

# NOTHING MATTERS MORE TO PEOPLE THAN PEOPLE: BRAND MEANING AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Aaron C. Ahuvia

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose – This paper argues for the following sensitizing proposition. At its core, much of consumer behavior that involves brand meanings is an attempt to influence, or symbolically mark, interpersonal relationships.*

*Methodology/approach – This paper presents a conceptual argument based on a literature review.*

*Findings – First, I argue that our pervasive concern with other people is a basic genetic component of human beings, and discuss some possible evolutionary pressures that may have led to this result. Then I discuss how this pervasive concern influences consumer behavior related to brand meanings. This discussion is structured around two aspects of social relationships: interpersonal closeness and social status. Relationship closeness is discussed with regard to brand communities, gifts, special possessions and brand love, and the often hidden ways that social*

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*relationships permeate everyday consumer behavior. Social status is discussed with reference to materialism. Materialism is sometimes misunderstood as an obsession with physical object, or as occurring when people care more about products than they do about people. In contrast, I argue that materialism is better understood as a style of relating to people.*

*Originality/value – This paper integrates a range of disparate findings in support of a broadly applicable generalization that nothing matters more to people than other people. This generalization can function as a sensitizing proposition that managers and researchers can bear in mind as they seek to interpret and understand how brand meaning influences consumer behavior.*

**Keywords:** Brand meaning; brand love; consumer–brand relationships; evolutionary theory; materialism; social motivation

## INTRODUCTION

*“It’s the simplest lesson of the Internet: it’s the people, stupid. We don’t have computers because we want to interact with machines; we have them because they allow us to communicate more effectively with other people.” (Rushkoff, 2005)*

“Nothing matters more than other people” may seem like an odd title for an article on brand meaning. But during 20 years of talking to people about products and brands, it has become abundantly clear to me that if, as Shakespeare says, “All the world’s a stage,” then the people are the leading characters while the brands, products, and other things in our lives are the props. The props are there to help the characters tell their story. And that story revolves around the relationships between the characters. Brands and products can be incredibly important to consumers; but for most people, most of the time, these things are important to us because of the ways they influence or record our interpersonal relationships. In some cases, the connection to other people is fairly straightforward. For example, when asked, “If you could save just a few objects from a fire in your home, what would they be?” people often answer that they would save treasured photographs of family and friends and family heirlooms. These photos and heirlooms are connected to people in a very straightforward way. In other cases however, to understand the importance of social relationships in

consumer behavior, one needs to look a little bit below the surface. For example, when people say they love Cuisinart, this may look at first to simply be a relationship between a person and a brand. But scratch below the surface even a little bit, and you quickly find that they love Cuisinart because cooking is important to them, which, in turn, is because dinners with family and friends bind people together. Knowing that Cuisinart is loved because it facilitates close interpersonal relationships does not diminish the importance of the brand; it explains its importance. Russell Belk put this succinctly when he said, “*Relationships with objects are never<sup>1</sup> two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)*” (Belk, 1988, p. 147). I refer to this quote frequently, so for convenience I am going to dub it “Belk’s first axiom.”

This paper aims to be of both theoretical and managerial interest, by offering an empirically based sensitizing proposition. Research methods that utilize a sensitizing approach (Denzin, 1970), or create sensitizing propositions (e.g., Ahuvia & Izberk-Bilgin, 2011; Breazeale & Ponder, 2012), are common in qualitative/interpretive research. A sensitizing proposition refers to a theoretical claim that does not necessarily operate in a strict law-like fashion, yet is very frequently true and therefore worth keeping in mind. Aphorisms such as “that which is measured improves” can sometimes qualify as sensitizing propositions, provided they are derived from rigorous research, rather than just summarizing folk wisdom. This paper is an extended explanation of, and argument for, the sensitizing proposition that, with regard to consumer behavior involving brand meanings, *nothing matters more to people than other people*.

This paper is organized as follows. Since the beginning is often the best place to begin, the paper commences with a look at evolution and why a focus on interpersonal relationships is hardwired into the human brain. Next the paper discusses a fundamental distinction between two categories of interpersonal relationships: close relationships such as friendship that are characterized by affection, and social status relationships that are characterized by respect – or the lack thereof. Each of these categories of relationships is then treated in its own section.

The section on close relationships begins briefly with gift-giving and brand communities. The discussion in this section then moves on to explain why close social relationships are often also prominently involved in consumers’ relationships with special possessions and brands they love. This section concludes with a discussion of the often hidden role that these interpersonal relationships play in everyday acts of mundane consumption.

The final major section addresses social status relationships and brand meaning. Specifically, an extended argument is made that materialism is often misunderstood as being focused on goods rather than people, whereas in fact materialism is primarily a particular social style for relating to other people.

### A VERY SOCIAL ANIMAL

The human brain treats good social relationships as a basic need akin to having food, clothing, and shelter (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Just as with other basic needs, people find meeting the need (i.e., socializing) to generally be enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000); and long-term happiness is closely linked to meeting the need by having close friends (Demir, Orthel, & Andelin, 2013) and feeling oneself to be respected by others (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010; Ng & Diener, 2014). Conversely, a failure to meet one's social needs, that is loneliness, is painful (Pieters, 2013).

