# Mediation Effect of Self-brand Congruence in Relation Materialism and Brand Engagement in Self-concept (BESC) among Teenagers

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## Abstract

Adolescents - today's Generation Z, are an important consumer group because of the role they play in the modern economy. This study examined whether there is a relationship between materialism and BESC and whether self-brand congruence is a mediator of this relationship in adolescent groups. A total of 316 Polish students aged 13 to 17 years (M = 15.17, SD = 1.51) participated in the study; 50.9% of them were girls. The study found that ideal self-brand congruence is a significant mediator of the correlation between materialism and BESC.

**Keywords:** Teenagers, materialism, brand engagement in self-concept, self-brand congruence

## 1.     Introduction

Recent marketing reports (Gfk, 2018) indicate that teens are spending more and more money and are increasingly influential in choosing many products and services for the entire household. Materialistic lifestyles seem to be an integral part of modern life for teen consumers (Twenge & Kasser, 2013).

During the teenage years, the construction of one's own identity is the most important developmental task (Erikson, 1968). Young consumers use material goods to gain status and prestige in a group (Banerjee & Dittmar 2008), as communicators of self-image, but also as a way to compensate for deficiencies in that self-image (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981; Chaplin et al., 2014) and to protect their self-image (Munichor & Steinhart, 2016).

To date, there has been much research indicating links between materialism and the role of material possessions in constructing self-concept (Lee et al., 2020; Razmus et al., 2020), but little is known about this topic among adolescents. This study aims to use a mediation model to examine the relationship between materialism and BESC among Generation Z adolescents.

## 2.     Conceptual framework

### 2.1  Materialism

Materialism plays a very important role in explaining consumer behavior, as evidenced by the growing literature on materialism in marketing and economic psychology (Goldsmith et al., 2012). Although materialism has been one of the most discussed issues since the 1990s (Sabah, 2017), there is relatively little research on its role in adolescents' lives (e.g., Chaplin & John, 2007).

The two main approaches to materialism point to an understanding of materialism (1) as a personality trait, the importance a consumer attaches to material possessions (Belk, 1984, p.291) and as (2) a value system in which possessions are at the centre of everything (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Materialism helps consumers form and maintain their own identity (Shrum et al., 2014).

Adolescent materialism refers to desiring, acquiring, and possessing material things and money to acquire these things and desiring in the future such professions that will provide continuous opportunity to buy what one desires (Goldberg et al., 2003).

Previous research on adolescents has shown that materialism is a predictor of compulsive buying behavior (Islam et al., 2017) and leads to excessive and impulsive purchases (Islam et al., 2017). In addition, peer-rejected adolescents have higher levels of materialism than group-accepted peers (Jiang et al., 2015), and adolescents whose self-concept is particularly unstable are particularly prone to obtain and consume items to impress others (Chaplin & John, 2007).

### 2.2  Brand engagement in self-concept

Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) is a corresponding term to materialism. Materialism refers to attributing undue importance to the possession of material goods (Belk, 1984; Flynn et al., 2016; Richins & Dawson, 1992) and is a broader, global construct. BESC, on the other hand, refers to a consumer's tendency to express themselves through identification with a brand (Sprott et al., 2009). BESC represents consumers along a continuum, where the lowest end is made up of consumers who do not perceive brands as important elements of self-concept, and the upper end is made up of consumers who identify with brands and have special ties to them.

Brand engagement in self-concept is of great interest to both researchers and practitioners. (Razmus et al., 2017). However, in a broader context, BESC is a niche area that describes the general tendency of consumers to use brands to shape their identity and express it to others (Ismail et al., 2020). To date, however, not much is known about how BESC is related to specific market behaviors (Flynn et al., 2016). BESC is significantly correlated among both

genders with attitudes toward shopping (Goldsmith et al., 2012), better brand name recognition, attention to brands, and purchase of expensive goods associated with the preferred brand (Sprott et al., 2009). The inclusion of important brands in one's self-concept stems from the desire to build and own an appropriate image (Razmus et al., 2017).

### 2.3  Self-brand congruence

Congruence theory is one of the most cited theories explaining consumer behavior (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al, 2012; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, 1982, 2018). Research on it, appeared as early as the 1960s (Dolich, 1969) and concerned the degree of congruence between self-perceptions and brand user or brand image.

Most works state that congruence is a measure of the cognitive link between the product/service/user image and the consumer's self-image (Sirgy, 1982). The literature distinguishes between the ideal self-brand congruence or the real self-brand congruence (Sirgy, 1986). This relationship motivates the consumer to purchase the brand because it indicates to the consumer the value that can be derived from the purchase and from the use of the brand (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). Moreover, it is assumed that as the congruence between the mentioned constructs increases, the consumer's positive attitude towards the brand and the effectiveness of the persuasive messages directed to him/her increases (Johar & Sirgy, 1991), which is one of the indirect objectives of the marketing strategies implemented.

Congruence with brand user image is a strong predictor of brand attitude and brand loyalty across products (e.g., Bosnjak et al., 2011; Sirgy et al., 1997). In addition, consumers prefer brands that fit well with their self-concept. Incompatibility with their self-concept causes dissonance and psychological discomfort that threatens a person's self-concept (Sirgy, 1986).

