Consumers' use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

How do consumers represent their identities on online social media platforms? In this article, we focus on consumers' use of brands on their Facebook pages as subtle cues to represent their selves. Although recent research suggests that consumers present an actual, not an ideal self, our data reveal that veridical presentations of the actual self through brands rarely exist. Furthermore, we contribute to an understanding of how multiple selves interact to inform brand connections. We offer insights into how and why consumers either blend or integrate their actual and ideal selves or choose one of them exclusively when these selves conflict. Additional contributions and future directions in the areas of self, branding, and social media are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have investigated the presentation of the self online since the early days of the internet (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000). One key question of interest in this stream of research has concerned whether people present an accurate version of themselves online, a more idealized version of themselves, or both (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Early studies of online impression formation focused on relatively anonymous online environments, such as chat rooms, bulletin boards, product discussion forums, and gaming websites. These studies generally concluded that, due to the anonymity of these environments, users tend to construct idealized versions of themselves without fear of disapproval and social sanction from those in their off-line social circles (e.g., Bargh et al., 2002; Walther, 1996). For instance, a study of a prominent online gaming site shows that players create virtual, alternate selves who embody aspects of the players' ideal selves (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007).

As the media landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, new online platforms have altered the ways in which people interact with one another. At least 75% of adults who use the internet use social media (Stephen & Galak, 2010; Urstadt, 2008). Social networking sites (SNSs), which fall under the umbrella of social media, have recently become prominent. SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, attract more than 90% of young adults and teens, and represent over a quarter of all internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010).

Consistent with the growing research on human brands (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011; Thomson, 2006), there is a renewed interest in how people present themselves online, especially in the context of these SNSs. A great deal of interest is centered on Facebook, the largest SNS, boasting 640 million members worldwide, with 165 million of these members residing in the United States (Stone, 2010). There are key characteristics of Facebook that distinguish it from other forms of social media, and even from other social networking sites such as Twitter and MySpace. Facebook users are "primarily communicating with people who are already part of their extended social network" (Boyd & Ellison, 2009, p. 210), and these users, or "friends," are all visible within their networks. In other words, Facebook represents a means for individuals to continue their offline relationships and conversations in an online medium. In addition, within each network lies a certain degree of visibility through features including wall posts and public displays of connections. Indeed, Facebook use is shown to be significantly associated with the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Recent research on Facebook examined the conveyed personalities of users' profiles to test the validities of the *idealized virtual identity hypothesis* (that Facebook users' profiles display idealized information that does not reflect their personalities) and the *extended real-life hypothesis* (that Facebook users' profiles display information to communicate their real personalities) (Back et al., 2010). The research concluded that consumers present an actual, but *not* an ideal, version of themselves on this social networking platform. The authors' proposed explanation for this finding that an idealized version

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of the self is not reflected in users' profiles is that creating idealized identities should be hard to accomplish, primarily because "friends provide accountability and subtle feedback on one's profile" (Back et al., 2010, p. 372). In other words, Facebook "friends" might question the validity of information if it does not reflect their perceptions of the person.

With the current research, we aim to build on this literature studying consumers' expressions of self via Facebook to complement and extend these findings. Specifically, we focus on consumers' use of brands as subtle cues to represent their selves. Brand mentions are arguably the most relevant and important aspect of this medium to marketers, and can include "liking" a brand by publicly linking it to one's profile, as well as mentions of brands in other subtle ways, such as through narratives, photographs, and profile activities and interests. While it has been noted that consumers may use brands to identify themselves with specific subcultures and/or identities online (Stern, 2004), we have a limited understanding of what purpose these brand linkages serve in the expression of consumer identities in SNSs. Thus, we aim to shed light on two important questions. First, how do users present their identities *through brands* on Facebook—do they represent the actual self, the ideal self, or both? As a limiting condition to recent research concluding that Facebook profiles reflect actual but not ideal selves, we propose and show that consumers may present *both* actual and ideal versions of themselves through the brands that they publicly associate with on Facebook. Second, and perhaps more importantly, how do consumers use brands to blend their actual and ideal selves when these identities are congruous, or cope when these identities are incongruous? As we will discuss later in more detail, Facebook has a number of characteristics (e.g., its ubiquitous nature, high visibility, direct connection to a sizable and heterogeneous network of known individuals) that provide unique and interesting conditions for investigating the interaction of multiple selves and the incorporation of brands in consumer self-expression.

We aim to make at least three important contributions with this article. First, we respond to a call for further research on identity and brands. Kirmani (2009, p. 274) notes that research is needed "to pursue issues dealing with the intersection of identity and brands" to offer theoretical and substantive insights in this area. According to congruity theory, consumers tend to prefer brands that are congruent with certain aspects of their identities (Sirgy, 1985). However, this literature is relatively silent on how multiple identities interact to inform brand preference. We aim to extend this theory by shedding light not only on how consumers choose brands that are congruent with their selves but *also* how and why consumers publicly link themselves to brands to resolve conflicts engendered by different salient aspects of the self.

Second, we extend the current knowledge on how consumers use brands as cues to represent themselves, in the context of the most well-known and most used social networking platform: Facebook. Whereas most prior research has examined brand-self congruence in the context of offline measures, such as brand perceptions and purchase intent, we examine the ways in which consumers directly and publicly link themselves to a brand to present their selves on a prominent social networking platform. This is important as it has been noted that the particular self that consumers choose to express may be dependent on contextual factors (Schenk & Holman, 1980).

Third, this research builds on the recent literature by providing an improved understanding of consumers' self-presentations on SNSs. To complement recent research showing that Facebook profiles reflect only actual, and not ideal, versions of the self (Back et al., 2010), we show that by using brands as subtle cues, consumers do indeed communicate idealized versions of their selves, and even more so in aggregate than their actual selves. Overall, this research builds on a strong foundation of work employing qualitative methods to explore new media (e.g., Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Winer, 2010).

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. Next, we review the literatures on brands and the self and self-expression with regard to different aspects of the self. Then, we introduce our methodology and findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications for firms and future research directions.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Brands and the self-concept

Self-concept is defined as a person's perception of him or herself (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Importantly, the self consists of multiple aspects, or dimensions (James, 1890; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Although the self-concept is relatively stable over time, the self is also malleable in that it may be influenced by social roles and cues, causing people to behave differently in varying situations. Thus, any of these dimensions can be activated at any time due to a number of factors that may become salient as a function of a situation (Aaker, 1999).

According to self-concept theory, people behave in ways that maintain and enhance their sense of self. One way to do this is through the use of brands (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008, 2011), which are imbued with symbolic meanings that develop as early as middle childhood (Chaplin & John, 2005). Through these meanings, brands can serve as a means for a consumer to express different aspects of his or her self (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Levy, 1959; Torelli, Monga, & Kaikati, 2012). Indeed, the congruence between brand and self-image is shown to be positively related to consumers' evaluations of products (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982). For instance, self-congruity has been shown to significantly influence promotion effectiveness (Close, Krishnen, & LaTour, 2009), quality perceptions of stores in shopping malls (Chebat, Sirgy, & St-James, 2006), and brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). Furthermore, consumers choose brands with appealing personalities to enhance their selves (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009) and may develop more positive self-perceptions in line with the brand's personality even after using a brand for only a brief amount of time (Park & John, 2010).