To understand why interpersonal relationships are fundamental to what it means to be human, look back on what life was like for millions of years, as humans were evolving to become what we are today. Philosophers such as Locke and Hobbes put forward the idea that, in some original "state of nature," people were fundamentally individuals who only lived in groups because they voluntarily agreed to form groups.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, for human beings our "state of nature" is fundamentally to exist as part of a group held together by a web of social relationships. Before the first humans (genus *Homo*) emerged about 2.5 million years ago, our predecessors (australopithecines) already lived in groups. Looking at modern apes can give us useful clues to what life as australopithecines was probably like. Primatologists tell us that the lives of apes are permeated with concerns about mating relationships, friendships, and political alliances, suggesting that this was also probably the case for our ancient ancestors. Hence, when the first human baby was born, it was born into a world permeated with social relationships.

Mechanisms for dealing with social relationships are etched into our very DNA. For example, there is an area of the human brain called the *fusiform face area*,<sup>3</sup> which exists specifically to help people recognize human faces. Norton (2012) provides a striking example in which a patient

undergoing brain surgery to reduce severe epileptic seizures, had mild electrical stimulation applied to different regions of his brain to locate the part of his brain responsible for his seizures. The patient remained awake during this process so he could report the effects of the electrical stimulation to the surgeon. When the surgeon stimulated the fusiform face area region of the patient's brain, the patient reported that the surgeon's "whole face just sort of metamorphosed," giving the patient the impression that the surgeon had "just turned into somebody else." Yet no other parts of the surgeon's body, or any of the other objects in the room, were affected by the electrical stimulation, just the surgeon's face.

Dunbar's social brain hypothesis (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007) states that it is not just this one particular part of our brain that evolved to help us manage social relationships; the neocortex (i.e., *most* of our brain) evolved, in no small part, for this purpose (Haidt, 2012; Hamilton, 2010). The neocortex is the outermost layer of the brain, and makes up roughly 76% of its mass. The neocortex is involved with a wide variety of mental functions, and is the primary location for language, empathy, and even consciousness itself. All mammals, and only mammals, have a neocortex, which allows mammals to experience empathy. Mammals' capacity for empathy is one reason why dogs and cats are much more popular pets than are lizards. It is also interesting to note that, because only mammals have empathy, the metaphor that a person who lacks empathy for others is "cold blooded" actually reflects a scientific reality.

In some ways, having a large neocortex is an evolutionary disadvantage. Large brains require large heads, which cause more infants and mothers to die in childbirth. Our brains also use about 20% of our daily calories, so having a large neocortex means we need to acquire more food each day (Hamilton, 2010). These large neocortices must have provided a big advantage, which more than compensated for the aforementioned disadvantages. What was it?

One straightforward – and mostly incorrect – answer is that bigger brains allowed our ancestors to make better tools. But tools changed very little during the evolutionary periods when the neocortex was growing enormously, and it doesn't explain why some monkey and ape species have much larger brains than others. In contrast, Dunbar finds a very strong relationship between the size of the brain in primate species and the size of typical social groups, such that the larger the neocortex, the larger the group (Dunbar, 1998). Not only does a larger neocortex allow us to handle the social complexity of a larger group, it allows humans to work cooperatively in ways that go far beyond typical pack behavior. For example, the

language skills, conscious deliberation, and empathy that the large neocortex makes possible allowed people working in groups to persuade each other about what the best plan was, and reach agreement (Haidt, 2012).

Having a brain that is built for life in groups helped early humans succeed as teams. Moreover, having a brain that was a little bit more socially tuned in than average, gave individuals within those groups a big survival and reproductive advantage over their less socially aware neighbors:

- Social skills were, and still are, crucial in finding a mate.
- Before the advent of technology, the most powerful and versatile resource for getting things done was a friend.
- Social skills allow people to manage their place within hierarchies, and perhaps advance to a more advantageous position. Today, office politics can have a huge influence on a person's professional success. In earlier human history, these types of relationships had an even bigger impact on a person's life. In a hunter-gatherer society, you saw all the same people "at home" as you did "at work," you could not readily change jobs, nor could you move to a new town. So it was nearly impossible to escape a social relationship gone sour.
- Finally, before the advent of money people lived in what are called gift economies. For example, if your group had an exceptionally good day hunting and managed to kill a mammoth, what would you do with all the meat? If you could sell the meat for money, you could store the money for later use. But money wouldn't be invented for a very long time. Before the advent of money, the best way to store something perishable was in the form of a social relationship. You would give the meat to others who needed it, with the expectation that they would return the gift at another time. A person's success in such a system was strongly influenced by the number and quality of social relationships.

One of the defining characteristics of modern society was the depersonalization and bureaucratization of public institutions (Ahuvia & Izberk-Bilgin, 2011; Weber, 1958). To many readers that may sound like a horrible thing, but what it essentially meant was that all citizens would get (in theory at least) equal treatment by the government, regardless of whose friend or relative they were. Similarly, all customers would pay the same price for any given item at a store, rather than each price being dictated by the customer's personal relationship with the proprietor. As the aphorism "it's not what you know, it's who you know" suggests, social relationships are still incredibly important not just for their intrinsic pleasures but for getting ahead and getting things done in the world (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Yet

today one can easily lose touch with how much more important social relationships were at earlier times in human history. Considering this, it makes sense that social relationships are woven into the fabric of our brains to such an extent that people readily anthropomorphize products (Ahuvia, 2008; Ahuvia & Rauschnabel, 2013; Hart, Jones, & Royne, 2013; Kim & McGill, 2011; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocerto, 2013). And it makes sense that when you scratch below the surface to see how consumers are using brand meanings, it so often turns out that the brand meaning is a tool being used to influence, or reflects the influence of, a social relationship. Because at the end of the day, nothing matters more to people than other people.

