

4 Interrelationships between having, doing, and being

Having, doing, and being can be regarded as the three basic modes of living since *being* is not possible without *having* and also not without *doing*. On the most basic level, we need to eat, dress, live and sleep somewhere. Thus, we need to have certain objects that enable us to exist. This does not necessarily imply that all individuals place the same emphasis on each of the three basic modes of existence, but all three are necessary. Exemplary of this are the views of Sartre, Marx and Fromm. For Sartre (1943), the most fundamental of the three modes is *having*. He believes that one can only know who one is by looking at what one has: "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (p. 145). Marx's focus in contrast is on *doing*. He advocated that people could best actualise their selves by being involved in meaningful work. Since, however, in a capitalistic system workers do not own the products of their labour, they are robbed of their very selves (Marx, 1848/ 1964). Fromm emphasized *being*. For him the only (desired) role of possessions is to facilitate being as a way to provide the means for personal growth and development (Fromm, 1956; 1976). Without elaborating on the three underlying philosophies any further, the important point to note here is that all three writers view having, doing and being as three interrelated facts of life (compare Belk, 1988). They all agree that objects can and are used by individuals to create and to maintain a sense of self, albeit they do not agree on the weight that should be given to each of the three modes.

Empirical evidence for this interrelationship has been provided by a number of studies conducted by marketers and consumer researchers. The results show that objects contribute to and reflect our sense of identity, they aid in the process of identity development and during times of transitions, they help us to present desired self-images in certain situations and to express social relationships. At times they may even contribute to *flow*, an intense experiential state of enjoyment that is intrinsically rewarding and sought simply for the pleasure it brings. Hence, in a consumer society, objects (*having*) seem to be an important source of meaning with which we construct (*doing*) our lives (*being*).

Based on this evidence, Belk (1988) formulated the concept of the extended self. The extended self, simply stated, is the self plus possessions. The term possession in that equation refers not only to material objects but also includes body parts, internal

processes, ideas, experiences, persons and places. Empirically it has been shown that the greater the attachment to any of these belongings, the more likely they will be part of the extended self. Not all individuals however are equally likely to incorporate possessions into the extended self. Those who regard possessions as being important for their sense of self are more likely to do so (Sivadas and Venkatesh, 1995).

Likely reasons for attachment are that an object is symbolic of an important person, relationship or event in life that existed, happened or will occur in the past, present or future. This is true for both men and women with the only difference that high attachment objects for men are more likely to reflect accomplishments and mastery and for women social ties. Another characteristic of strong attachment objects is that they are more likely to be associated with positive emotions, individuals are more satisfied with them and are more likely to care for them and to display them (Schultz Kleine, 1998; Schultz, Kleine and Kernan, 1989; Sivadas and Venkatesh, 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Considering that individuals generally exhibit a certain bias towards anything that is related to the self, the above observation that individuals associate positive emotions with high attachment objects and are more likely to take care of them provides further support for the notion that such objects actually are part of the extended self.

Further evidence that the self is implicated by our possessions is provided by Schultz Kleine, Kleine and Allen (1995), Grayson (1996) and Muniz (1997). They found that individuals utilize certain possessions in narrating their life stories and in defining their identities. Characteristic of such self-defining possessions is that they reflect personal uniqueness and interrelationships with important others. They can however also stand for the kind of person I once was but am no longer, or for the kind of person I am not and don't want to be. The latter category might include objects like unwanted gifts, objects that remind oneself of the prototypical user with whom one doesn't want to be associated, or possessions that remind oneself of an earlier bygone life story. Thus, it can be said that objects that help to define the self are like 'narrative storehouses'; they validate the experiences one has taken part in and they make time more concrete. In accordance with the findings reported above, it was found that affection is only expressed towards those products or brands to which a positive meaningful self-connection exists.

Another well-known study that indicates the importance of possessions in defining identity is Goffman's (1961) book *Asylums*. He showed how people can be stripped of their identities by taking away all or most of their personal belongings and how this identity can be replaced by one that fits the institutionally appropriate one. Sayre and Horne (1996) investigated disaster victims who had lost most of their possessions. They observed that the victims, in an attempt to preserve their identities, initially transferred the symbolic meanings that connected them with the lost objects to human relationships and ideological symbols of completeness. In the process of replacing the destroyed possessions, the shopping experience helped disaster victims to recreate their identities by lending new meaning and by providing the opportunity to build new self-object connections.

In summarizing the results presented up to this point, it can be stated that the essence of possessions that implicate the self resides not in the objects themselves but in the relationships that exists between them and their owners. In other words, the meaning of objects is inherently related to personal perception and interpretation and arises from an interaction between the objects, their owners and the context in which they are used. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have put it, "things tell us who we are, not in words but by embodying our intentions" (p. 91). As our understanding of who we are changes over the lifetime, the intentions that are embodied within our possessions change as well. How this actually manifests itself is explored in the next section.