With the current research, our aim is gain a deeper understanding of how and why consumers choose to link themselves to brands on Facebook. Our first question is: Do consumers link to brands on this platform to reflect their actual selves, their ideal selves, or both? Recent research concluded that only actual, and not ideal, selves are reflected in Facebook profiles (Back et al., 2010). However, that research was conducted in the context of Facebook users' general profiles, which contain more explicit statements about the self, including descriptions of one's activities and behaviors, and not on Facebook users' utilization of brands as more subtle cues about their selves. In the next section, we discuss brands as reflections of self.

2.2. Brands as reflections of actual and ideal selves

While there are numerous conceptualizations of the self, the prominent facets of the self-concept that we focus on here are the actual and ideal selves. Scholars have long debated the relative influence of the actual versus ideal selves on consumers' evaluations of and preferences for branded products (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Landon, 1974). One important aspect of brands is that they can be used by a consumer to express to others their actual (i.e., who they are) and ideal selves (Belk, 1988; Dolich, 1969; Holt, 2002; Landon, 1974), with the ideal self representing either an expansion of self (self-representation; Belk, 1988) or a contraction of self (self-presentation; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; more information on this point will be provided in the findings section).

In the context of Facebook, there is reason to expect that consumers will reflect their actual selves by linking themselves to brands.

Users are linked to the people in their network and they tend to know each other to some degree. As such, users may be less likely to deviate from others' perceptions of themselves on Facebook because "friends" might consequently question the user's authenticity (Back et al., 2010). One reason for using this platform is to keep in touch with friends (Ellison et al., 2007), such that traditional offline relationships are facilitated by this technology in nontraditional ways. Thus, because Facebook friendships may be grounded in offline relationships, social sanctions could result from grossly misrepresenting oneself.

At the same time, there is reason to expect that consumers may also reflect their ideal selves by linking themselves to brands on Facebook. Although Facebook users tend to use this platform to keep in touch with friends, most of these relationships can be characterized as "weak ties" (Ellison et al., 2007; Granovetter, 1973; Trusov et al., 2010) and part of a person's "extended social network" (Boyd & Ellison, 2009, p. 210). Thus, the meaning of "friend" on Facebook does not carry the traditional connotation. Consider that the mean number of Facebook friends is approximately 250 (Walther, Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), whereas the typical number of close relationships offline is approximately 10–20 (Parks, 2007). Consequently, a user's "friends" may not know him very well, making it possible to present a more idealized version of oneself using subtle cues, with a relatively low risk of social sanction. Furthermore, following from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Schenk & Holman, 1980), extant research suggests that consumers' publicly observable behaviors may be driven to a greater extent by their ideal (vs. actual) selves (Alpert & Kamins, 1995; Dolich, 1969; Graeff, 1996; Ross, 1971). Most recently, the findings of Swaminathan et al. (2009) suggest a signaling role of brands in public (vs. private) consumption settings. These authors find that individuals with anxious attachment styles tend to associate themselves with brands with favorable personality characteristics only when the product is consumed in a public setting, where they can manage others' impressions of themselves.

Building on prior research, we expect that many users will connect with a combination of brands on Facebook, representing both their actual and ideal selves. Furthermore, as consumers appear to be especially driven by their ideal selves in public circumstances, and because Facebook enables them to deliberately and *publicly* link themselves to brands, one might expect the ideal to outweigh actual self, regardless of whether the branded product or service is publicly or privately consumed.

2.3. Expressing different aspects of the self

Our second question is as follows: How do users make decisions when expressing multiple selves by linking to brands? As implied in the previous discussion, the self develops not in isolation but through the process of social experience (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Thus, feedback and reactions from others affect the growth of the self, and consumers strive to elicit positive reactions from others. Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-factor model posits that impression management consists of both impression motivation, which is the extent to which the desire to control the self-image that is projected to others is activated, and impression construction, which involves the selection of the appropriate impression to convey to others and how to go about doing so.

As Facebook users are linked to other people whom they know, their desire to control the image projected to others, or impression motivation, tends to be high in this context. Indeed, Facebook use is shown to be significantly associated with the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Linking oneself to brands on Facebook serves as a means of impression construction, which involves determining the type of impression to make on others and how to go about it (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For instance, in linking oneself to a brand, others' perceptions of a brand owner's personality may be affected by carry over from the personality of a brand (Fennis, Pruyn, & Maasland, 2005).

Importantly, however, it is rare that individuals who are constructing impressions will have a single persona that they use in virtually all situations and with virtually all targets (Leary & Allen, 2011). One of the major research programs in consumer culture theory (CCT) focuses on the means by which consumers achieve balance among their multiple selves (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Some of this research focuses on how individuals in a liminal state may generate both positive and negative possible selves and weigh these against one another in a mental balance (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991) or develop addictions as a means of escaping an inauthentic self (Hirschman, 1992).

Most central to our main arguments is research from both the CCT and experimental consumer research literatures demonstrating that individual consumers *tailor their public images to different targets* (i.e., display different selves in different situations) as a means of coping in creating their identities. For instance, Aaker (1999) notes that conflicting personality traits may be present in an individual's self-concept (e.g., sociability and intelligence). To reconcile these traits, an individual may express sociability at a party and express intelligence when focusing on his/her work, which is consistent with Sirgy's contention that the consumption of brands may be strongly related to an individual's self-image in one situation but not in another (Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983). Similarly, James (1890) and Mead (1934) contend that individuals have a separate self (or "me") for each of their social roles.

Building on this theory, research has shown that as they transition from role to role, consumers use varying product cues to signify their occupation of each new role (e.g., political, religious; Fournier, 1998; Solomon, 1983). In some cases, consumers may even use different elements of the same consumption object as a means of representing varying aspects of the self. For instance, it has been suggested that a home's interior décor may reflect the true self (representing family), with the home's exterior representing a different aspect of the self (Belk, 1988). Notably, each of these examples from the literature illustrate that consumers tailor their public images to different targets in an effort to achieve balance among multiple selves (Leary & Allen, 2011; Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997).

There is increasing interest in how individuals reveal multiple identities in the digital space, such as through blogs (Zhao & Belk, 2007) and personal websites (Schau & Gilly, 2003). As will be further elaborated in the findings section, Facebook has a number of distinct properties (e.g., direct connections to multiple audiences) that distinguish it from offline and other online venues. Importantly, these properties increase the likelihood of conflict between the actual and ideal selves of Facebook users who may wish to construct several identities simultaneously. While congruity theory demonstrates that consumers tend to choose brands that are congruent with some aspect of their selves, we aim to shed light on how the congruity (or lack thereof) *between selves* (actual and ideal) affects conspicuous displays of brand preference.