## TWO CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the broadest terms, consumers use brand meanings to help achieve two types of relationship goals: managing relationship closeness and maximizing status (for a related point, see Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). An easy way to understand this distinction between closeness and status is to note that when people lack close relationships they feel lonely, but when they lack social status they feel shame or humiliation. Closeness and status have a bi-directional causal relationship to each other. People tend to seek close relationships with others they esteem, and people tend to have a positive bias in their perceptions of the people they are close to.

### *Close Relationships*

Interpersonal closeness is generally a two-way, reciprocal, “relational” (Ahuvia & Rauschnabel, 2013; Marston, Hecht, & Roberts, 1987) phenomenon. Unrequited love and similar types of “one-way” close interpersonal relationships do occur, but they are relatively infrequent and are considered normatively problematic, that is, a malady that should be remedied. Contrary to the cliché that “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” closeness in a relationship requires ongoing inputs of time and energy, from all participants if it is to be maintained (Mende, Bolton, & Bitner, 2013). Because creating and maintaining a high degree of closeness in a relationship takes time and energy it is costly, and people need to be selective about with whom they form close relationships. Therefore, people create portfolios of relationships at different levels of closeness (see Fig. 1) – a few

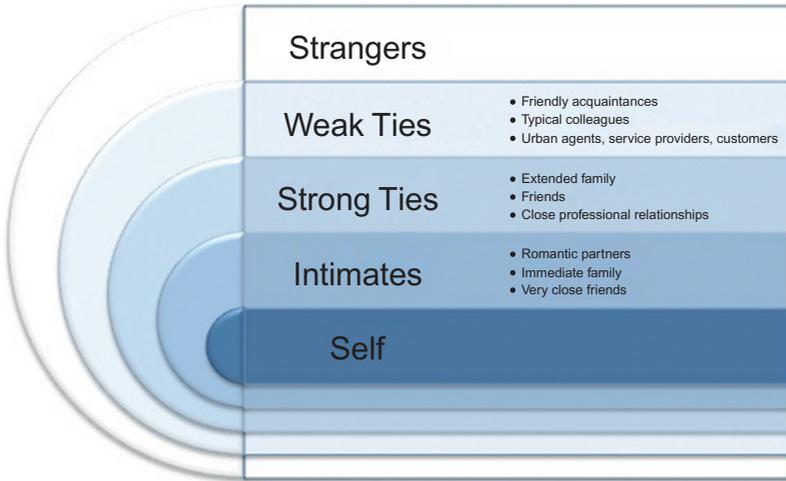


Fig. 1. Degrees of Relationship Closeness.

intimate relationships, a slightly larger number of strong ties such as typical friendships, and a larger number still of weak ties such as friendly acquaintances and what Adelman (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987) calls urban agents, which are usually service providers like hairdressers or bartenders with whom people have ongoing friendly relationships (Mende et al., 2013). Finally, at the outermost ring, are billions of complete strangers. When I talk about people using brand meanings to *manage* the closeness of their relationships, what I mean is that people try to create a good portfolio of relationships, with the right people being at the right level of closeness. Although this often involves deepening the closeness of a relationship, it could just as well involve creating more distance in some relationships (Marcoux, 2009; Zhou & Gao, 2008).

### *Status Relationships*

By *status* I simply mean having high regard for, strong respect for, or positive attitudes toward a person. There are two major differences between status and closeness, which I will discuss here. The first difference has to do with the role of reciprocity. As mentioned above, close relationships are by their nature generally reciprocal. So if Person 1 wants a very close

relationship with Person 2, but Person 2 doesn't reciprocate that desire, problems ensue. Status relationships, especially those based on respect, can sometimes also have a reciprocal aspect to them (i.e., if Person 1 respects Person 2, Person 2 is likely to also respect person 1). But status doesn't need to be reciprocal. For example, it is very common for millions of fans to idolize a celebrity while the celebrity doesn't even know they exist as individuals. Unlike the case of unrequited love, this situation is not an aberration nor is it generally seen as normatively problematic.

The second core difference between close relationships and status relationships is that if a person neglects a close relationship that relationship will tend to become more distant over time, whereas status has a much longer shelf life. For example, many Americans strongly respect Abraham Lincoln although they think of him only occasionally and put no ongoing energy into maintaining that positive view of him. Therefore if Person 1 wants Person 2 to feel close to her, Person 1 needs to put ongoing energy into the relationship, so maintaining a close relationship is a high-cost activity. This helps explain why people do not seek closeness and intimacy from most relationships. In contrast, once Person 1 has won the esteem of Person 2, there are not high ongoing costs on Person 1 to maintain that esteem. Therefore, while people need to be very picky about whom they become close with, people frequently wish to be esteemed or at least respected by everyone. For example, many people dress in a way that they hope will win at least a little respect from people they encounter, even the passing stranger. And should the possibility of fame actually arise, many people find the prospect of being admired by thousands or even millions of people to be quite alluring. But no one would want to be best friends with hundreds of millions people. In sum, as a general rule, people try to manage relationship closeness but try to maximize social status.