Eventually, this paper seeks to empirically support the conceptual relations between materialism, BESC and self-brand congruence (SBC) in the next section as hypothesized below:

H1: Materialism is positively related to self-brand congruence.

H2: Materialism has is positively related to BESC.

H3: Self-brand congruence is positively related to BESC.

H4: Self-brand congruence mediates the relationship of materialism and BESC.

### 2.4  Proposed model

Overall, the hypotheses are based on the materialism literature and assume that higher materialism will lead to higher self-brand congruence. In other words, materialistic

adolescents will be more likely to identify their self with a brand user and building yourself through brands.

In sum, we develop a mediation model in which the self-image congruence through brands partially mediates the relationship between materialism and BESC (Figure 1).
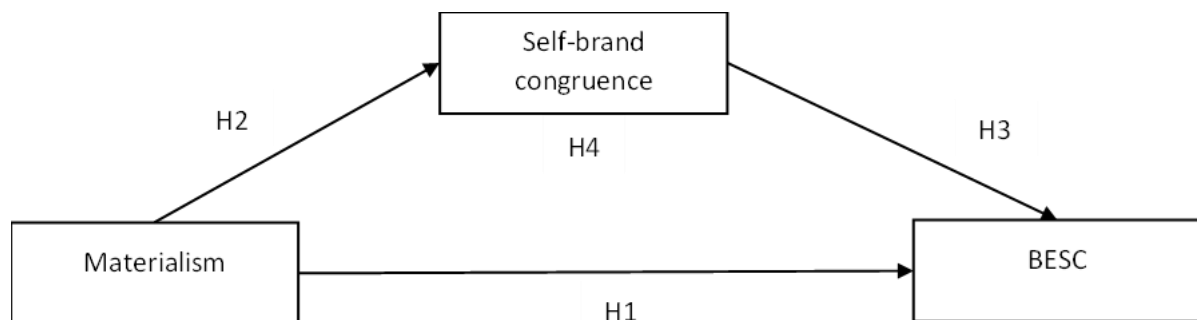


*Figure 1. A mediation model of the relationship between materialism and BESC*

## 3.　　Method

### 3.1　Sample

A total of 316 students aged 13 to 17 years ($M$ = 15.17, $SD$ = 1.51) participated in the study; 50.9% of them were girls. 79.1% of the students received pocket money ($Me$= 30 PLN).

### 3.2　Procedure

First, ethical approval was obtained to conduct the study. Only those who received explicit parental consent were allowed to participate in the study. Next, we asked adolescents to provide informed consent. Data were collected through in-person interviews. Respondents were trained by the researcher in the use of the Lickert scale before they responded. The response scale was printed separately in A4 format and the respondent had it in front of them during the survey. Participants did not receive any compensation and were informed that their anonymity was assured. The procedure of the study was the same as that used by Gorbaniuk et al. (2021).

The study began by selecting 1 product category (athletic shoes, cell phones, candy bars, cars, and sodas), then a list of brands from the selected category was presented. The adolescent selected brands that he or she was familiar with from the list. Then, from these brands, the researcher selected one, presented a slide with the brand's products, and asked the respondent to imagine a typical user of that brand. In the next step, the respondent was asked to directly rate his/her similarity to the typical brand user on the Sirgy et al. (1997) scale,

rating on a scale of 1 to 7. Next, the respondents completed a scale regarding BESC and a materialism scale. Finally, participants answered questions on demographics: age, gender, family economic situation, and pocket money.

### 3.3 Measures

To verify the hypotheses, we used:

1. (10-item Young Materialism Scale from Goldberg et al. (2003), in polish adaptation (Zawadzka & Lewandowska-Walter, 2016). The reliability of the scale in the present study sample was $\alpha = .81$

2. Self-brand congruence Scale adapted from Sirgy et al. (1997), form is prepared by translation of 6-item self-image congruence scale (3 for ideal self, 3 for real self). Cronbach's $\alpha$ internal consistency index is 0.90 and 0.86.

3. BESC (Sprott et al., 2009) in the polish version (Razmus, 2012), which includes 4 items in its shortened version. Cronbach's $\alpha$ reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .87$.

### 3.4 Statistical analyses

To test the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS with mean scores on items relating to materialism, BESC and self-brand congruence (Model 4; Hayes, 2013). The analysis assessed (1) the effect of materialism on BESC (2) the effect of materialism on SBC and (3) the effect of SBC on BESC.

Statistical significance of correlations, direct and indirect effects were assessed using 5000 bootstrap trials to create adjusted confidence intervals(CIs; 95%).

## 4.     Results

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables matrialism, BESC and SBC.

*Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations*

| Veriables | Descriptive statistics (boot 95% CI) | | Pearson's r correlation coefficients (boot 95% CI) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 1  Materialism | 3.73 | 1.02 | - | | |
| | (3.62, 3.84) | (0.94, 1.10) | | | |
| 2  BESC | 4.06 | 1.41 | 0.49** | | |

| | (3.90, 4.21) | (1.32, 1.51) | (.39, .58) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3  SBC ideal | 3.66 | 1.52 | 0.22** | 0.23** | |
| | (3.48, 3.82) | (1.42, 1,61) | (.09, .33) | (.12, .33) | |
| 4  SBC real | 3.70 | 1.45 | 0.21** | 0.18** | 0.70** |
| | (3.53, 3.87) | (1.36, 1.53) | (.09, .33) | (.06, .30) | (.62, .70) |

*\*\* p<0.01*

Inspection of the correlations shows that materialism is positively correlated with BESC (boot 95%CI = [0.39, 0.58]) and positively correlated with SBC ideal (boot 95% CI = [0.09, 0.33]) and SBC real (boot 95% CI = [0.09, 0.33]). The correlation findings also reveal that BESC is significantly correlated with SBC ideal (boot 95% CI = [0.12, 0.33]) and SBC real (boot 95% CI = [0.06, 0.30]).

## 4.2  Mediation effect

The next step was a mediation analysis, in which the bootstrapping mediation effect was tested. Results showed that materialism positively predicted BESC (95% CI = [0.50, 0.77]). Materialism also predicted SBC ideal (95% CI = [0.16, 0.48]) and SBC real (95% CI = [0.15, 0.45]). In turn, SBC ideal positively correlates with BESC (95% CI = [0.01, 0.26]), confirming a mediating effect. In contrast, SBC real does not correlate with BESC (95% CI = [-0.15, 0.12]), which does not confirm a mediating effect for this dimension of congruence. The results of the PROCESS macro are shown in Figure 2.
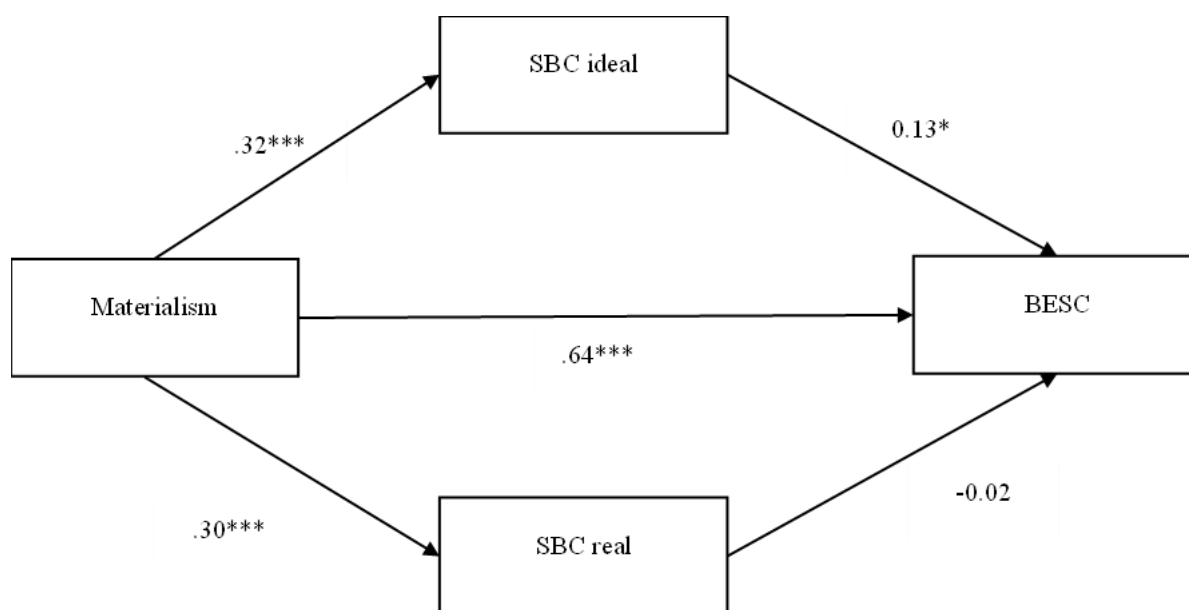


*Figure 2. Mediation model*

*N = 316. Unstandardized coefficients are presented. \*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001*

## 5.   Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between materialism and brand engagement in self-concept among adolescents and to elucidate the potential mechanism of how and when materialism may predict BESC. As expected, results showed a positive correlation between materialism and post-brand self-construction, mediated by the influence of ideal self-brand congruence.

The results showed that materialism positively predicted constructed selves through brands in adolescents, which was consistent with previous research in adult consumers (Flynn et al., 2016; Goldsmith et al, 2012; Sprott et al, 2009). Our research suggests that the more materialistic teenagers are, the higher their tendency to construct themselves through brands. The action of teenagers choosing or using certain brands can be interpreted as working on their identity (Autio et al., 2016). Adolescents are looking for a way to construct their own identity, and brands can participate in this (Sirchuk, 2012).

The finding that materialism predicted BESC through the mediating effect of self-brand congruence was consistent with the assumptions of congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982; 1986), which indicate that if the brand/user image is congruent with the consumer's self, the consumer becomes more committed to the brand. The fact that this effect was only significant for the ideal-self indicates that materialistic adolescents, by identifying congruence with the image of the desired brand user, construct their self-image in this way.

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