Next, we describe our methodology for studying how consumers use brands on Facebook as reflections of their identities.

3. Method

To investigate how brands are used on Facebook to depict aspects of the self, our study employed multiple methods over a two-year research period. To gain a perspective of action (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988) we utilized observational research, diaries, focus groups, in-depth interviews and electronic journal entries. The researchers observed the activity on 84 volunteer participants' Facebook pages (123 observational sessions lasting 45 min resulting in over 200 pages of notes). All volunteers gave consent to be observed, and volunteers were not "Facebook friends" with the researchers. During the observations, the researchers looked for subtle uses of brands on the

participants' walls and in their photos and narratives. Special attention was given to how participants integrated brands in their interactions with other Facebook users. Table 1 demonstrates how the researchers categorized the brands observed on these Facebook pages. Participants expressed themselves using "brand" cues via various Facebook tools (e.g., profile activities, likes, ordinary routines). The participants were male and female undergraduate college students, ranging in age from 20 to 28. Eighty percent of them were Caucasian, while 10% were African-American, 5% were Asian, and another 5% were of Hispanic descent.

To triangulate across data points (Belk et al., 1988), all 84 of the volunteer participants were asked to keep a consecutive seven-day diary with the goal of identifying brands on their Facebook pages and explaining why particular brands were on their pages, describing the image of each brand, and comparing the brand's image to his/her personality, goals, and aspirations. At the end of the week, participants created two collages depicting the following: brands on their Facebook pages that represent their actual selves (qualities a person feels describe him/her at the present time) and brands on their Facebook pages that represent their ideal selves (an expansion or limitation of their actual selves, see Table 4). The collages were used as projective vehicles to elicit participant commentary during eight focus group sessions with approximately 10–12 participants in each session. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 min. During the focus groups, the participants discussed why they have certain brands on their Facebook

pages and how each brand is related to their self-concepts. Participants discussed brands that represent both their actual and ideal selves. The projective task with their collages engaged participants through story-telling and allowed for more personal and meaningful insights during the focus groups to further elaborate on why and how brands are used to reflect aspects of the self.

The findings from the first phase revealed that consumers use brands on Facebook to represent both their actual and ideal selves. We found evidence of iconic brands (Holt, 2004), relational brands (Fournier, 1998), and mundane brands (Coupland, 2005). In particular, participants were probed to elaborate on their linkages with mundane brands, such as athletic brands (e.g., a university sports team); functional brands (e.g., Gillette); or not-for-profit brands (e.g., the American Red Cross). The most easily identifiable brands were iconic, well-known brands (e.g., Nike, Starbucks). Hence, focus groups began with a discussion of iconic brands and then proceeded to discuss the less obvious brands (from the perspectives of the participants). The mundane brands provided equally insightful data and were typically used to express aspects of the actual self.

In the second phase of our research, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteer graduate students. All of the participants in the study were assured of anonymity. Table 2 provides a list of participants' pseudonyms and a brief description of their backgrounds. The participants were male and female, ranging in age from 22 to 36.

Before the interviews, participants were asked to maintain an electronic journal for two weeks and given instructions to record their use of brands, the number of times they encountered brands (on their own Facebook pages and those of their friends), and their observations of their Facebook friends' uses of brands. Table 2 highlights the most prominent brands recorded in the participants' electronic journals. After the two-week period, interviews were conducted in a private setting with access to a computer (e.g., library, office).

During the interviews, participants were shown a figure demonstrating the actual and ideal selves on opposite ends and were asked to place the brands mentioned in their journals on the figure (to represent more actual, more ideal, or equal). Table 2 demonstrates whether participants felt the majority of brands on their pages were more actual or ideal. The interviewer followed a semi-structured guide beginning with the brands that represent the actual self and then proceeded to discuss the brands that represent the ideal self (see Table 3); however, the interviews were informal in nature and characterized by a conversational quality in which the discussions were largely driven by the participants. The interviews concluded with an analysis of the participant's Facebook page. Each participant logged onto his/her Facebook page and walked the interviewer through his/her page(s) discussing points where brands were present. Participants were asked to elaborate on how they expressed their online identities and how they coped if/when their actual and ideal selves conflicted.

Our data analysis utilized the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991). Our analysis of verbatim interview and focus group transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole strategy in which the researchers aimed to develop a holistic understanding of how brands are used to represent the self. Aided by Atlas software, we used prior theories to guide our analysis of the diaries, focus groups, interviews, journal entries, and observational data. Following Burawoy's (1991) suggestion to utilize existing bodies of literature in search of theories to explain behavior, the data analysis process involved going back and forth between the data and existing theories on actual and ideal selves and, more generally, self-concept.

4. Findings

The findings are organized as follows. First, we will briefly discuss participants' reflections of their actual and ideal selves through self-brand linkages on Facebook. Next, we will review how they view Facebook as a means of communicating identity through brands. Finally,

Table 1
Observational data illustrative of brands displayed on participants' Facebook pages.

Facebook tools	Brand cues used to express the self
Profile activities (22%)	Brands are displayed through all hedonic activities illustrative of fun, adventure, or volunteerism such as golf, tennis, wine class, cooking class, shopping, and participating in fund raisers or mission trips. Brands in this category include: Callaway golf clubs, William Sonoma, Polo, Brooks Brothers, Saks Fifth Avenue, Chanel, and Chateau Margaux, Red Cross, American Cancer Society, and religious brands.
Profile interests (21%)	Brands are displayed through all personal interests and goals such as eating right, exercising, movies, socializing with friends over coffee, and traveling. Brands in this category include: Nabisco 100 calorie snacks, Nike, Star Wars, Starbucks, Whoopsie Daisy Designs, and Hampton Inns.
Likes (24%)	Brands are displayed through the symbolic act of "liking" a brand. Consumers are primarily motivated by the need for expressing a particular style. Facebook Ads work best when their appeal (profile picture) matches the dominant type of self-concept held by the consumer. Brands in this category include: retailers, restaurants, and organizations.
Attitudes displayed in narratives form (5%)	Brands are integrated throughout discussions posted on participants' walls, newsfeeds, and personal messages. Participants who openly promoted or dissuaded brands are highly motivated by expressing their opinions and are appreciative of retail aesthetics and technical innovations. Brands in this category include: retail brands, technology brands, and iconic brands.
Ordinary routines displayed in narrative form (17%)	Brands are expressed through story-telling. Consumers discuss brands and how brands are part of their everyday life. Brands in this category include: Old Spice deodorant, Gillette razors, Allergy Guard hypo-allergenic pillows, and Rembrandt Canker Sore Whitening Mint Toothpaste.
Photos of consumption (11%)	Brands are displayed through the act of consuming the brand. Many of these brands are displayed in Wall posts as "in-the-moment" photos. Brands in this category include: beer brands, branded vacation destinations, University brands, and retail brands.