4.1 THE MEANING OF GOODS THROUGHOUT THE LIFE CYCLE

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) assessing the meaning individuals of all ages attribute to their most favoured possession noted that possessions throughout the life cycle "are used as symbols in a self-development process of becoming a unique identity while at the same time connecting with others and participating in one's culture through shared meaning" (p. 359). As explained in chapter three, the formation of identity begins during adolescence with an extended period of exploration. If one asked young people during an early stage of this phase (approx. ages 10 to 12) to describe themselves, they are likely to say something like the following: My name is Peter, I live in a house on Kings' Boulevard, in a room

together with my little sister, I have a dog, roller skates, and a CD collection (c.f. Belk, 1988; Montemayor and Eisen, 1977). A great proportion of how these young adolescents see themselves is related to their possessions. A few years later, if asked the same question, they will tell you more about their characteristics and abilities: My name is Peter, I am a good soccer player, I like to play the guitar, I am smart, and I have lots of friends. Consumer goods during this phase also play an important role. The favourite possessions of adolescents at this stage mostly consist of items that reflect their abilities and characteristics, and of commodities that they can manipulate and control (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). For Peter his favourite possessions might be his soccer shoes, his guitar, a reward he received for the best science project from his high school, and the pictures of the past camping trips with his friends. Hence, identity during this life stage is mainly built around potential roles and reflected as such in one's most liked possessions.

During young adulthood a preference shift can be observed. Favoured goods now represent more concrete future plans, and therefore the specific kind of identity a person is striving for (Olson, 1985). If this phase of aspiration is completed, in most cases a person has achieved an identity. This identity is likely to be reflected in the various social roles one plays, e.g. at work, at home raising the children, in the neighbourhood, in clubs or other organizations one belongs to. Consumer goods during this stage are used for the purpose of demonstration. They reflect one's work or role identity and are symbols of one's achievement, and of who one is or wants to represent (Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995).

With increasing age, the importance of social roles declines and individuals begin to re-define their identities. This also becomes obvious in a changed meaning they attribute to goods. Elderly people are more likely to favour possessions that are symbolic of their lived experiences and of their identity over the lifetime. During old age another phenomenon can be observed. Individuals sensing their mortality strive toward preserving their identity beyond the point of death. They begin to hand over photographs, diaries, biographies, furniture, jewellery and other self-signifying belongings to people of a younger generation. Hence, consumer goods during this phase serve to keep one's identity alive in the memory of other people (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995, Hirschman, 1990; Olson, 1985).

The end of a particular life stage and the beginning of a new one generally is spanned by a transitional phase and often marked by special events and rituals. The purpose of rituals is to facilitate the movement between two stages. It allows individuals to experiment with new social roles, to practice role performance and to gain more confidence. Because of their communicative powers⁴, consumer goods and services are frequently used to support this process. They aid to explore possible future selves and make them more concrete, plausible and real. Examples of this are provided by McAlexander and Schouten (1989) who investigated the functional aspects of haircuts during the phase of role exploration in adolescence. Schouten (1991) showed the role of cosmetic surgery during life transitions, and Friese (1997) the role of wedding dresses in the process of getting married. During less enjoyable life periods, e.g., when getting divorced or when disengaging from a subculture, possessions have also been shown to fulfil an important function, either to reconstruct or to let go of an identity (see McAlexander, 1991; Hughes and Degher, 1998).

In summarizing the above findings, it can be stated that consumer goods contribute quite extensively to our understanding of who we are: They help in the process of exploring and constructing an identity; they can be used for the purpose of demonstrating one's identity or for the purpose of reminding oneself of who one has been during the various stages of one's life. Further, they support the re-formation of one's identity during transitional phases, and before death they aid to achieve immortality by preserving one's identity in the minds of those who live on.

4.2 PRODUCT SYMBOLISM

Levy (1959) was among the first who advocated the idea that people buy products not only for their functions but also for their personal and social meanings. According to his view, modern goods are psychological 'things' symbolic of individual attributes, personal goals and social patterns. He predicts that individuals will be especially inclined to purchase an item, if the symbolic meaning it conveys is deemed to be appropriate. This means that a product "joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way consumers think about themselves" (p. 410). Thus, if Levy's prediction is correct, consumers should lean towards those products that symbolically fit their

⁴ See section 4.2 for more detail on the communicative powers of goods.

goals, feelings and self-definitions. Essential for such a product/self-image match to occur is that within a particular culture or sub-culture a shared understanding of the symbolic nature and meaning of consumer goods exists. First evidence that such a shared understanding exists has been provided by Levy himself. He could show that darker colours were generally interpreted by consumers as being symbolic of respectability, lighter colours as being symbolic of softness, youthfulness and femininity, red as a symbol of excitement and provocation, and yellow and brown as a sign of manliness. Since Levy's 1959 article a number of studies have been conducted to further unravel the symbolism that consumers attribute to certain products. The main results of these studies are presented next.

4.2.1 Decoding and encoding of product meaning

According to results of a study conducted by Belk, Bahn and Mayer (1982), the decoding and encoding of product meaning seems to be part of the socialization process in a consumer culture. Already sixth graders are able to consistently recognize consumption cues and to draw social implications of consumption choices. Considering the variety of products that have been found to elicit shared social meanings, this result is not surprising. Consumers seem to draw inferences about others or convey messages about themselves by using almost any product cue provided. Among the products that have been found to elicit shared social meanings are clothing, homes and cars, eyeglasses, cosmetics, deodorants and other personal care products, style of grooming, choice of alcoholic beverages and recreational drugs, the usage of regular or instant coffee, books and magazines, leisure products and recreational activities, mode of travelling, luggage, retail store patronage, cigarette smoking and the choice of restaurants (e.g., Belk, 1978, 1981; see Belk, Bahn and Mayer, 1982 for a review; Holman, 1980, Kirchler and Piesslinger, 1992).