### *A Typology for Substitution Effects, Instrumental Effects, and Materialism*

Table 1 presents a typology of some of the ways that interpersonal relationships influence consumer behavior. Although substitution effects are listed in the table, consistent with Belk's first axiom, I have found them to be rare. In my experience, the main exception to this rule is with regard to entertainment. Close relationships provide many benefits including entertainment. I hypothesize (but have not seen this tested) that people frequently use consumption to directly substitute for the entertainment they might otherwise have received through their friendships. But consumption

**Table 1.** Substitution Effects, Instrumental Effects, and Materialism.

	Person–Thing	Person–Thing–Person
Relationship closeness	<i>Substitution effect:</i> Using consumption to substitute for close interpersonal relationships	<i>Instrumental effect:</i> Using consumption to create or enhance close interpersonal relationships
Esteem and respect	Probably an empty cell, since this cell refers to a person valuing the esteem that objects have for him or her	<i>Materialism:</i> Using consumption to create or enhance esteem or respect from another person

cannot substitute as well for other aspects of a close interpersonal relationship. So, while consumption can help solve the problem of boredom, it can't really solve the problem of loneliness.<sup>4</sup>

## BRAND MEANING AND RELATIONSHIP CLOSENESS

This section begins with a brief discussion of brand communities and gifts, as these are among the most obvious instances in which close relationships influence consumer behavior. The discussion then moves through compensatory consumption, brand love, and special/favorite possessions, before finally arriving at the often unnoticed social motives behind mundane consumption and consumer–brand relationships.

### *Brand Communities and Gifts*

Brand communities are one of the most straightforward instances where brand meaning facilitates interpersonal closeness at a variety of levels (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Cova, 1997; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009) by connecting “consumer to brand, and consumer to consumer” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418). Although the term “brand community” brings to mind large amorphous groups, brand communities can also be much smaller and more intimate cliques of friends (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Morandin, Bagozzi, & Bergami, 2013). Thus, desire to create closer interpersonal relationships often motivates people to become community members (Ahuvia & Rauschnabel, 2013; Muntinga,

Moorman, & Smit, 2011). In brand communities relationship ties with other community members and with the brand can form a mutually reinforcing cycle (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). That is, as friendships with other brand community members become stronger this also reinforces the relationship between the consumer and the brand, which then reinforces the relationships with other people in the brand community, and so on. Beyond the dyadic friendships fostered by brand communities, they also provide their members with a more diffuse sense of belonging to a group that is not just the sum of the individual relationships within that group (Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi, & Morandin, 2012; Cova, 1997).

Another common way that brand meaning is employed to manage the closeness of interpersonal relationships is through gifts (Belk, 1996; Belk & Coon, 1993; Giesler, 2006; Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989; Lowrey, Otnes, & Ruth, 2004; Marcoux, 2009; Mauss, 1925; Sherry, 1983; Sherry & McGrath, 1989; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). Gifts are an example of what Ahuvia and Rauschnabel (2013) call *relationship markers*, which also include photos, souvenirs, “our song,” “our favorite restaurant,” and other things that symbolically mark a social relationship. When someone gives a gift, it becomes an extension of his or her identity. Therefore, “... this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is (an extension of) a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself ... while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (Mauss, 1925, p. 10). Belk and Coon (1993) found gifts are often valued for their symbolic meaning regarding what they say about the relationship. This type of gifting can co-exist with a selfless altruistic desire to make the recipient happy. But Belk and Coon (1993) noted that these relationship defining gifts often also have a self-serving element because the giver is trying to define the relationship in a way that it will meet his or her needs. Brand meaning can play an important role in that process; just consider the way a gift of Godiva chocolates sends a more romantic message about the relationship than does a gift of Hershey’s chocolates.

### *Special/Favorite Possessions and Brand Love*

Some early research in which the pervasiveness of interpersonal relationships in consumer behavior became apparent was the literature on special/favorite possessions (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989; Kleine & Baker, 2004;

Mehta & Belk, 1991; Richins, 1994; Schultz, Kleine, & Kernan, 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988) and product enthusiasm (Bloch, 1986; Bloch & Richins, 1983), that was a direct predecessor to the literature on brand love (see Ahuvia, 1992 for some transitional work). The primary research paradigm in these literatures involved depth interviews with consumers about their favorite or “special” possessions. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), which was based on Rochberg-Halton’s dissertation, was an early and highly influential study of this kind. Findings from this study are typical of work done in this area, and stressed the way these favorite objects were often used to construct the person’s identity, and to mark close interpersonal relationships.

One would expect that the reasons given for the special attraction of Visual Art objects would pertain to their beauty, originality, aesthetic value, or the artist’s skills; in short, with the intrinsic qualities of the picture. Yet this was rarely the case. Only 16% of the time were any aesthetic characteristics of the picture mentioned, and an additional 10% of the reasons dealt with what we coded as Style, or any decorative, fashion, or design aspect of an object ... (I)n fact, pictures were the objects most often mentioned (as representing non-kin relationships), suggesting that they are a main symbol of friendship. (p. 65)

Again, as in the case with paintings, the most surprising thing is how seldom aesthetic qualities of sculptures are ever mentioned. There is no reference to plastic art as the arena in which ... Michelangelo, and Rodin wrought their great masterpieces, a hallowed craft to be approached with reverence and a refined sensitivity .... As with most other objects, sculptures frequently stand for family relationships. (p. 77)

A later cross cultural study by Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found remarkably similar results in their American sample. They reported that when the American respondents talked about favorite objects that were artworks “they seldom did so because of the object’s aesthetic value. Rather, Southwest Americans often indicated that art or aesthetic objects were selected because they serve as reminders of an experience or person” (p. 538). Interestingly, this American sample was compared to “peasants living in three villages in the Zinder province of the Niger Republic” (p. 534). The Nigerian respondents were not always able to name a favorite object, and tended to have very functional utilitarian relationships with the objects in their lives, for example being much more likely to care about their favorite possession because of its high cash value if it was sold. However, some Nigerians did list art objects as favorite possessions. And in those cases they were relatively more likely to mention the object’s aesthetic value and much less likely to value it as a symbolic connection to another person. Perhaps then, the strong tendency to value products

because they symbolize and help consumers manage close personal relationships is a particular characteristic of consumer societies. Examples in which tribal societies use objects to manage the closeness of interpersonal relationships certainly exist (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996), but may be more limited to ritual or specially designated objects. This is not to suggest that interpersonal relationships are less important outside of consumer societies, but rather, that in non-consumer cultures, interpersonal relationships are not frequently mediated through products.