Table 2
Demographics of interview participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Brands publically viewed on their Facebook page	Self-reported their Facebook brands as more actual or ideal
Jeff	M	28	Red Socks, Nike, Nacoochee Village Tavern and Pizzeria, Great Clips, Slack Auto Parts, local library	A
Callie	F	22	Chanel, Lancome, Serena Williams, Local Newspaper, Menchie's Frozen Yogurt, Five A Day Café, Justin Bieber	I
Donna	F	36	New York Yankees, Hershey, Salty Dog Café, Harry Potter, Publics, Quelf, Red Hot Chili Peppers	A
John	M	29	Audi, Patek Philippe, Barnes and Noble, Adidas, Amazon, Sports Authority	I
Bella	F	22	Starbucks, Easy Bistro and Bar, Shoedazzle.com	I
Chet	M	24	BMW, Georgio Armani, Levi's jeans	I
Amber	F	32	New York City Ballet, Ann Taylor Loft, Lifeway Christian Stores, Rite Aid	A
Deb	F	35	Prada, Guess jeans, Versace, Akif Hakan Celebi Photography, Porterhouse Grill, Chili's Bar and Grill, Red Lobster	I
Alisa	F	26	Ann Taylor Loft, Mad Men, Chick-fil-A, Grumpy's Pizza	I
Derek	M	34	Great Big Bertha golf bag, John Lobb golf shoes, Oakley's Romeo 2 sunglasses	I
Matt	M	30	Brioni, Columbus Blue Jackets, Landon Donovan, Italy, Umbro, Amazon, Chicago's Pizza, Franklin Covey	I
Valarie	F	28	Katie Couric, Pete Sampras, Rick Steves, Clinique makeup, Bob Marley, Keri lotion, Papa John's Pizza Internet Movie Database	A
Sarah	F	22	Food Network, Oprah, The Galaxy Concert Theater, Wholly Cow, Grocery Coupon Network, 4 Walls	I
Jody	M	29	Dogfish Head beer, Human Rights Campaign, Gillette, Anchor White Toothpaste,	A
Emma	F	22	Scrubs, Grey's Anatomy, Coca-Cola, American Cancer Society Relay for Life, March of Dimes, Churches in Action	A
Daniel	M	31	Nintendo, Kappa Total Cereal, Gatorade, Megan Fox, Two and a Half Men, Delta, Groupon, Taco Bell	A
Daisy	F	27	Clinique, Diet Coke, Dasani, YouTube, Twlight, Blue Dragon Thai Food, FAGE Total Greek Yogurt	I
Mark	M	32	KCM, North Face, REI, Jeep, Flixster, Family Guy, South Park, Netflix	I
Eric	M	23	World Wrestling Entertainment, Derek Truck Band, Nike, Notre Dame, Smoken' Joe's BBQ & Blues, Fox News, Texas Holdem	I
Brooke	F	23	Wilsons Leather, Jersey Shore, BP, Naked Juice, Papa John's	I
Shea	F	25	Lil Wayne, Costa Del Mar, Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, Jared, Athleta, Duck Life 3, Nayan Cat	I
Diane	F	31	Atlanta Braves, Lady Gaga, Outback Steakhouse, Domino's Pizza, Jack & Daisy, Disney World	I
Tom	M	24	Armani, Corvette, Usher, Imo's pizza, Swiss Army, Raze	I

we will elaborate on how these Facebook users make decisions in expressing multiple salient identities by linking to brands as cues. We identify conditions that lead to greater actual- or ideal- self-congruity, exclusive ideal, or neither (see Fig. 1). A holistic representation of our findings is visually demonstrated in the conceptual model in Fig. 1. As shown in Fig. 1, participants' situational contexts will influence their motivations in terms of presenting aspects of their actual or ideal selves. As such, participants may experience a decision conflict among various ways of presenting the self. The identity decision is a background for which participants use brands as a means to express aspects of the self.

4.1. Brand linkages to reflect the actual and ideal selves

The self-concept, as suggested earlier, is a multidimensional construct reflecting more than one type of self-perspective (Sirgy, 1985). As prior research has suggested that only one aspect of the self-concept (actual, and *not* ideal) is represented in Facebook profiles (Back et al., 2010), we sought first to examine whether this is also the case specifically for brands, which serve as more subtle cues of identity due to their symbolic meanings. As a limiting condition to prior research, our findings revealed that Facebook fosters expressions of both actual *and* ideal aspects of the self, each of which can be made salient by individual traits and situational factors. We found evidence of users linking to brands that represent the actual self, as well as two subcomponents of the ideal self: ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation (see Table 4).

As noted in Table 4, ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation stem from the actual self, but the three have different motivations in terms of self-expression. When expressing aspects of the actual self, participants typically selected brands that *maintained* the self-concept. As Brooke demonstrates below, Facebook users utilize brands to clarify personality ambiguities and highlight individual characteristics that maintain the self-concept.

> I publicize brands that I like. I want you to know more about me, so I will use brands to tell others things about me and who I am now (Brooke, maintain the self-concept).

When expressing aspects of the ideal self, participants described two distinct motives associated with linking to brands: to enhance the self

and to protect the self. Self-representation refers to an expansion of the self-concept that relates to the many possible selves an individual could be, while self-presentation refers to a purposeful, restrictive version of the actual self, with strategic implications aimed at influencing others' perceptions. The underlying motive for ideal self-representation is self-enhancement, whereas the motive behind ideal self-presentation is protection. Alicke and Sedikides (2009) elucidate the motives underpinning the two concepts by explaining that people tend to exaggerate their virtues (self-enhancement) and minimize their shortcomings (self-protection). The narratives below are examples of ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation.

> One day I want to be involved in research that benefits society as a whole. I want to contribute to something bigger…I can express my desires to others by friending these brands (not for profit brands) on Facebook and I'm able to connect with other people (who also like the brand) who have similar goals…Facebook streamlines my efforts (Emma, ideal self- representation exemplar).

> I really have a reserved personality because I like being alone, reading books, and spending time in the library. But, on Facebook all you see is my social side. If you just looked at my Facebook page, you'd probably think I'm a social butterfly…the brands I associate with are popular brands and all seems like I'm this dynamic, outgoing person (Diane, ideal self- presentation exemplar).

Table 3
Classification of in-depth interview questions.

Guiding research questions used to understand the actual self concept	Guiding research questions used to understand the ideal self concept
1. How do you actually see yourself?	1. How would you like to see yourself?
2. What brands displayed on your Facebook page represent your real or actual self?	2. What brands displayed on your Facebook page would you like to see yourself associated with?
3. How do you think others actually see you?	3. How would you like others to view you?
4. What brands on your Facebook page would your friends use to describe you?	4. What brands would you like for others to use to describe you?