The kinds of inferences that are drawn based on displayed consumer goods include both sociodemographic characteristics like age, gender and social status and personality characteristics. For example, if a person provides some wealth related consumption cues like taking the plane instead of travelling by bus, he is not only perceived as a person with a higher income, a higher occupational status and a higher education, but also as more likeable, more successful, more interesting, more generous, more responsible, more attractive and more aggressive (Belk, 1978). Other

examples of inferred personality characteristics based on product usage are provided by McKeachie (1952) and Calder and Burnkrant (1977). They examined the influence of cosmetics on impression formation. Women wearing lipstick were perceived by men as more frivolous, introspective, anxious, conscientious and interested in the opposite sex than women not wearing lipstick. If a woman was observed to buy Revlon mascara as compared to another brand, other women viewed her as being more popular and competent.

Automobiles and homes were also shown to provide certain cues (Belk, Mayer and Bahn, 1981). Size and newness were used by observers to make inferences of social class, occupation and personality characteristics of the owner. Large houses and automobiles were taken as an indication that owners were less sociable but more successful; from newness it was inferred that the product owners were younger, less sociable and more successful.

An additional aspect of symbolic product meaning is that they cause others to react toward the owner or user of the product in a particular manner. For instance, individuals wearing high status clothing like a suit and a tie were found to be more successful in getting people to sign a petition than people dressed more casually (Suedfeld, Bochner and Metas, 1971; Darley and Cooper, 1972). Similarly, newer and more expensive cars also elicited more favourable reactions. If stalled at a stoplight, newer and more expensive cars received fewer horn-honking responses than older and less expensive cars (Doob and Gross, 1968).

Hence, the necessary condition allowing consumers to match products with their self-image can be regarded as fulfilled. There is sufficient empirical evidence showing that a general public agreement on the symbolism of products exists and that people react to that symbolism in a consistent manner. Now we can consider the question of whether consumers indeed lean towards those products that provide a symbolical fit with how they see themselves. The short answer to this question is: Yes, consumers do have a preference for those products that are congruent with their self-image. However, as will be shown next, the relationship that exists between a person's self-image and the image of a product is more complex than this.

4.2.2 Product/Self-image congruence

... in many ways the car defines much of what is American. It is symbolic of our affluence, our technical leadership, our commitment to freedom and individualism. And what is true for our society is largely true for each of us as individual members of that society. We buy cars that fit with our self-image, that say something about us, that say something to us (Douglas Banik, DMB&B Chicago, in Solomon, 1992, p. 167).

Support for the above assertion has been provided by a number of studies. Birdwell (1968) and Grubb and Hupp (1968) for example found a statistically significant relationship between how car owners perceive themselves and how they view their cars. According to Birdwell, this relationship appears to be most pronounced for owners of prestige and medium-priced cars and lowest for economic compacts. A likely reason for the latter finding might be that financial limitations restrict consumers in buying a car that is truly expressive of themselves. Grubb and Hupp, in addition to investigating product/self-image congruence also assessed whether stereotypical car and car owner images exist. They found that both VW and Pontiac GTO owners have definite ideas about the kind of image their own car and the respective other car portrays and about the kind of person who drives that car. Moreover, their own self-image closely resembled the stereotypical image that others have about them.

In both of the above studies the focus was on the *global* self-perception of consumers. This approach has been criticized because it does not take into account that the self-concept is a multidimensional construct, disguising the fact that particular aspects of a person's self-concept could actually be more influential in predicting product choice. As a result of this criticism, a number of studies were conducted that explored the relationship between product image and more specific aspects of the self-concept. Dolich (1969), Landon (1974) and Ross (1979) for example investigated whether actual and ideal self-concepts would be more useful in predicting product/self-image congruence. Dolich and Ross tested whether a match exists between actual and ideal self-image and most and least preferred brands of beer, cigarettes, soap, toothpaste, magazines and automobiles. For all products they found a closer match between actual self-image and the image of the most preferred brand. The least congruence was found between least preferred product brands and ideal self-images. Thus, ideal self-images appeared to be more influential when rejecting a brand or product. Landon measured the influence of actual and ideal self-images on purchase intentions for a variety of products. He however obtained no consistent results.

Whether the actual or the ideal self-image was more prominent was dependent on product type and individual differences. For women the ideal self-image was overall more important for expressing purchase intentions than for men, and vice versa men associated their purchase intentions more strongly with their actual rather than their ideal self-image. Hence, the relationship between self image and product image is more complex than was initially assumed.

A third aspect of the self-concept that has been investigated within this context is the situated self. The situated self has been defined as the 'meaning self' that a consumer wishes to present to others in a particular situation (Lee, 1990). The situated self is likely to play a more important role for products that are only occasionally consumed and displayed because it can be assumed that individuals are motivated to create the most socially desirable situated self that is available in any given situation due to their general tendency to strive towards self-concept maintenance and enhancement. Empirically this was tested by Turner (1980) and Kleine, Schultz-Kleine and Kernan (1993). Turner found that the situational self-image is more important than the actual self-image in predicting the preference order for beer. Hence, when ordering a drink in a pub or a bar a consumer is more likely to order the kind of drink everybody else is ordering or the one that best suits the momentary occasion and situation. Kleine et al. evoked a very situation dependent social *identity* schema in their subjects by asking them about their *identity* as an athlete. Their results show that individuals view their possessions through the perspective afforded by a particular *identity* rather than through their global self-understanding. Kleine et al. concluded, "we are attracted to products that are consistent with, and that enable the enactment of, the various social *identities* which make up our sense of self" (p. 209, italics added). This conclusion however overlooks that a fairly strong self-image/product image congruence has been found for automobiles. Automobiles have to be used by most people across a variety of situations. The average consumer does not have one car to pick up his girl-friend for a date, another car to drive to work, a third car to visit his parents and a fourth to meet his friends at the sports club. Cars are also less interchangeable and bought less frequently than athletic clothing. Therefore, situational self-images are likely to be less important for car, housing or other more expensive purchases and more important when buying consumer products that are used within a specific context. A person's global sense of self is likely to be of greater

