003), these findings imply that favorite brands play a self-defining role only for some consumers. Although the use of the BESC measure on a large-scale basis may be impractical, firms may benefit from investigating whether, in addition to other relevant criteria, a brand’s current target segments are lower or higher in BESC and to adapt brand communication strategies accordingly.

Another managerial implication of our research is that brand managers should consider how consumers build connections not only with their own brands but also with competing brands. This consideration is particularly important for segments characterized by high levels of BESC. For example, if a high-BESC consumer does not form a connection with a manager’s brand, that person is likely to form a connection with competing brands in the market (cf. Fournier 1998). Thus, managers should actively consider how to incorporate their brands as part of high-BESC consumers’ self-concepts and how to inhibit competing brands from building such connections.

**CONCLUSION**

In this research, we propose a reliable and valid measure of consumer propensity to include brands as part of the self-concept. The empirical evidence we present substantially develops the nomological network for the construct and shows that BESC affects various brand-related attitudes and behaviors. We are confident that this new construct and the attendant BESC scale will prove valuable to further the understanding of the role of brands in the lives of consumers.
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