The self-concept is the totality of the consumer's thoughts and feelings toward him or herself.
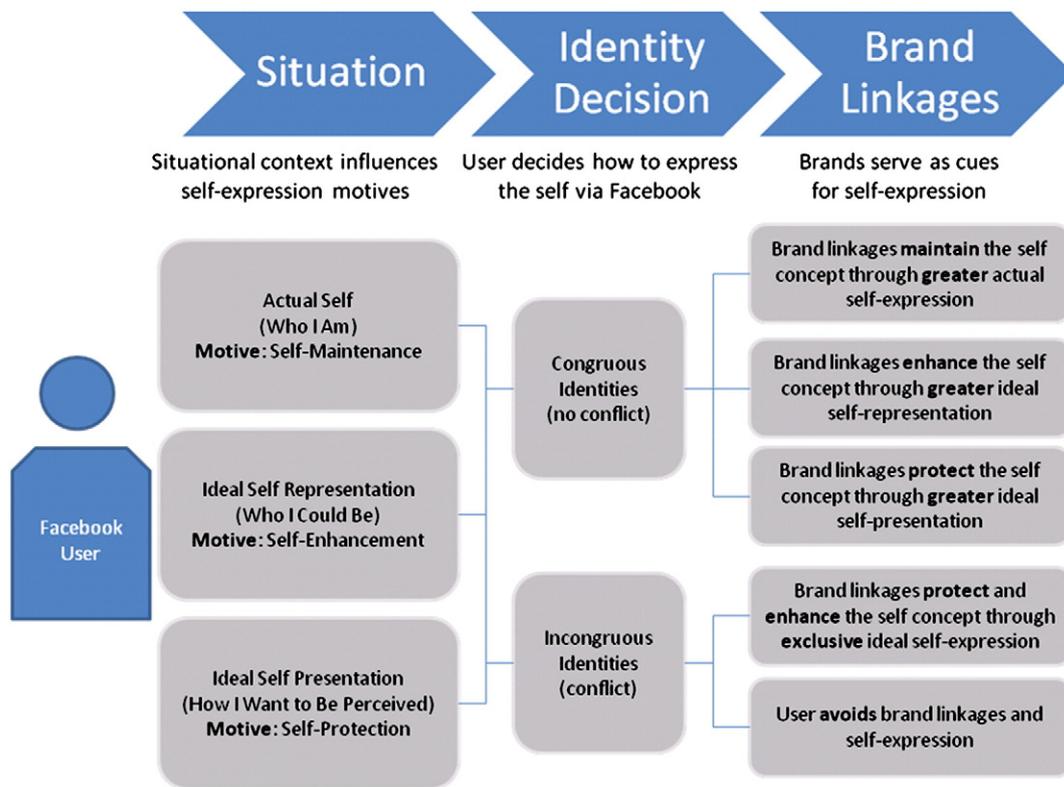
Fig. 1. Self-expression on Facebook.

Emma connects with brands that are associated with social improvements (e.g., the American Cancer Society, Relay for Life, the March of Dimes). In the future, Emma desires to engage in meaningful research to provide functional knowledge that could improve the quality of life for the broader society. She is involved with non-profit brands on her Facebook page, which allows her to connect with others who have similar goals. In addition, Emma wishes to convey an idealized version of herself by signifying to others that she not only wants to support non-profit organizations with her time but also with her talents. Emma's motive for connecting with non-profit brands is to enhance the self-concept, and this represents an expansion of her actual self (the person she could be and wants to become). Turning to the second exemplar, Diane presents an ideal self that is a restriction of her actual self where the underlying motive is to protect the self-concept. Although Diane enjoys socializing with others, she confessed that she prefers being alone. When faced with the option of either spending time at home reading a good book or meeting up with her friends at a restaurant, she derives more enjoyment spending time alone at home. However, she shows the social side of herself and identifies with socially oriented brands (e.g., the Atlanta Braves, Disney World) on Facebook because this is the part of herself that she wants to show others. Diane suggests, "people like social people" and "popular people are not loners;" therefore, she presents a strategically selected self, motivated by public perception (how I want to be perceived). Diane feels that she will be more popular and well-liked if she presents the outgoing

side of herself on Facebook, and this is an attempt to protect her self-concept.

Importantly, Diane and Emma demonstrate distinct motives in relation to expressing the ideal self. Diane aims to *protect* the self, while Emma desires to *enhance* the self. Both are aspects of the ideal self. However, motives associated with the ideal self are in contrast to motives associated with linking to brands that represent the actual self, which serve to *maintain* the self-concept (see Table 4).

4.2. Facebook as a means of communicating identity through brands

Facebook profiles allow for self-expression through brands, which are a subtle but powerful means of non-verbal communication. Our participants are aware of using Facebook for their own purposes in punctiliously managing their self-identities. They discussed the ability to link to brands instantaneously and deliberately on this platform, with this linkage being public and observable by all members of a user's social network. The linkage can be more powerful than offline brand identifiers because brands on Facebook can be continuously showcased using Facebook tools (see Table 1).

If you like a brand just for yourself, then you know you like it and you don't have to remind yourself of that. You want other people to see a brand when you "friend" a brand on Facebook because you want people to characterize you that way. If you don't, then

Table 4
The self concept.

Dimensions of the self	Definition	Relation to the self-concept	Motive for linking to brands
Actual self	The authentic self related to who I am now (who I am)	How I actually see myself	To maintain the self-concept
Ideal self-representation	The aspirationally-defined self related to the many selves a person could be (who I could be)	An expansion of my actual self	To enhance the self-concept
Ideal self-presentation	The strategically-chosen self related to concerns about public perception (how I want to be perceived)	A limitation of my actual self	To protect the self-concept

I don't know why you would click "like" anything or even be on Facebook… brands show your true self and the self you want to be (Tom, M, 24).

As Tom notes, brands can send powerful messages in online social networking sites such as Facebook, and his linkage to brands is more deliberate and perceptible than his offline means of communication. Our participants suggest that they are able to present aspects of their self-concepts, and brands allow them to highlight certain characteristics to the larger network. Tom elaborates on this idea by stating: "if you buy a new shirt with a popular brand, only a few people will take notice of the brand on that given day." However, on Facebook, consumers can publicize brands to the broader network, and the level of visibility is controlled by the individual. For example, the consumer can simply "like" a brand, or the consumer may elevate the visibility by adding brand-related photos and narratives (see Table 1). In addition, the ubiquitous nature of Facebook allows for ongoing visibility and immediate recognition among friends. For instance, when an participant updates or makes changes to his or her profile, other users can check in at any point during the day to view these updates. Facebook allows for a unified awareness among people in a network. Because it is just as easy to "unfriend" a brand as it is to "friend" a brand, users have the autonomy to manage their self-expressions by selecting brands with high self-brand congruity. As such, brands can be used to communicate aspects of the self to the larger network instantaneously.

Importantly, our participants noted that Facebook allows greater opportunity (than offline self-brand expressions, for example) for the simultaneous expression of multiple salient identities. Consequently, this simultaneous expression provides an environment for conflicting identities. As discussed by Shea, users are perplexed when they want to show different aspects of the self to different audiences.