relevance when purchasing goods that are used across a variety of contexts. The significance of actual and ideal self-images on product choice is more difficult to determine since gender and other personal difference variables seem to exert an influence. Overall it can however be concluded that consuming behaviour has a lot to do with how consumers perceive themselves. In reviewing the literature Belk, Bahn and Mayer (1982) and Sirgy (1982) reported that a perceived product/self-image match, frequently also leading to purchase intentions, has been found for quite a large number of products. These include healthcare-, grooming- and cleaning products, beer, leisure products and activities, clothing and accessories, food products, cigarettes, home appliances, magazines, homes and home furnishing.

4.2.2.1 Adapting or matching?

The often suggested cause and effect relationship that the self-concept influences purchase decisions is doubted by some authors. They argue that another explanation for the detected relationship between self-image and product image might be that consumers adapt their self-image to the product image after having purchased an item. One could however hold against this kind of reasoning that in a number of studies a link between product/self-image congruence and purchase intention has been reported. On theoretical grounds, arguments for either position can be found namely by drawing on the self-congruity theory developed by Sirgy (1986) and the self-concept theory of behaviour and marketing research formulated by Grubb and Grathwohl (1967).

Sirgy developed his theory to explain self-concept processes like self-evaluation, self-perception, self-concept change, self-generalisation, etc. All of these processes are motivated by the first order principle to maintain and to enhance the self-concept. Self-congruity is reached if a match between an observed self-image outcome (e.g., a compliment for a new outfit) and a self-expectancy is perceived (the anticipation that one looks good in the new outfit). If the comparison is guided by the self-consistency motive, then a simple comparison between self-image outcome and self-expectancy occurs. If however the comparison is driven by the self-esteem motive, then the relative goodness of fit between the two is compared. A better than expected outcome leads to self-enhancement and a worse than expected outcome to self-debilitation. Self-expectancy thus serves as a reference value against which the observed self-image outcome is compared.

The above used example implies that a self-concept maintenance or enhancement has taken place via interaction processes - the consumer has received a compliment from another person. The same outcome may however also result from intra-action processes (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). Instead of receiving a compliment, the consumer might also see a mirror image of himself in a shop window, or he might sit in a café contemplating about the reaction of his girl friend to his new outfit. If he is satisfied with what he sees in the shop window or if he imagines his girl friend to be happy with his choice of clothing, this might also result in self-esteem enhancement. Interaction processes however seem far more important than intra-action processes for maintaining or enhancing a particular self-image (or *an identity*) as has been shown by Kleine et al. (1993). They found that the salience of a particular *identity* derives from social rather than internal psychological factors like connections to friends and family and media exposure. In other words, a particular *identity* is likely to be more central to the existence of a person, the more external connections exist that support that *identity*. Based on these findings, Kleine et al. concluded that simply having possessions is not enough; what matters is the reaction of other people to the use and display of these possessions.

With the above theoretical positions in mind, we can now turn back to the issue of whether it seems more likely that products are purchased to match an already achieved self-image or whether consumers adapt their self-image to fit a product image after they have purchased an item. The suggested answer is that both explanations can be correct depending on the underlying motivation that is driving a purchase. If purchase decisions are based on the self-consistency motive, then consumers might be more likely to purchase products that are congruent with their self-image. If self-esteem enhancement is the main motivating factor, then consumers might be more likely to purchase products that reflect an ideal image of themselves, hence an image they yet have to adapt to. This aim however can only be achieved if the desired ideal state is within a reasonable distance from the consumer's actual state; otherwise the adaptation process is likely to fail. If a consumer's self-perception is too far away from a product image then a) it will be difficult for the consumer to identify with the product via intra-action processes, and b) also interaction processes will not lead to the desired ends in that other people's reactions are likely to miss the mark. It is easy to see how such attempts to achieve an ideal state can be potentially harmful to an individual.

This problematic aspect of consuming behaviour is further explored in chapter five. For the moment, the interim conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that ordinary consumption is more likely to be based on the desire to purchase goods that match one's self-image, since the process of adapting one's self-image to a desired product image is not as easy to achieve and more likely to result in failure.

4.2.2.2 Underlying cognitive processes

Another question that can also be answered by knowing something about the functions of the self-concept is the issue of how and why product/self-image congruence can be achieved. As has been shown in chapter three, individuals experience greater levels of motivation and involvement if self-knowledge has been activated. Reasons for this are that self-relevant stimuli are processed in greater depth and faster than non self-relevant stimuli and they are experienced as central foci. Further, we know that important self-schemas are kept immediately accessible, and that a person's self-concept functions as a semantic filter through which all information from the outside is perceived as being the point of orientation for an individual's every behaviour. Thus, if we come across a product that symbolically matches either our global self-concept or a particular self-schema, we are more likely to notice it and to be drawn to it. Due to the self-serving bias that guides our action, we are also more likely to evaluate the product favourably in comparison to other products or brands. Thus, when a purchase decision needs to be made, the product chosen will most likely be the one which is closest to our own self-perception.