The previous examples focused on art objects, but these findings are consistent across a wide range of product categories. As Wallendorf and Arnould (1988, p. 542) conclude about favorite objects of all kinds:

Among Southwest Americans, affective memories of personal experiences or the person who made the item for the owner are often symbolized. This form of favorite object attachment is associated with stronger liking for the object than is object characteristic-based attachment.... Thus, favorite objects most often serve as symbols of, rather than replacements for, close interpersonal relationships.

This research on special or favorite possessions led to work on brands and possessions people love (Ahuvia, 1992, 1993; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). Ask people why they love something, and they will almost invariably begin by listing that thing's many virtues: loved foods are delicious and healthy, a loved table saw is incredibly precise, loved clothing makes the person feel beautiful and was a great bargain, etc. It is not surprising then that thinking something is great (i.e., positive attitude valance in Batra et al., 2012) is one important component of brand love.

However, when it comes to brand love, not all of the virtues people list about a product or brand are created equal. When collecting qualitative data on brand love, one useful approach is to first ask respondents for examples of things they love, and then ask if they *really* love that item or if they are just using the word love loosely? Similarly, one can also ask them to rank two or more things they love based on how much they love them or the extent to which they are good examples of love, and then have them think out loud as they perform this ranking task. Answering these questions requires respondents to use their tacit knowledge about love and thus allows them to talk about aspects of love that would otherwise have remained unspoken. When answering these questions respondents often zero in on two types of benefits that are of critical importance for brand love: (1) the brand helps define their identity and (2) the brand helps connect them to other people (Ahuvia, 1993). And because the important

people in our lives are usually also important parts of our identity, these two types of benefits often overlap each other.

Why these two benefits? *Love relationships are deep, significant, and meaningful experiences.* So products, brands, and other things that feel profoundly important to people, are more likely to be loved. It is very rare for people to have deep and profound feelings directly about products and brands in and of themselves. In contrast, it is very common for people to have deep and profound feelings about their sense of identity, and their close social relationships. Therefore, *to the extent that products and brands are seen as deeply meaningful to people, it is usually because people have mentally connected them to important social relationships or other important sources of personal identity* (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). These mental associations allow the brands and products to bask in the reflected glory of these meaningful interpersonal relationships. This, I believe, is why Belk's first axiom holds true more strongly for things people love, than it does for products that consumers have a simpler, more utilitarian relationship with.

A case study from Ahuvia (1993, pp. 92–93) provides an interesting example of how close social relationships are particularly tied in to brand love (although in this instance, the product was handmade and therefore not branded, I use the term “brand love” broadly to include this type of situation). The data comes from an interview in “Josh’s” home.

Josh did not have particularly strong attachments to objects. This fact was revealed in two particularly telling sections of his interview. In one, he was asked if he ever used the phrase “I love X” in regards to anything other than people. He assured me that he did, but that he didn't *really* love any of these things; all he meant was that X was of the highest quality. He then gave me the example of a stunning wooden crib with hand-done decorative inlay that he had built for his baby daughter. My initial reaction upon seeing the crib was to be a little taken aback that an amateur woodworker could produce something so nice, especially with regard to the inlaid decorative patterns. I was also a bit surprised that he could have made such a beautiful crib for his daughter and yet not feel that he loved it?

A short time later, my surprise turned to confusion. I asked him “if the crib were transformed into a person, who would it become?” I expected that any personification of a crib would describe a nurturing caretaker for his baby daughter. But he answered that the crib would be a female James Bond. Its hobbies? “Backgammon, polo, gambling, I don't know, the crib that gambled its life away.” This answer struck me as so odd that my initial reaction was to wonder if he was joking. But later in the interview I gained an insight into his relationship with the crib that allowed these comments to make sense. I had expected him to focus on the crib as a caretaker for his baby, but he was focused entirely on the formal aesthetic properties of the object. From that perspective, given the clean elegant lines of the crib's design and the black diamond-shaped

inlaid border, its personification as a smooth, classy, high-living sophisticate made sense. His relationship to the crib was primarily person-thing, quite separate from his relationship to his baby daughter. And that's why he didn't love it. Because he did not see the crib enmeshed with his relationship to his daughter, the crib lacked the emotional significance needed to qualify as love.

My theory about why he didn't love the crib gained some additional support later that evening when his wife got home. She had joined us in the living room, which was filled with art. Her husband was telling me about some of the objects in the room. When I asked him where some of the objects had come from, he could not remember. His wife then proceeded to tell me in detail about the histories of all the objects in the room, even the ones that had been gifts from his friends before they had met. From what turned into a fairly extended conversation, it became clear that she was the keeper of the relationships in the family. Just as with the crib, he didn't relate to the art at any level aside from its formal aesthetics, to the point where he couldn't even remember who gave him what gifts.

A recurring finding in this research was that for an object to be loved it must appeal to the respondent on multiple levels. Just being beautiful isn't enough if the object lacks strong personal meanings. In this case Josh had stripped all objects of any personal significance: they were just 'stuff'. Hence it made sense that he would also not love any of them.