Facebook has its downsides. It is like you are on stage for the masses to see. You can't just be casual about the brands you have. It's like you have to rehearse for a play. What part of myself am I going to show today? (Shea, F, 25)

Shea uses the metaphor of a play. In essence, Facebook is the stage, brands are the props, and the users are the actors. The users must utilize brands to present themselves to their audiences. As Shea explains, Facebook users must consciously and calculatingly consider the person that they want to portray. Actors (users) are easily able to engage their audiences (the network) through the use of props (brands). The specific reflection of the self-concept through brands on Facebook depends precisely on the level of congruity among participants' multiple selves. Next, we will discuss how linking with brands represent aspects of the self.

4.3. Identity decision and brand linkages

Our data revealed that Facebook users often have multiple salient identities and must choose how to present aspects of their actual and ideal selves on a single platform to widespread viewers with whom they are connected in a network. Importantly, these identities could be either congruous or incongruous with one another, depending largely on current goals elicited by situational contexts and individual traits. A high level of congruity means that consumers are able to find harmony between their actual and ideal selves and, thus, present a blending of the two identities on their Facebook profiles. Overall, this congruity led to a subjective blending of the two identities. A high level of incongruity, however, implies an inharmonious relationship between the actual and ideal selves. We first discuss the case of congruity, and its manifestations in terms of greater actual or ideal self-expression through brands. Then, we review incongruity and its related tradeoffs and coping mechanisms: exclusive ideal self-expression or the avoidance of self-expression.

4.4. Congruous actual and ideal selves

When the actual and ideal identities were congruous, participants expressed both their actual and ideal selves through brand linkages. The relative strengths of these selves depended on their relative accessibility; that is, participants described situations when they would want to show more of their actual selves and other times when they would want to show more of their ideal selves. Notice that the situational context influences self-expression. For example, Callie subjectively rates her Facebook identity as 20% actual and 80% ideal (meaning that 20% of the brands on her profile represent her actual self while 80% represent her ideal self), while John rates his Facebook profile as 45% actual and 55% ideal. As described here, both of the participants feel that they show more of their ideal selves, but they selected different proportions to demonstrate their own perceived blending of the two identities through brand linkages. In a follow-up interview, Callie was asked to rate her Facebook profile again, and during the second interview Callie rated her Facebook identity as 40% actual and 60% ideal. Thus, the "liked" brands had changed slightly between the first and the second interviews. When probed to explain why she identified with more brands representing the actual self in the second interview, Callie explained that her situation had changed.

I think I was in a new place and was meeting new friends so I wanted to show more of my ideal self, but now I've just had some good things happen to me recently…I got a new car and I've got a new boyfriend… I want to show more of my actual self now (Callie, F, 22).

As demonstrated by Callie, we found evidence among our participants that their identities are continually evolving and, as a result, the subjective calculation of the actual and ideal selves can change from day-to-day and minute-to-minute. Facebook offers a platform that allows consumers to change their identities to reflect personal goals and interests that are current and relevant to the situational contexts of their own lives. In other words, situational context influences self-expression motives on Facebook. This platform facilitates the redefinition of identity over time, as users are easily able to link to and update their identifications with brands, regardless of current ownership or prior use. Next, we describe two manifestations of brand linkages when actual and ideal selves are congruous: greater actual self-expression and greater ideal self-expression.

4.4.1. Greater actual self expression

During the interviews, 30% of participants self-reported that more brands represented their actual selves (vs. ideal selves). When these participants were asked about the brands that represent their actual selves, they described inconspicuous brands that have utilitarian meanings. For example, narratives describing brands that represent the actual self typically followed this script: "I use this brand and therefore it represents me." In the following exemplar, Matt discusses pizza as a utilitarian brand that expresses his actual self.

The brands that I am friends with are similar to my own interests and activities…I have brands on my page that I use every day, like Chicago's Pizza and Papa John's Pizza. My friends know that I eat pizza every week (Matt, actual exemplar).

As conveyed by Matt, Papa John's Facebook friends receive discounts and promotions. Matt suggests that eating pizza is a part of his day-to-day life routine. Therefore, Matt connects with various brands of pizza. The pizza brands do not serve as a means for self-enhancement or self-protection. Rather, the pizza brands represent his actual self (who I am now).

Participants who identified with more brands representing their actual selves seemed less concerned about the opinions of others and

tended to seek out brands that represent who they are in the present moment (e.g., links with brands to maintain the self-concept). Brands representing the actual self tended to be currently owned or used. The participants that linked with more brands to maintain the self-concept expressed higher self evaluations (e.g., more confidence, higher self-esteem), and, interestingly, we found evidence that several of the participants were prompted to link to actual-self-brands by distinctiveness motives. Distinctiveness motives refer to the ways in which a particular individual is willing to deviate from the normative image that most people attempt to convey (see Leary & Allen, 2011). In other words, participants expressing more of their actual selves desired to be distinct and aimed to use brands as a means for setting themselves apart from their peers, and, in some cases, they linked with brands that many of their peers would shun. For instance, Jeff associates with low cost brands such as Great Clips and Wal-Mart, whereas most people in his peer group would not publicly link to such economical brands.

> I don't really care about what people think about the brands I like. I like them because I like them, not because other people are going to accept me more. I think some people are too concerned with other people's opinion…I know most people would not friend Wal-Mart, but it doesn't bother me (Jeff, higher self-evaluation exemplar).

During his interview, Jeff expressed a high level of self-confidence and conveyed that he enjoys deviating from the norm by associating with economical brands because it reinforced his own sense of self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Jeff suggests that being economical is part of his own personality and he likes displaying this distinctiveness trait to his network of friends.

4.4.2. Greater ideal self expression

During the interviews, 70% of participants self-reported that more brands represented aspects of their ideal selves (vs. actual selves). When these participants were asked to describe the brands that represent their ideal selves, they typically discussed iconic, luxury brands. Furthermore, they expressed more concerns about either promoting or expanding parts of the self that they felt good about (ideal self-representation) or altering the opinions and feelings of others to obviate the risk of rejection or criticism (ideal self-presentation). Both self-enhancement and self-protection are instrumental in maintaining, promoting, and safeguarding pivotal self-interests (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Participants expressing more of their ideal selves demonstrated lower self evaluations (e.g., seemed less confident, expressed lower self-esteem). When probed to explain why they selected brands to represent the ideal self, participants discussed linking with brands for the sake of highlighting certain characteristics or goals to others in their networks (ideal self-representation) or only showing certain parts of the self thus restricting the information available to others in their networks (ideal self-presentation). These participants described instances when they would link with brands to receive higher normative evaluations from the acquaintances in their networks. Normative motives refer to the degree to which the individual's image resembles the types of impressions that most people attempt to make (see Leary & Allen, 2011). Our participants were inspired to link with iconic brands because these brands are recognizable, and most people associate desirable traits with such brands. Sirgy (1985) suggests that conspicuous brands embody more congruity with the ideal self and inconspicuous brands are more consistent with the actual self. Our findings revealed similar themes. The following exemplar relates to Derek's use of conspicuous, iconic brands to demonstrate his ideal self on Facebook.