This tendency to lean toward products that match our self-image is regarded by Burroughs (1996) as a potential motivating factor of impulse buying. He argues that if consumers come across a product that matches their self-image, they will feel an instant and compelling desire to own the product. The desire is instant because the stimulus provided by the product is connected to the self-concept, and experienced as compelling since self-relevant stimuli are mostly emotionally loaded. The desire to own the product may at times be irresistible since the self-schema that has been activated by the product is so dominating that other concerns are either overridden or cannot be activated before the decision to purchase the item has already been made. According to Burroughs, an additional factor that contributes to the difficulty in resisting the urge is the kind of information processing strategy that is preferably used

by people in such a situation. It has been shown that individuals are more likely to use a holistic processing mode, as compared to analytic evaluation strategies, when the focus is on symbolic rather than on tangible attributes of a product, when right brain activities like emotions are activated and when a product is considered spontaneously (Baumgartner, 1993).⁵ Hence, when mapping complex symbolic product meanings onto the self, a fair assumption seems to be that consumers use a holistic processing strategy. This on the one hand allows them to spontaneously arrive at a decision but it also precludes them assessing a product on more analytical grounds.

Based on this chain of arguments, impulse purchases could be defined as a match between the symbolic meanings of a particular product and a consumer's self-concept or desired self (Burroughs, 1996). Evidence for this type of impulse purchase has been provided by Walker (1992). She reported that acquisitions that were experienced by consumers as 'really me' purchases were elicited by products that evoked a sense of self, were highly involving and likely bought on impulse. However, not all 'really me' purchases might be impulse purchases and not all impulse purchases are 'really me' purchases. In the following a few explanations and scenarios are given that show why not all products that elicit a self-relevant stimulus are bought on impulse.

The critical element in Burroughs' model seems to be a person's ability to resist the urge to buy, once a product has been spotted that matches the person's self-image. Since people differ in their ability to resist impulses, this might be a likely explanation for why not all products that match a person's self-image are bought impulsively. We also know that not all individuals are equally likely to employ holistic and analytic information processing strategies. Baumgartner (1993) found that verbalisers⁶ when left to follow their own natural inclination are more likely to use analytic processing strategies than visualisers. Hence, if verbalisers encounter a self-relevant product stimulus they might not consider a product holistically and therefore are better able to resist the urge to buy the product on impulse.

Even if somebody has been classified as being a visualiser and as being very impulsive, this does not necessarily imply that this person, let's call him consumer X, buys all self-relevant products on impulse. He may for example have developed

⁵ If consumers employ a holistic processing strategy, they form a global impression of a product as a unitary whole. If information is processed in an analytical fashion, consumers view a product as a composite of individual components.

⁶ Verbalizers are people who show a preference for engaging in and enjoying thinking.

certain strategies to overcome spontaneous buying urges as is demonstrated in the following scenario: During lunch break consumer X walks by a clothing store and sees a suit that really appeals to him. It matches his office clerk *identity*. He feels very tempted to buy the suit, goes inside the store and tries it on. It fits well and consumer X also likes his image in the mirror. However, he does not buy the suit immediately since in the past it has happened to him that he had bought a jacket rather spontaneously and a week later he saw the same jacket in another store for 20% less. Based on this experience he developed a rule to first look around in a few other stores to compare prices and other offers. So he leaves the store without buying anything and returns to work. It still might be the case that consumer X returns the next week to buy the suit that caught his attention because of the perceived self-image match. Then however it is no longer an impulse purchase but a purchase based on careful considerations initiated by a spontaneous liking.

Circumstances might also prevent a consumer from engaging in a spontaneous purchase, for example if some time elapses between making the purchase decision and the act of purchasing because one has to wait in line at the cash register. During this time other self-schemata and considerations are likely to come to the fore. One might for instance start to contemplate one's financial or need situation, whether the quality of the product is satisfactory, whether it is good value for money, and so on. Before it is one's turn to pay, the first spontaneous decision to buy the product may have been overruled by other considerations and one may decide after all to put the product back on the shelf and to leave the store. Hence, not all products that match our self-image necessarily trigger an impulse purchase. They may simply just attract our attention and help us in making a decision. If for instance we have a choice between two or three brands of a product that cost approximately the same and are satisfactory with regard to our requirements for quality and performance, it is then very likely that we choose that product which is most harmonious to our own self-image.

4.2.3 Summary and Outlook

In the previous sections it has been demonstrated that a shared symbolic meaning of consumer goods exists and that consumers use this knowledge a) to evaluate others on the basis of the kind of products they use and display, and b) to portray desired images of themselves. In addition, the existing symbolic classifications of products

allow consumers to match product images with particular parts of their self-concept. One hoped for effect is that consumer goods, due to their communicative powers, will aid in maintaining and enhancing the self-concept.

Thus, in a consumer society material goods appear to exert an influence on all facets of being. For many who live in such a society it is probably unimaginable *not* to buy goods that in addition to being functional also provide a desired image; or *not* to wear the right clothing for particular occasions, or *not* to judge and evaluate other people based on the kind of products they display. One might call this type of behaviour materialistic even though many individuals seem to be reluctant to admit to it, as is evident in the tendency to consistently underreport levels of materialism (see below). Having a materialistic orientation, albeit a fact of life, is regarded as not being socially desirable. A reason for this might be the strong polarization that exists. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the term materialism refers to people whose way of life, opinions or tendency are based *entirely* upon material interests; their devotion to material needs and desires take precedence over spiritual matters. This definition does not take into account that more moderate levels of materialism - which nonetheless reflect the same underlying orientation - also exist.