Beyond supportive findings for these claims in research on brand love (Ahuvia, 1993; Batra et al., 2012), support can also be seen in the earlier work on favorite possessions. Schultz et al. (1989) compared consumers' "favorite possessions – the items you cherish the most," with the consumers' "least favorite possessions – the items you would not mind parting with" (p. 362). Among the favorite possessions, 49.5% served to connect the consumer to another person, whereas this was true for *none* of the least favorite possessions. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988, p. 538) found similar results and provided the same explanation for these results as I have suggested for brand love, mainly that symbolic "representation of personal connections in favorite objects appears to enhance people's liking of the object as it takes on deeper meaning."

### *Social Motives in Mundane Consumption and Consumer–Brand Relationships*

The influence of close interpersonal relationships on consumer behavior is strongest for products that consumers love or cherish, but it is not limited to those situations. The desire to manage interpersonal relationships also shows up in a lot of consumer behavior involving products that are not particularly special, what I'll call mundane products. However, the extent

to which social relationships guide consumer behavior for mundane products is not always obvious, even to the consumers themselves. Often these social motives underlie and implicitly structure consumer choices and behaviors, so they may not be the first motives that come to mind when consumers explain their choices to researchers. One way of getting around this problem is through depth interviews, often including projective questions, as was common practice in the favorite objects literature. However, long-term ethnographies in which the researcher spends a significant amount of time observing the consumer's behavior, as well as talking with them, allow for even greater insight (Belk et al., 1989; Sherry & McGrath, 1989).

In their classic book based on anthropological ethnographic research, Douglas and Isherwood (1996/1979) argue that beyond meeting basic subsistence needs, consumption is fundamentally about defining social relationships. These social relationships include hierarchical relationships based on differing social status as well as more intimate close relationships. They see consumption as often including ritual elements, and they write that "consumption rituals are the normal marks of friendship. The patterned flow of consumption goods would show a map of social integration" (p. xxii).

Miller (1998), based on extensive ethnographic research in England, provides another landmark study. He writes that in "analyzing shopping, we have to appreciate the degree to which objects are an integral part of the process by which relationships are formed and maintained" (Miller, 1998, p. 51). The following description of a shopping trip is worth quoting at length, because the way social relationships influence this mundane product choice are really revealed in the details of the narrative.

Susan had planned to take me on a more "typical" shopping trip with her own two children, but as it turned out we had company in the form of two of her brother's ... children .... The trip would be dominated by Susan's self-appointed task of buying clothes for one of the visitors — sixteen-year-old Joanna. Susan had decided that she might be best placed to intervene within the different desires and demands of her relatives. The two visitors had recently been staying with Susan's mother, who had complained to Susan regarding Joanna's clothes. These were castigated as being either too "ethnic" or too revealing (short skirts or see-through shirts). Susan could see trouble ahead, as they were all going to be together for a family holiday in Italy. Susan was also concerned that Joanna should have some clothing that would not attract too much attention from Italian men, who she assumed were more predatory than English men. On the other hand, she did not see herself as particularly prurient and felt that there was little point buying clothing without some attention to her niece's sense of fashion. If the latter didn't approve the garment, it probably wouldn't be worn anyway. Joanna herself was not especially clothes conscious for a sixteen-year-old girl. To go shopping she wore a midlength, black, fairly unpretentious dress.

(Susan) came up with the idea of bicycling shorts as sufficiently fashionable and sexy to please her niece while from her point of view safer than a short summer dress or skirt. The top, however, was more of a problem. We were looking for a white blouse, but these seemed to vary between teenage shops that sold ones too much like crop tops and the rather dowdy blouses found in older women's clothes shops. We found a blouse with "tails" intended to be tied together at the front, which looked suitable for a holiday, but the material was of poor quality and the size was wrong. Later we considered several others including one with shoulder pads but rejected them on various grounds. After half a dozen more shops we found another shirt designed to be knotted around the front, and made of better material, the right size, and on sale. Although she did not particularly like the buttons on the sleeves, Joanna was as happy with this as was Susan. In this case the result of a concerted effort has probably been a success. The choices made will hopefully prevent the development of those tensions that threatened to arise from various family members' fears of the effects of a sixteen year old's sexuality on a family holiday in Italy.

Imagine that it was a week or two after the shopping trip and Susan was responding to a questionnaire that asked why she had chosen that blouse. In all likelihood she might have answered something like "I liked the way it looked, the fabric was a good material, and it was on sale." All of which would be true, yet would completely miss the way her concerns about social relationships influenced her final choice. Yes, Susan liked the look of the blouse she chose, but why did she like it? We can see from the ethnographic description how Susan balanced the concerns and views of several different people, and that this shaped her idea of the kind of blouse she was looking for, that is, what she would like the look of. Unfortunately for researchers, most consumers are terrible at explaining their taste, that is, explaining why they liked the way something looked, sounded, etc. usually because they don't consciously know. In this example we saw how, at least in part, taste is "a process in the creation of relationships — that is, the choice of Joanna's blouse is constructed in the space between her own, her Aunt's, and her grandmother's ideas" (Miller, 1998, p. 21).

Being so concerned with how interpersonal relationships influence shopping, it is understandable for Miller to also address consumer—brand relationships. Miller (1998, p. 46) writes that a

very common perspective ... has arisen in the last few years in marketing research, based mainly on the work of Fournier and her research into American women's relationships to brands (Fournier, 1998). It has become quite fashionable in marketing to talk about people having relationships to brands much as they do to people. So people are seen in marketing as betraying a long-term loyalty to one brand and going out for a "one-night stand" with a competing brand. On the basis of my ethnography, I would suggest that most of this discussion is misguided. Relationships to brands certainly matter, but they are important because of the way they express and mediate the relationship to other people that is the foundation of most shopping.

