make. A heightened concern about the nature of one’s public “image” also results in more concern about the social appropriateness of products and consumption activities.

Consumers who score high on a scale of **public self-consciousness** express more interest in clothing and use more cosmetics than others who score lower. In one study, highly self-conscious subjects expressed greater willingness to buy personal products, such as a douche or a gas-prevention remedy, that are somewhat embarrassing to buy but may avoid awkward public incidents later.

Similarly, high **self-monitors** are more attuned to how they present themselves in their social environments, and their estimates of how others will perceive their product choices influence what they choose to buy. A scale to measure self-monitoring asks consumers how much they agree with statements such as “I guess I put on a show to impress or entertain others” or “I would probably make a good actor.” Perhaps not surprisingly, publicly visible types such as college football players and fashion models tend to score higher on these dimensions.

**Self-consciousness on steroids**—perhaps that’s what we’re experiencing in what historians looking back might call “The Era of the Selfie.” A selfie, or a picture a smartphone user takes of himself or herself on a smartphone (whether or not it’s attached to a “selfie stick”) is a common form of communication, especially for Millennials. There are more than 35 million of them posted on Instagram alone. Then add in the growing practice of posting streaming video of yourself on platforms including Periscope, Camio, and Meerkat, and you’ve got a major cultural phenomenon. Indeed the term **meerkating**, which describes the act of someone shooting a live video stream, has become a verb as thousands of people create their own running self-documentaries.

What explains the infatuation many of us seem to have with photographing ourselves? One simple reason: Because we can. Obviously the widespread adoption of smartphones makes it easy to do. But there may be other reasons as well. One explanation hinges on the concept of the **empty self**. This perspective points to the decline of shared points of reference over the last 50 years as we witnessed a decline in family, community, and traditions. As a result, people have shifted inward and a focus on the self is an unconscious way to compensate for what we have lost. Indeed when we look at young people (more on this in Chapter 13), we do observe a decline in marriage rates and a low amount of trust people place in government, corporations, and organized religion. The increasing focus on self-reliance in turn creates a culture of narcissism, where we are obsessed with what we do and feel the need to constantly record it (updating our relationship status on Facebook, posting selfies and photos of our meals on Instagram, etc.).

Perhaps that’s an overly bleak assessment, but it does help to explain why the average Millennial checks his or her smartphone 43 times per day, and why 83 percent of Millennials report that they sleep with their smartphones every night. Here’s the irony: Research shows that although people believe taking pictures during an event enhances their enjoyment, the opposite is true. There is a tendency to become preoccupied with documenting the moment—the more pictures people take, the less they say they enjoy the actual experience.

### Are We What We Buy?

Way back in 1890, the famous psychologist William James wrote, “A man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his.” And that was before iPhones, Diesel jeans, and Igloo dorm-size refrigerators! **Self-image congruence models** suggest that we choose products when their attributes match some aspect of the self. And, when we choose a product that we think is aesthetically pleasing this choice makes us feel better about ourselves. Indeed recent research that included brain wave measures such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) showed that when a person has a close relationship with a brand this activates the insula, a brain area responsible for urgent, addiction, loss aversion, and interpersonal love.

These emotional connections even make people defensive of their favorite brands if they see negative information about them. A comment by a respondent (a 32-year-old male) in one study nicely illustrates this bond: “My BMW is my wingman, my twin. I
Marketing Opportunity

Identity marketing is a promotional strategy whereby consumers alter some aspects of their selves to advertise for a branded product. Air New Zealand created “cranial billboards” in exchange for a round-trip ticket to New Zealand—30 Los Angeles participants shaved their heads and walked around with an ad for the airline on their skulls.56 Temporarily tattoos of brand logos are common these days. Indeed this idea is hardly new; bubble gum companies in the 19th century distributed crudely made versions of the tattoos, and then in 1890, Cracker Jack used them as one of their “prize in every box” promotions.57 More recently, Reebok set up a pop-up tattoo shop at an event in Sweden and gave away thousands of dollars in prizes to the fan who got the biggest version of the brands’ new triangle logo (not a temporary one). The lucky winner’s right thigh is, shall we say, Reebok’s for life.58

Congruence models assume a process of cognitive matching between product attributes and the consumer’s self-image.47 Over time we tend to form relationships with products that resemble the bonds we create with other people: These include love, unrequited love (we yearn for it but can’t have it), respect, and perhaps even fear or hate (“why is my computer out to get me?”).48 Researchers even report that after a “breakup” with a brand, people tend to develop strong negative feelings and will go to great lengths to discredit it, including bad-mouthing and even vandalism.49