An emphasis on material objects may however not preclude people from engaging in spiritual endeavours or from being embedded in social networks. Miller (1988, 1995) for example showed that people who are comfortable in dealing with consumer goods, especially for the purpose of self-representation and for expressing social relations, were embedded within a functional social network. Those who felt incompetent in appropriately employing and manipulating consumer goods had problems in building up relationships and in maintaining them. Further evidence for the usefulness of material possessions in negotiating relationships and in assisting social embeddedness has been provided by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981). They found that people who have strong ties to others often represent these ties in the form of special material objects. On the contrary, people who claimed *not* to be materialistic because they did not own many possessions often lacked special close friendships and relationships.

Consumption and the use of material objects are also not completely devoid of the spiritual dimension. It has for example been shown that with the aid of consumer goods it is possible to achieve a heightened experiential state of enjoyment, which is

intrinsically rewarding and simply sought for the pleasure it brings. This state has been described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as *flow*. McAlexander and Schouten reported that one way of arriving at such a state is via novel consumption episodes like going on a trip on a new Harley Davidson motorcycle. This as a first step enables consumers to experience a consumption peak.⁷ By recreating this peak experience through repeated use of the product and through social sharing like story telling, the experience deepens and intensifies and eventually leads to flow. According to McAlexander and Schouten, the actor emerges from this experience as being highly integrated into meaningful human relationships and as a more differentiated and unique individual (in Smith, 1995).

Hence, living with, using, employing, displaying or talking about material objects also has its positive sides. This is evident in the role that objects play in the process of identity development and maintenance, in impression formation and management, and with regard to product choice and self-concept maintenance and enhancement. Considering the functional aspects of material objects and the importance that is attributed to them, a fair assumption seems to be that individuals living in a consumer society will display at least moderate levels of materialism as a mechanism of successful survival. This view does not rule out that more extreme forms of a materialistic orientation might have negative effects and consequences on both the individual and society. The point moreover is to show that there is little reason for condemning a materialistic orientation altogether. This perspective is supported by Holt (1995) who stated:

Consumer actions directed towards consumption objects have many faces: they are lived experiences that enlighten, bore, entertain or raise our ire, but they are also means that we use to draw ourselves closer to valued objects and resources that we use to engage others - to impress, to befriend or simply to play (p.15).

In the following a more detailed picture of a materialistic orientation is presented, how it is defined and measured and how the materialistic consumer can be characterized, both at high and at low levels of materialism. This will complement the account given so far by also disclosing some of the negative aspects.

⁷ Further, evidence for consumption peaks has been provided by Arnould and Price (1993) who investigated rafting and "the magic of rivers," and Dodson (1996) who explored peak experiences on mountain bikes.

4.3 MATERIALISM

Taking into account the continuous nature of a materialistic orientation, Belk (1984) defines materialism as reflecting "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest level of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life" (p. 291). Belk suggested measuring this kind of orientation via the three personality traits envy, non-generosity and possessiveness. Envy, according to Belk, motivates a striving to acquire desired objects in order to deprive envied others of their possessions. Non-generosity can be characterized by an unwillingness to give or share with others and is motivated by an egoistic concern for self and others. The third personality trait possessiveness is defined by Belk as the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one's possession. It is a relationship formed with an object after its acquisition.

In contrast to Belk, Richins and Dawson (1992) view materialism as a consumer value and not as a personality trait. They argue that a materialistic orientation like a value guides actions, attitudes, judgments and comparison *across* specific situations and *beyond* immediate goals. More specifically they regard materialism as a composite of three dimensions: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success. *Acquisition centrality* is understood by Richins and Dawsons as a life-style in which a high level of material consumption functions as goal and serves as a set of plans. It lends meaning to life and provides an aim for daily endeavours. The second dimension, *acquisition as a means of achieving happiness* is based on three beliefs. The first belief has already been mentioned by Belk and it entails that material objects provide the greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The second belief is rooted in the idea that money and social progress bring personal happiness. The third belief is related to the idea that acquisition rather than experience is the main source of happiness. *Possession-defined success*, the third dimension of materialism, is based on the notion that members of society evaluate others and themselves in terms of their consuming life-style. Accordingly, materialists should view themselves as successful to the extent that they possess products that project socially desired self-images.

Belk as well as Richins and Dawson have developed a scale to measure materialism. The Belk scale assesses the three described personality traits and the Richins and Dawson scale people's value orientation towards material goods with regard to the three dimensions happiness, centrality and success. Richins and Dawson's measure has been the more successful of the two. In a review of studies that have employed the Belk materialism scale, Micken (1995) concluded that the scale is neither very reliable nor does it show high validity. The three factors envy, non-generosity and possessiveness could not be reproduced in most studies even though efforts have been made to refine and to improve the scale. The construct validity of the scale has been questioned as well. For example, several items of the scale seem to measure individualism rather than materialism (e.g., statements about sharing possessions, lending them to others, having people stay over at one's home or buying for oneself instead of for others), and the happiness and satisfaction dimension are not assessed at all.

In comparison, most researchers who have employed the Richins and Dawson scale could reproduce the three proposed dimensions happiness, centrality and success. Overall the scale has shown high levels of reliability, also in countries other than the U.S. Therefore, in the following only results of studies are reported that have used the Richins and Dawson's materialism scale.

Before however sketching a profile of the materialist consumer, it should be noted that Mick (1996) found a confounding effect of socially desirable responses (SDR) on materialism. He reported a significant negative relationship between the Richins and Dawson materialism scale and the Marlowe-Crowne SDR scale. This indicates that a materialistic value orientation is regarded as socially undesirable and that individuals are reluctant to admit to it. Consequently, it can be assumed that the level of materialism is systematically underreported.