I share Miller's observations that "Relationships to brands certainly matter" and that, nonetheless, these consumer–brand relationships are very frequently subordinate to "relationship(s) to other people that (are) the foundation of most shopping." However, from my reading of Fournier's work, I strongly suspect she would agree with this as well. Miller cites Fournier (1998). That paper reported three case studies, and in each case dissected in detail how the consumer–brand relationships emerged from a larger system of interpersonal relationships. This strong link between consumer–brand relationships and interpersonal relationships is a basic result that I have seen time and time again in my own work as well (Ahuvia, 2005; Ahuvia & Rauschnabel, 2013).

It may seem at first that the very idea of a consumer–brand relationship is inherently a person–thing affair, but this is not the case. Consumer–brand relationships are somewhat analogous to a clique of friends that get together regularly, only in this case the clique includes a brand or product. The various dyads in that clique have relationships with each other, but many of these dyadic relationships get their power from the existence of the larger clique. A recent study by Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia (2009) on brand personality is germane here. Swaminathan et al. (2009) found that just as people are attracted to others who are similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), consumers are attracted to brands when the brand's personality matches their own (Aaker, 1997; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). This is a good example of a consumer–brand relationship, that is, the same criteria for choosing an interpersonal relationship is being used to choose a product. Yet Swaminathan et al. (2009) also found that this is *only true for products that are consumed publicly*. So these consumer–brand relationships at first look to be person–thing relationships, but turns out in the end to be person–thing–person.

## **BRAND MEANING AND SOCIAL STATUS: MATERIALISM AS A WAY OF RELATING TO PEOPLE**

The desire for social status has been a widely studied topic at least since Veblen (1965/1899), and a general overview of this research is beyond the scope of this paper. I will instead focus on one type of status consumption – materialism – because it is sometimes misunderstood in two ways: first, as being about the physicality of objects or second, as occurring when

people care about things rather than people. Quite to the contrary, I argue here that at its core, like so much of consumer behavior, *materialism is not about stuff, it is about people* (Hunt, Kernan, & Mitchell, 1996; Pieters, 2013).

### *Materialism and Physical Objects*

The word “materialism” has several meanings. In everyday speech, materialism involves a very strong desire for money and the things money can buy. In philosophy it refers to the belief that only the physical world exists. And in anthropology and archeology, it is associated with “material culture,” which refers to the physical objects produced by a society. As the word “material” is used in philosophy and in the study of material culture, the physicality of something is the defining characteristic of the term; for example, wine is material, a wine tasting class is not. So, one can understand why the philosopher De Botton (2012) would claim that buying a Ferrari is not materialistic, because, as he argues, buying a Ferrari is motivated more by a desire for social status (a non-physical benefit) than it is by the physical properties of the car. De Botton is correct that buying a Ferrari is often status consumption, but this only means it isn’t materialism as the word is used in philosophy or anthropology. De Botton fails to recognize how the root word “mater” is being used when people talk about materialistic consumption. In the common use of the word materialism (the only use I will discuss henceforth), the root “mater” does not derive from the distinction between material and immaterial, but rather from the distinction between worldly versus spiritual. As The American Heritage Dictionary defines it, to be materialistic is to be “worldly, secular, temporal – characteristic of or devoted to the temporal world as opposed to the spiritual world.” This idea can be translated into non-religious psychological language by contrasting base or mundane concerns with elevated or higher order concerns.

In the vernacular use of the word “materialism,” the physicality of something is largely a red herring, a distraction from the main issue at hand. Consider this thought experiment. Person 1 is a sculptor who has chosen a life of financial hardship so that she will have time to devote to her work that symbolically depicts the plight of the homeless. Person 2 is a business-woman. She takes the day off work to enjoy being pampered at an extremely trendy and exclusive spa. She makes a point of letting other people know about this (in ways she deludes herself into thinking are

inconspicuous), so that they will be impressed. Who is more materialistic, the artist or the businesswoman? If the physical nature of something was really the issue in materialism, then the sculptor would be more materialistic than the businesswoman, because the sculptor is creating a large physical object whereas the businesswoman will walk away from her day at the spa without any physical objects. The fact that this conclusion seems incorrect, indicates that there is something amiss with the idea that materialism is fundamentally about the physicality of objects.

The idea that materialism is about the physicality of objects also conflicts with empirical findings. Richins (2013) finds, for instance, that materialists derive the most emotional benefit from products *before* they buy them, when the product is just an idea in their mind (Campbell, 1987); but their happiness declines once they actually purchase the item and it becomes a physical-material part of their lives. Materialists, more so than non-materialists, tend to value publically visible possessions over privately used possessions (Richins, 1994). This public display has a narcissistic aspect, which is why materialism is correlated with narcissism (Lambert & Desmond, 2013). My argument here is parallel to my earlier argument about brand personality (Swaminathan et al., 2009): if materialism was fundamentally about the stuff, why would materialists care if others saw them using it?

Conversely, just as materialists aren't necessarily preoccupied with their possessions, it is quite possible for someone to be non-materialistic, and yet care quite deeply about their stuff. For instance, collectors care a lot about the items in their collection. Yet Belk (1995) found that avid collectors do not score higher on materialism than the average person. Belk and Coon (1993, p. 413) even suggest that "in the intense love that we appear to feel toward certain goods (Ahuvia, 1992; Belk, 1991; Shimp & Madden, 1988) we exhibit a selfless passion that may transcend materialism."

Finally, developmental psychologists have identified a group of people that in early childhood show a preoccupation with objects rather than people (Dawson et al., 2010). But these children aren't materialistic, they are autistic.