Research largely supports the idea of congruence between product usage and self-image. One of the earliest studies to examine this process found that car owners’ ratings of themselves tended to match their perceptions of their cars: Pontiac drivers saw themselves as more active and flashy than did Volkswagen drivers.50 Indeed, a German study found that observers were able to match photos of male and female drivers to pictures of the cars they drove almost 70 percent of the time.51 Researchers also report congruity between consumers and their most preferred brands of beer, soup, toothpaste, and cigarettes relative to their least preferred brands, as well as between consumers’ self-images and their favorite stores.52 Some specific attributes useful to describe matches between consumers and products include rugged/delicate, excitable/calm, rational/emotional, and formal/informal.53

Although these findings make some intuitive sense, we cannot blithely assume that consumers will always buy products whose characteristics match their own. It is not clear that consumers really see aspects of themselves in down-to-earth, functional products that don’t have complex or humanlike images. It is one thing to consider a brand personality for an expressive, image-oriented product, such as perfume, and quite another to impute human characteristics to a toaster.

Another problem is the old “chicken-and-egg” question: Do people buy products because they see these as similar to themselves, or do people assume that these products must be similar to themselves because they bought them? The similarity between a person’s self-image and the images of products purchased does tend to increase over the time the product is owned, so we can’t rule out this explanation.

Remember that the reflected self helps shape self-concept, which implies that people see themselves as they imagine others see them. Because what others see includes a person’s clothing, jewelry, furniture, car, and so on, it stands to reason that these products also help to create the perceived self. A consumer’s possessions place him or her into a social role, which helps to answer the question, “Who am I now?”

People use an individual’s consumption behaviors to identify that person’s social identity. In addition to checking out a person’s clothes and grooming habits, we make inferences about personality based on his or her choice of leisure activities (e.g., squash versus bowling), food preferences (e.g., tofu and beans versus steak and potatoes), cars, and home decorating choices. When researchers show people pictures of someone’s living room, for example, study participants make surprisingly accurate guesses about the occupant’s personality.54 In the same way that a consumer’s use of products influences others’ perceptions, the same products can help to determine his or her own self-concept and social identity.55

We are attached to an object to the extent we rely on it to maintain our self-concept.59 Objects act as a security blanket when they reinforce our identities, especially in unfamiliar situations. For example, students who decorate their dorm rooms with personal items are less likely to drop out of college. This coping process may protect the self from being diluted in a strange environment.60 When a pair of researchers asked children of various ages to create “who am I?” collages, for which they chose pictures that represented their selves, older kids between middle childhood and early adolescence inserted more photos of branded merchandise. Also, as they aged, their feelings about these objects evolved from
concrete relationships (e.g., “I own it”) to more sophisticated, abstract relationships (e.g., “It is like me”). Our use of consumption information to define the self is especially important when we have yet to completely form a social identity, such as when we have to play a new role in life. Think, for example, of the insecurity many of us felt when we first started college or reentered the dating market after leaving a long-term relationship. Symbolic self-completion theory suggests that people who have an incomplete self-definition tend to complete this identity when they acquire and display symbols they associate with that role.

Adolescent boys, for example, may use “macho” products such as cars and cigarettes to bolster developing masculinity; these items act as a “social crutch” during a period of uncertainty about their new identity as adult males. As we mature into a role, we actually...
SECTION 2 Internal Influences on Consumer Behavior

rely less on the products people associate with it. When kids start to skateboard, they often invest in pro skateboard “decks” with graphics and branding that cost between $40 and $70 even without the “tracks” (wheels and axles). But—to the chagrin of the skateboard industry—as they get more serious about boarding, many think it’s just fine to buy blank decks, the plain wood boards that cost only $15 to $30.63

The contribution of possessions to self-identity is perhaps most apparent when we lose these treasured objects. One of the first acts of institutions that want to repress individuality and encourage group identity, such as prisons or the military, is to confiscate personal possessions.64 Victims of burglaries and natural disasters commonly report feelings of alienation, depression, or of being “violated.” One consumer’s comment after she was robbed is typical: “It’s the next worse thing to being bereaved; it’s like being raped.”65 Burglary victims exhibit a diminished sense of community, lowered feelings of privacy, and less pride in their houses’ appearance than do their neighbors.66