> I want people to know that I play golf, so my page shows different golf brands. But, I really want people to think I am better than I really am at golf, so I intentionally pick golf brands that are reputable and expensive. Like I talk about my Great Big Bertha golf bag and my

dream John Lobb golf shoes, and my Oakley's Romeo 2 sunglasses (Derek, ideal self-representation exemplar).

Derek believes that iconic brands such as John Lobb and Big Bertha convey to others his desire to become a proficient golf player. This is an expansion of his actual self. Derek plays golf currently; he wishes to become a better player and suggests, "I think most people want to be really good at something." Derek's connection with iconic golf brands is driven by normative motives. Although Derek does not own all the golf brands displayed on his page, he identifies with recognizable brands to express an idealized image of himself that is consistent with the normative expectations of superior golf brands (e.g., high performance).

With the noted examples above (greater actual self or greater ideal self), the actual and ideal selves are congruous because the multiple identities (actual self, ideal self-representation, and ideal self-presentation) can be blended on a unified platform. Although participants may present more of the actual selves, ideal self-representation, or ideal self-presentation, the identities are still harmonious. For instance, Matt believes that he presents more of his actual self on his Facebook profile but, during his interview, he also discussed brands that represent his ideal self such as Umbro that mirrors his dream of becoming a pro soccer player.

4.5. Incongruous actual and ideal selves

In the following two sections, we discuss situations in which aspects the actual and ideal selves conflict or, in other words, are incongruous. In such instances, participants conveyed that they used two very different coping strategies: an exclusive ideal strategy (to enhance and protect) or an avoidance strategy.

4.5.1. Exclusive ideal self expression

As previously noted, Facebook provides greater opportunity (vs. offline environments or other online venues) for the actual and ideal selves to conflict. In fact, our findings reveal that the social networking platform may elevate conflict between the actual and ideal selves because there is only one means for communicating the self to a large network of friends, and there is a continual opportunity to do so. In contrast, during face-to-face interactions, consumers may show many selves to various acquaintances at different points in time (Leary & Allen, 2011). For example, Leary and Allen suggest that the persona consumers may adopt in interactions with a minister may be very different than in interactions with a person to whom they are romantically attracted.

When the actual and ideal identities conflict on a networking platform such as Facebook (e.g., the participant does not want to show both the actual and ideal selves to his/her network), consumers must find a means to cope. Chet describes the increased likelihood of conflict between his actual and ideal selves on Facebook and his efforts to cope.

> I like for people to know about the brands that I like, but you have to be careful because you have so many viewers on Facebook. Sometimes I may really like a brand but don't want everyone to see it… like Wal-Mart because I want my professional acquaintances to see me as professional and in-charge and I don't think Wal-Mart conveys that kind of image. I'm careful about my selection of brands and I know that I'm creating a certain image. I guess there is more room to show different aspects of myself, but also more variance or inconsistency with what parts of myself to show different people. I'm always on display, so that means I've got to really watch what I say and do online… so sometimes I just show one side of myself (Chet, M, 24).

As noted by Chet, Facebook allows for self-expression, but at the same time there is more opportunity for incongruity between the actual and ideal selves. A popular strategy among our participants when their actual and ideal selves are incongruous is exclusive ideal self-expression. The

primary goal of participants using this strategy is to construe their Facebook presence in such a way that brand linkages place their personal attributes in the most favorable light. Using the exclusive ideal strategy, participants seek credibility from others in their network, and this strategy includes both self-enhancement and self-protection. According to Alicke and Sedikides (2009), a commonality between self-enhancement and self-protection is that both concepts are based upon the notion of viewing oneself more positively, or less negatively, than objective circumstances warrant, and both concepts can be used to advocate a desired self-view (ideal self). As demonstrated below, when identities conflict, users may choose to solely display aspects of their ideal selves.

> When I'm not sure, I go all ideal from brands to pictures…When I first came to college I think that I was all ideal, but now I am a little of both…I feel like I am at a point in my life where I feel more comfortable with my actual self (Deb, exclusive ideal self strategy).

> Facebook has become a place where people go to promote themselves as models. My cousin does this. She posts certain brands on her News Feed all the time. She thinks that people are going to form different opinions about her based on the brands she identifies with. She wants to become a movie star so she associates with movie star brands (Daisy, cousin uses exclusive ideal self strategy).

As illustrated above, Deb explains that she used an exclusive ideal self strategy as she transitioned from high school to college. She described her actual self during this transition period as immature and insecure, but her ideal self desired to become mature and confident. During the transition period, Deb linked with brands solely to either enhance the self or to protect the self. As her situation changed (e.g., "made new friends," "made good grades," "joined university clubs"), she gained more confidence and began to use a blended strategy of the actual and ideal selves. The exclusive ideal self was simply a coping strategy Deb used during a transitional period in her life. "I was very insecure, so I didn't really want to reveal my insecure self" (Deb). Similarly, Daisy provides an example where her cousin uses an exclusive ideal self strategy by posting pictures of herself as a model. "If the pictures are not model worthy, she's not gonna post it" (Daisy). Linking with brands provides one means for deriving success with this strategy. For instance, Daisy's cousin uses brands to embellish her desired model image and to protect her sense of self in terms of public perception. "She's far from model material in my opinion…but the brands she friends makes people think she's the real thing" (Daisy). Daisy's cousin is consumed by her ambition to become a model, and she uses an exclusive ideal self strategy to cope with conflicting identities (she lacks model-like attributes but desires to become a model).

4.5.2. Avoidance of self-expression

A second coping strategy when the actual and ideal identities conflict is the avoidance of self-expression. Mick and Fournier (1998) describe how consumers use an avoidance strategy to cope with the paradoxes of new technology. Similarly, several of our participants suggested that as they formerly engaged in job search initiatives, they closed their Facebook accounts and avoided self-expression altogether. Daniel's narrative illustrates this point.

> I know employers use the internet to get information about people interviewing so I closed my Facebook account so that my personal information couldn't be used against me. My character shown on Facebook is not who I really am. I have the ability to be really professional, but you wouldn't know that by looking at my Facebook page (Daniel, avoidance strategy).

Driven by the situational context of the job search, Daniel's actual and ideal selves conflicted. As a result, Daniel coped by using the avoidance strategy. When Daniel was asked to describe his actual self, he used descriptors such as "party animal," "ladies' man," and "get this party started kinda person." When asked to talk about his ideal self, Daniel explained that he wanted to be "professional and clean cut," "a successful corporate American man," and "ethical." When Daniel was faced with searching for a summer internship, he avoided using Facebook by suspending his account temporarily. The avoidance strategy provided a viable means for coping when his actual and ideal selves conflicted.