All this is not to say that there will be no correlation between materialism and a desire for some types of physical objects rather than experiences (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). Carter and Gilovich (2010) found that people tend to enjoy experiential purchases more than physical goods, in part because there is less of a tendency to engage in invidious comparisons with experiential purchases. But for materialists, invidious

comparisons are an important motivation for purchase, so this fact would lead them to prefer objects like clothing and jewelry over many activities that are less publically visible, and less likely to facilitate social comparison (Alba & Williams, 2013). Nonetheless, recognizing a correlation between materialism and a desire for some types of physical objects is not the same as seeing the physicality of objects as a defining characteristic of materialism.

### *Materialism and the Priority Given to Objects versus People*

The idea that materialism is primarily about the physicality of objects is sometimes linked to another somewhat off-target view, that materialists prioritize things over people. This view is half-right, materialists do tend to neglect their close social relationships (Pieters, 2013; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). For example, materialists are not inclined to share what they own with others (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992), and Kasser (2008, p. 2) notes that, “materialistic values tend to oppose values such as being “helpful” and “loyal,” obtaining “true friendship” and “mature love,” and having close, committed relationships.” What is more, materialism is bad for close relationships in a host of other ways as well (Van Boven et al., 2010). Married materialists tend to be “cool” rather than “warm” in their relationships (Claxton, Murray, & Swinder, 1995). And to perhaps add insult to injury, materialistic people are even seen as boring to talk to, at least about materialistic topics (Van Boven et al., 2010). It should not be surprising then that materialists are relatively less satisfied with their close personal relationships (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003).

We have just seen that materialism is bad for close social relationships, but that doesn't make it less focused on interpersonal relationships more broadly defined. Materialists do care about social relationships, but as compared to less materialistic people, they prioritize status over closeness (see Table 1). Specifically, a materialistic orientation (a) emphasizes the esteem and respect aspect of social relationships by competing for social status and power, and (b) sees money and the things it can buy as primary assets in this competition. I will examine each of these points in turn.

Looking at materialists' general world view, they have relatively strong basic needs for power and control (Zhou & Gao, 2008). In social

relationships materialism is closely associated with a social dominance orientation (Roets, Hiel, & Cornelis, 2006). Materialistic people tend to view their social relationships in competitive and hierarchical ways (Christopher, Morgan, Marek, Keller, & Drummond, 2005), valuing power, mastery and control over others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) more than a benevolent concern for others (Richins, 2004).

This pattern from materialists general world view also holds for consumption. Materialists are more likely to compare their incomes to their co-workers' (Clark & Senik, 2010). When they spend that money, materialists "are especially attuned to the social meanings of goods" (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006, p. 287). As Richins (1994, 2004) found, materialists value purchases that allow them to gain social status rather than facilitate close relationships with others. And materialism goes beyond the desire for a modicum of respect from other people; materialists tend to use goods in ways that they hope will give them a measure of power over others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Duclos, Wan, & Jiang, 2013).

Kasser and colleagues' extensive work on materialism is particularly germane here (summarized in Kasser, 2002). This research comes out of self-determination theory, which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Intrinsic goals are "generally congruent with the psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence" (Grouzet et al., 2005, p. 801) and include, among other things, the desire for close interpersonal relationships. Extrinsic goals correspond to what I've been calling the search for social status and respect from others; often through becoming wealthy, but also by being good looking or famous. Materialism is defined as prioritizing extrinsic goals over intrinsic goals. Therefore, within the self-determination theory stream of materialism research, prioritizing the status aspect of relationships over interpersonal closeness is more than simply associated with materialism, it is a defining feature of materialism.

People can pursue status, fame, and power in a wide variety of ways (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998; Shrum et al., 2014). In a highly religious community, for example, high status might be given to people who are perceived as especially pious. A reasonable argument can be made for calling any form of status seeking "materialism," but I believe doing so would be a mistake. That is because it would broaden the term "materialism" to such an extent that it would become less useful, and it would be very confusing to anyone who only knew the term in its more conventional sense. So, in my view, materialism involves the pursuit of social status using money or the things it can buy (both goods and services).

## CONCLUSION: COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION

There has recently been a good deal of research on how experiences such as being socially rejected (Lee & Shrum, 2012), or conversely, made to feel more socially secure (Clark et al., 2011), influence consumer behavior. When people experience a lack of close interpersonal relationships, they respond in ways that might help them form a close relationship, such as tailoring their spending to fit the preferences of a person they are interacting with (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011), or that demonstrate that they are a desirable relationship partner such as donating money to charity (Lee & Shrum, 2012). But, when people feel their social status is being threatened, they tend to respond materialistically with conspicuous consumption (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Furthermore, this tendency to respond to threats to one's social status with conspicuous consumption is much stronger in materialistic individuals (Dittmar & Bond, 2010). This research offers a good concluding note, as it both reiterates how social relationships permeate consumption, and shows how research in this area is currently moving forward.

## NOTES

1. In an email exchange Belk clarified that the words “never” and “always” are hyperbole, not meant to be taken literally.
2. To be fair to these philosophers, this was more an ontological claim than a historical one. Nonetheless, the history of human development is relevant to assessing how reasonable this individualistic claim is.
3. The fusiform face area is part of a larger area of the brain called the fusiform gyrus, and the scientific literature sometimes uses the term fusiform gyrus synonymously with the fusiform face area.
4. At least for now. But as new technology allows products to become more anthropomorphic, it is possible that in the future products may increasingly substitute for other aspects of interpersonal relationships.

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Aaron C. Ahuvia

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