4.3.1 A profile of the materialist consumer

4.3.1.1 Materialism, money and subjective well-being

In assessing the construct validity of their scale, Richins and Dawson (1992) found that persons scoring as high materialists are more likely to value financial security, they spend three times as much on themselves than on others, contribute less to

charity, are less likely to contribute to ecological organizations and give less than half to friends and family. Further evidence for the greater likelihood of high materialists to buy things for themselves is provided by McKeage (1992). She found that level of materialism is positively related to the propensity to self-gift giving. Hence, for people displaying high levels of materialism money appears to be very important, either to accumulate it or to spend in on themselves. Further findings were that materialists spend less money on travelling, they are not in favour of a voluntarily simplistic life style that accentuates experiences, are less likely to choose 'a sense of accomplishment' as an important goal and are less likely to value warm relationships with others. High materialists thus de-emphasise experiences.

A possible inference that one might derive from these results is that materialists are selfish and inconsiderate of other people's need. Williams and Bryce (1992) conducted a study in order to test this hypothesis but found no relationship between selfishness, willingness to help others and materialism. Hence, this hypothesis has to be rejected. A more apt conclusion might be that high materialists may suffer from loneliness and a lack of relationships with other people due to their limited emphasis on experiences. This indeed has been shown by Sujan (1995). One may ask how this finding fits together with the above mentioned studies showing that material possessions aid in negotiating relationships? The answer is that it all depends on the underlying attitude that guides a person's actions. Depending on the kind of emphasis that one gives to material objects and the kind of relationship that one has developed to certain objects, they can either contribute to social embeddedness or they may lead to loneliness. Loneliness may however not be the only price that high materialists have to pay.

Emmons (1986) reported that a lack of social contacts potentially results in lowered feelings of subjective well being. Whether however a causal link between social contacts, subjective well being and materialism exists has not yet been tested empirically. Indirect indications are that high materialists are less satisfied with their circumstances, their standard of living and life in general (Richins and Dawson, 1992). In comparing levels of subjective well being in affluent and less affluent countries, it has been found that suicide rates are highest in the wealthiest nations. Hence, having access to an abundant world of goods does not seem to be the deciding factor for achieving happiness (Diener and Diener, 1995).

4.3.1.2 Object preferences and self-presentation

In examining the differences between low and high materialists in terms of their most valued possessions, Richins (1994) found that materialists are overall more likely to value financial assets, automobiles, motorcycles and other objects of transportation, appearance related possessions and possessions that are worn or used in public places. Low materialists are more likely to value recreational items. If asked why they valued such possessions high materialists are more likely to refer to the financial worth of the items, the positive effects they have on appearance, the prestige and success they convey, the control the possessions allow them to exercise, the utilitarian benefits the items provide and their practical and instrumental value in providing for the necessities of life. Low materialists in contrast were more likely to value objects for their symbolic interpersonal meanings, for sentimental reasons and for the recreational benefits, pleasure and comfort they provide. With only a few exceptions, all of these findings could be replicated by Wells and Anderson (1996).

Another type of person who appears to be very similar to the high materialist is the high self-monitor. High self-monitors have a tendency to notice cues for socially appropriate behaviour and modify their behaviour accordingly. They strive to be the type of person called for by each situation and they tailor their behaviour to fit social and interpersonal considerations of situational appropriateness. Low self-monitors in contrast tend to guide their behavioural choices on the basis of information from relevant inner sources like attitudes, feelings and dispositions. Hence, they display a substantial correspondence between their private attitude and their actual behaviour in social contexts (Snyder and DeBono, 1985).

With regard to their consuming behaviour, high self-monitors have been shown to be more concerned with physical appearance and body image, and they are more aware of messages that clothing and other personal effects convey (Snyder and DeBono, 1985; Sullivan and Harnish, 1990). Furthermore, high self-monitors were found to be particularly responsive to image-oriented appeals and were willing to pay more for goods that portray a favourable image, whereas low self-monitors were more responsive to product-quality appeals. When asked to describe their most recent purchase and to give reasons for having purchased the item high self-monitors tended to use social-identity terms and social arguments. Low self-monitors in comparison

described products in terms of their functional and tangible attributes and gave utilitarian arguments for having purchased them (Shavitt, Lowrey and Han, 1992).

Thus, high self-monitors seem to have a lot in common with high materialists and as can be expected Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) found a significant positive relationship between Snyder's self-monitoring scale, the overall materialism scale and all three subscales. Additional results were that both high self-monitors and high materialists experience higher product involvement and that high self-monitors similar to materialists view possessions as important, find more pleasure in possessions, and believe possessions to be central to happiness and success, for example by stating that a reason for buying branded products is to achieve a sense of belonging.

4.3.1.3 Happiness and materialism

Due to the belief of high materialists that possessions are central to happiness, one might expect that they experience positive affect after they have purchased an item. Richins, McKeage and Najjar (1992) however found that high materialists experience greater negative affect after a purchase. Similarly, Evard and Boff (1998) found that Brazilian managers who were high in materialism were more dissatisfied with services and product quality. A reason for this might be that materialists put higher expectations into a product purchase and therefore the likelihood of being disappointed after a purchase is much greater. This provokes a potentially dangerous cycle due to the underlying value structure that characterizes a materialist. Even if a purchase has disappointed them, high materialists are likely to persist in their belief that consumption will bring them happiness and instead of learning from a negative experience they will continue to consume. Over time, the repeated disconfirmation of their hopes may result in negative self-evaluations and a lowered self-esteem. Support for this assumption is provided by Richins and Dawson (1992) who found a negative correlation between materialism and self-esteem. Mick (1996) initially also found a significant negative relationship between materialism and self-esteem, which however was no longer significant after testing for social desirability. Despite this disconfirming finding, this is not a reason to dismiss the hypothesis that a materialistic value orientation can potentially result in a cycle of repeated unsatisfying purchases. More direct support for this thesis has been provided by a number of studies consistently showing that materialism is positively associated with addictive buying (Dittmar,