Participants realize that brands communicate characteristics about the self, and when the actual and ideal identities conflict, they may choose to avoid self-expression altogether. Donna explains this idea well.

> Brands speak identity and if I don't want to show myself to others for whatever reason, I'm not gonna like a brand. I'm gonna stay away from saying anything about myself online. Whatever you put on Facebook, it's there for the world to see…sometimes it's just best to say nothing (Donna, avoidance strategy).

As suggested by Leary and Allen (2011), it is rare that individuals have a single persona that they use in virtually all situations and with virtually all targets. Therefore, SNSs such as Facebook present more opportunity for conflict between the actual and ideal selves. Facebook, due to its connected nature, forces consumers to be more consistent and authentic in their self-expressions compared to offline and other online personas. Therefore, consumers must make trade-offs when their actual and ideal selves are incongruous. This means that consumers may solely link with brands that represent aspects of their ideal selves or avoid linking to brands altogether.

5. Discussion

Individuals represent aspects of their selves to others in their online social networks. Even in the absence of the nonverbal cues that characterize offline communications, people use whatever information is available online to form impressions of others (Walther & Parks, 2002). In the context of Facebook, most prior impression formation research focuses on sociometric data regarding the user's "friends" (Tong, Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Walther et al., 2008). Less research, however, is focused on impressions formed based on information posted directly by a user (for an exception, see Back et al., 2010). Importantly, the information that is *directly* created or posted by a Facebook user (e.g., brands "liked" by the user) can also be used to mold others' impressions of him or herself. Consumers are networked to other users on this platform, and within each network lies a certain degree of visibility through features including wall posts and public displays of connections. Indeed, the online environment allows for a transcendence of physical and material constraints, thus facilitating consumers' extensions of self, even in the absence of material possessions (Zhao & Belk, 2007).

Whereas earlier research suggests that Facebook users' profiles reflect only the actual self (Back et al., 2010), our findings present evidence of the use of brands to express both the actual and ideal selves. Back et al.'s (2010) study of self-expression on Facebook was conducted at a relatively high level of inquiry, examining users' Facebook profiles as a whole. Our unique methodology and tighter focus on brands allow for a deeper understanding and discovery of more subtle ideal-self expressions that slipped "under the radar" in earlier research. Indeed, we find that most people edit their presented selves in some motivated way. Over half of our participants self-reported expressing the ideal self to a greater extent than the actual self in their linkages to brands. Furthermore, participants revealed two subcomponents of the ideal self: ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation. Ideal self-representation involves an expansion of the actual self (self-enhancement), while ideal self-presentation is a limitation of the

actual self (self-protection). Thus, we identify reflections of self in this novel context that appear to have gone undetected in prior work.

An interesting finding of this research is that the ideal and actual selves often conflict on Facebook. Consequently, we contribute to the literature on how multiple selves interact to inform brand connections. Due to the virtual nature of Facebook as a unified platform for networking, consumers are forced to present a single persona to a wide range of acquaintances. In deciding how to express the self on Facebook, we find that participants' actual and ideals selves either blend (congruous) or conflict (incongruous). Users express their identities through brand linkages depending on the nature of the congruity (or lack thereof). When the identities are congruous, participants present either the actual or ideal self to a greater extent by linking with brands; however, aspects of both the actual and ideal exist. Therefore, we found evidence of a blending of the two identities. In other words, participants use a mix of brands representing both the actual and ideal selves, but typically more brands will represent either the actual or ideal self. When the identities are incongruous, participants take one of two routes in an effort to resolve the incongruity: linking with brands to enhance and protect the self-concept (i.e., ideal only strategy), or abstaining from linking to brands altogether. The avoidance of some brands and the embrace of others is a means through which users express aspects of their self-concepts. As the usage of social media platforms such as Facebook continues to increase, it is important for marketers to understand whyconsumers link with certain brands and avoid others as a form of self-expression.

Our study sheds light on the importance that marketers need to place on their social media promotional efforts. Participants in our study conveyed that brands can send powerful virtual messages. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that a brand's online image is just as important as its offline image, and possibly more important. Consistent with self-concept theory, consumers behave in ways that maintain, enhance, and protect their senses of self (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010), and one way consumers do this is by linking with brands on Facebook to portray a certain image to others.

6. Further research opportunities

There are several avenues for extending this research. First, future research could explore how individual difference factors moderate consumers' uses of brands to express their selves on Facebook. One individual difference factor is a person's attachment style. Recent research shows that anxiously attached individuals use brands as a way to signal their ideal self-concepts to others in a public setting (Swaminathan et al., 2009). Thus, these individuals might be especially likely to link themselves to brands on Facebook to communicate their ideal (vs. actual) selves. A second individual difference factor of interest is self-monitoring, which reflects the extent to which a person observes and controls expressive behavior and self-presentation in accordance with social cues (Snyder, 1979). As they are highly concerned with the social environment, high self-monitors might also have a strong tendency to express themselves with brands on Facebook. In addition, future research should examine the relationship between image congruence and brand evaluations among high self-monitors compared to low self-monitors within the context of a consumer's online social network.

Second, future research should investigate how "liking" a brand on Facebook affects the way in which the user *perceives him or herself*. In essence, future research could attempt to apply the notions of self extensions (Belk, 1988) to the social networking medium. Recent research shows that using a brand for only a short time leads consumers to alter their own self-perceptions (Park & John, 2010), and a similar effect may be found for consumers who link themselves to brands on Facebook. Our preliminary findings suggest that participants who linked with more brands to maintain the self-concept expressed higher self-evaluations (e.g., more confidence, higher self-esteem). However, expressing an ideal self may also have positive implications for

consumers' self-esteem. As self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) notes that large ideal-actual self-discrepancies are related to lower self-esteem, it has been suggested that consumers can increase their well-being (i.e., reduce this discrepancy) by presenting an ideal self online (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000).

Third, future research can examine the *effectiveness* of using brands as subtle signals for impression construction. Recent research shows that consumers' use of brands as signals of one's characteristics can backfire if perceived by others as inauthentic (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2011). Thus, using brands to represent the self on Facebook could possibly have unintended, adverse consequences for users' impression formation attempts. This seems especially relevant in the context of expressions of one's ideal self-image (which might be perceived by others as inauthentic) by linking oneself to brands on Facebook.

Fourth, our research could be leveraged to develop a number of new theories. For instance, one new area of study could investigate how consumers use brands in social media to simply 'hint' at an underlying identity, tease, or manage an impression of modesty or conservatism. Another possibility would be to develop a theory that moves beyond a polarized view of presentation as private versus public to suggest more interactive concepts. Yet another area for theory-building in relation to our work is to explore how and why consumers choose to "unfriend" brands.

Finally, future quantitative research may be useful for complementing and validating our findings. Such research could explore the effects of social norms bias on individuals' responses, as well as the effects of other users of the brand on self-congruity. Additional research could investigate these and other possibilities within Facebook and other platforms in the growing social media landscape.

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