A study of postdisaster conditions, where consumers may have lost literally everything but the clothes on their backs following a fire, hurricane, flood, or earthquake, highlights the dramatic impact of product loss. Some people are reluctant to undergo the process of re-creating their identities by acquiring new possessions. Interviews with disaster victims reveal that some hesitate to invest the self in new possessions and so become more detached about what they buy. This comment from a woman in her 50s is representative of this attitude: “I had so much love tied up in my things. I can’t go through that kind of loss again. What I’m buying now won’t be as important to me.”67

The Extended Self

As we noted previously, many of the props and settings consumers use to define their social roles become parts of their selves. Those external objects that we consider a part of us constitute the extended self. In some cultures, people literally incorporate objects into the self: they lick new possessions, take the names of conquered enemies (or in some cases eat them), or bury the dead with their possessions.68

Consumers continue to discover new ways to integrate man-made products into our physical bodies. The use of foreign materials to replace or supplement human body

A spouse often becomes part of a person’s extended self—for better or worse.  
Source: Courtesy of Clemenger BBDO.
parts is not necessarily new (remember George Washington’s infamous wooden teeth), but recent advances in technology continue to erode the barrier between self and not self. Here are some examples.69

- According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Americans get more than 9 million cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures in a year. The most frequently performed surgical procedure is breast augmentation, which typically involves the integration of man-made silicone implants with the patient’s organic material.
- More than 4 million Americans have an artificial knee.
- At least prior to his recent arrest for murder that made global headlines, the South African track star Oscar Pistorius competed against world-class runners with two artificial legs made of carbon. Nike teamed with orthopedics company Össur to introduce its first sprinting prosthesis, called the Nike Sole, perhaps the first commercially scalable transformation of disabled athletes into “superabled” athletes.
- More than 200,000 people now have cochlear implants that deliver sound from a microphone directly to the auditory nerve. Other neural implants recognize when epileptic seizures are about to occur and stimulate the brain to stop them. A woman paralyzed from the waist down who wore a motorized exoskeleton walked the route of the London Marathon over a period of 17 days.

We don’t usually go that far, but some people do cherish possessions as if they were a part of them. In fact, some of us willingly (and perhaps eagerly) label ourselves as fanatics about a cherished product.71 Consider shoes, for example: You don’t have to be Carrie of Sex and the City fame to acknowledge that many people feel a strong bond to their footwear. The singer Mariah Carey recently posted a photo of her huge shoe closet on Instagram and labeled it: “Always my favorite room in the house... #shoes #shoes #moreshoes.”72

One study found that people commonly view their shoes as magical emblems of self, Cinderella-like vehicles for self-transformation. Based on data collected from consumers, the researcher concluded that (like their sister Carrie) women tend to be more attuned to the symbolic implications of shoes than men. A common theme that emerged was that a pair of shoes obtained when younger—whether a first pair of leather shoes, a first pair of high heels, or a first pair of cowboy boots—had a big impact even later in life. These experiences were similar to those that occur in such well-known fairy tales and stories as Dorothy’s red shoes in The Wizard of Oz, Karen’s magical red shoes in Hans Christian Anderson’s The Red Shoes, and Cinderella’s glass slippers.73

In addition to shoes, of course, many material objects—ranging from personal possessions and pets to national monuments or landmarks—help to form a consumer’s identity. Just about everyone can name a valued possession that has a lot of the self “wrapped up” in it, whether it is a beloved photograph, a trophy, an old shirt, a car, or a cat. Indeed, usually we can construct a pretty accurate “biography” of someone when we simply catalog the items he displays in his bedroom or office. A study illustrates that the product/self doesn’t even have to be that strong to influence a consumer’s self-concept. In one experiment, researchers approached women in a shopping mall and gave them one of two shopping bags to walk around with for an hour. Women who received a bag from Victoria’s Secret later reported to the researchers that they felt more sensual and glamorous. In another experiment, MBA students were asked to take notes for 6 weeks using a pen embossed with the MIT logo; they reported feeling smarter at the end of the term.74

As Figure 6.1 shows, we describe four levels of the extended self, ranging from personal objects to places and things that allow people to feel as though they are rooted in their larger social environments.75

1 Individual level—Consumers include many of their personal possessions in self-definition. These products can include jewelry, cars, clothing, and so on. The saying “You are what you wear” reflects the belief that one’s things are a part of one’s identity.
2 **Family level**—This part of the extended self includes a consumer’s residence and the furnishings in it. We can think of the house as a symbolic body for the family, and the place where we live often is a central aspect of who we are.

3 **Community level**—It is common for consumers to describe themselves in terms of the neighborhood or town from which they come. For farm families or other residents with close ties to a community, this sense of belonging is particularly important.