Beattie and Friese, 1995; Mick, 1996; Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton, 1997). This constellation seems to be especially likely if individuals have been raised in disrupted families. Rindfleisch et al. found higher levels of both materialism and addictive buying among adult children of divorced parents. Further, the relationship between family disruption and materialism was moderated by a perceived lack of interpersonal resources such as love and affection rather than by diminished financial resources that are often a consequence of a divorce. Hence, a likely explanation for the detected link between family disruption and materialism is that for children of divorced parents physical objects and acts of consumption serve as a surrogate for the missing parent. The unfortunate connection that is built up through this form of compensation is that these children will begin to equate material objects with love and attention. How this is related to addictive consumption is explained in more detail in the next chapter.

4.3.1.4 The influence of age and gender on levels of materialism

A finding that has been supported by a number of studies is that materialism declines with age. A likely reason for this is the changing meaning of consumer goods for a person's identity over the lifetime. As has been shown above, for young individuals their most favourite possessions reflect their talents, abilities and future aspirations. Later, during middle adulthood, possessions serve as a sign of accomplishments. Older people value possessions for the experiences they stand for. Hence, it is likely that the desire for acquiring possessions is highest during early adulthood and declines thereafter.

With regard to gender difference, Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) found that men were overall more materialistic than women. In particular they scored significantly higher on the success and happiness dimensions whereas women had higher scores on the centrality dimension. Hence, for men possessions appear to be more significant as an indicator for success and happiness in life than for women. Women in contrast grant possessions a central place in their lives, yet happiness and success for them might not directly be related to owning material objects. This result could be replicated in a sample of UK consumers (see chapter five) and in a study surveying Brazilian managers (Evard and Boff, 1998). Brazilian male managers were more likely than female managers to relate money and possessions to happiness. These

findings are especially intriguing because they fit the general gender pattern that has already been proclaimed by Pythagoras⁸ and more recently reported by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Dittmar (1989) and Rudmin (1990). Women have been shown to have a more favourable attitude towards private property than men (the centrality aspect). They however do not value it for its worth in terms of money but for its connection to specific personal and social relationships. Men in contrast valued private property on the basis of more abstract qualities like money and power. A similar pattern has been found by Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) who investigated the meanings of important high attachment objects. For men high attachment objects were more likely to reflect accomplishments and mastery, for women they reflected social ties.

Based on this evidence it has been proposed by various authors that female materialism is contextual, whereas for men it is more impersonal, decontextualised and abstract. This might also explain why women generally score lower on the happiness and success dimensions of the materialism scale. It might be likely that material objects for women are only an indirect indicator of happiness and success by way of important relationships or social events, whereas for men a more direct relationship exists.

4.3.2 Summary

In the above comparison between high and low materialists it has become obvious that a strong emphasis on material goods can also be disadvantageous. The importance that is given to money and all its related aspects like financial security, income or spending at the expense of experiences has its price. This price might be loneliness, fewer relationships and lower feelings of subjective well being. The hoped for effect that purchases will result in positive affect often remains an unachieved dream. This might be due to the greater expectations high materialists put into material objects.

⁸ Pythagoras said about women: "They must not destroy the reputation they had acquired through tradition and not put the writers of myths in the wrong; on the grounds of their recognition of the justice of women, because they give away clothes and adornments without witnesses when others have need of them, without this trustfulness resulting in lawsuits or quarrels, these poets created the myth that three women had but one eye between them because there was such concord among them. If one was to apply this to men and say that one who had first obtained something could easily part with it and even willingly added something of his own, nobody would believe it. For it is not in the nature of men. (Pythagoras, in Vogel, 1966, pp. 132-133, cited in Rudmin, 1990).

Hence, an overemphasis on possessions, money and material goods - as compared to 'making the best of them' - does not appear to be the best recipe for a fulfilled and happy life. At best, it leads to a perceived lower feeling of satisfaction with life, at worst to suicide.

Another negative effect of materialism is obvious in the relationship that exists to addictive buying. It however needs to be added that not all high materialists will necessarily become addicted to buying. For instance, a person who thinks very highly of himself may not be very likely to attribute dissatisfaction with a purchase to personal failure. Hence, his feelings of self-worth are not touched by a dissatisfactory purchase and he is not likely to fall into the endless trap of trying to improve himself by engaging in repeated purchases. Similarly, a person who has not learned to equate love and attention with material objects, due to the fact that she always had sufficient quantities of both, may equally not be likely to develop an addiction to buying because the symbolism she attaches to material objects may be more functional and realistic. As will become evident throughout the remainder of this book, for an addiction to develop, other factors need to be present as well. A high materialistic value orientation is a likely answer to the question of why a person has become addicted to a particular kind of behaviour, namely to buying.

Addictive buying thus is one of the peculiarities of a highly materialistic value orientation, but it is also an outcome, albeit unintended, of the other developments that have been described to characterize life in a consumer society, i.e., the increased emphasis on self and identity, the prevalence of product symbolism, and the efforts of marketers to link the satisfaction of immaterial needs to consumption objects. How this relates to addictive buying is described in the next two chapters.