4 **Group level**—We regard our attachments to certain social groups as a part of the self; we’ll consider some of these consumer *subcultures* in later chapters. A consumer also may feel that landmarks, monuments, or sports teams are a part of the extended self.

### Embodied Cognition

To what extent do the products we buy influence how we define ourselves? Social scientists who study relationships between thoughts and behaviors increasingly talk about the theory of *embodied cognition*. A simple way to explain this perspective is that “states of the body modify states of the mind.” In other words, our behaviors and observations of what we do and buy shape our thoughts rather than vice versa. One of the most powerful examples is the idea that our body language actually changes how we see ourselves; in the most widely viewed TED talk ever, a social psychologist discusses how *power posing* (standing in a confident way even if you don’t feel confident) affects brain activity. Again, the self-fulfilling prophecy at work.

The embodied cognition approach is consistent with consumer behavior research that demonstrates how changes in self-concept can arise from usage of brands that convey different meanings. Indeed one pair of researchers used the term *enclothed cognition* in their work that showed how the symbolic meaning of clothing changes how people behave. In one study they asked respondents to wear a lab coat, which people associate with attentiveness and precise work. Indeed they found that subjects who wore the lab coat displayed enhanced performance on tasks that required them to pay close attention. But they also introduced a twist: When respondents were told the garment was in fact a painter’s coat rather than a doctor’s lab coat, the effects went away. In other words, the respondents interpreted the symbolic meaning of the clothing and then altered their behavior accordingly.
It’s tempting to point out that a study your humble author conducted more than 30 years ago on the “dress for success” phenomenon found similar results for students in job interview settings. In perhaps the best Ph.D. dissertation ever written (at least in your author’s opinion), male candidates who wore professional attire acted more assertively and confidently during the interviews, and on average even asked for higher starting salaries.\(^9\)

**The Digital Self**

We’ve already talked about impression management, but our wired world takes this process to a new level.\(^9\) Today we have access to “post-production” tools to engineer our identities. These free or inexpensive applications allow virtually anyone to dramatically modify his or her digital self at will as we strategically “modify” the profile photos.

Residents of the Blue Mars virtual world use their iPhones to vote on the most attractive avatars.

Source: Image courtesy of Avatar Reality.
The Tangled Web

“I can leave Facebook whenever I want!” Actually, for many people it’s not so easy. Researchers looked at Facebook posts, blogs, discussion groups, and online magazines when they find “breakup stories” that would help them to understand what people go through when they decide to end their relationship with this social network. Many people talked about the things they’re missing: friends’ birthdays, the ability to play online games, and the ability to use various online services. Their descriptions were laced with strong emotions that ranged from sadness to the kind of relief an addict might feel if he or she succeeds in breaking out of a bad habit. Here are a few excerpts from the study:

- “Deleting my Facebook account was a four-day affair. It took me that long to disentangle myself from the service and to let others know how else they could find me. “Disentangling” entailed deleting my photos, “unliking” everything and disconnecting all of the third-party services that used Facebook Connect to log me in.”
- “I found a tiny link at the bottom of the security settings page for “how to deactivate Facebook.” After clicking the link, a page popped up with photos of me and my friends. ‘Jake will miss you,’ one caption read. ‘Jules will miss you,’ ‘Aaron will miss you.’ All of my friends were smiling at me and telling me to please don’t go.”
- “I reactivated my Facebook account. Rejecting it felt, well, extreme. You can’t get away from it. It’s everywhere. We can’t reject it entirely. But I am approaching it this time with new wariness.”
- “[M]y decision to jettison Facebook has drawn me closer to those that matter and allowed peripheral acquaintances to fade away naturally. I can no longer just toss a meaningless ‘Happy Birthday, ugly!’ on my friends’ Facebook walls, but instead must call them to express such sentiments.”
- “I have toyed with the idea of logging back in, but prying Facebook’s sticky tentacles out of my life has inexorably improved my life, and I urge you to give it a shot, if only for a week.”

Wearable Computing

Get ready for the invasion of wearable computing. Whether devices we wear on our wrist like the Apple Watch, on our face like Google Glass, or woven into our clothing, increasingly our digital interactions will become attached to our bodies—and perhaps even inserted into our bodies as companies offer ways to implant computer chips into our wrists. There are obvious privacy concerns as these products pick up steam, but advocates argue they offer numerous benefits as well. These attachable computers will be cheaper, provide greater accuracy because sensors are closer to our bodies, and be more convenient because we won’t have to carry around additional hardware. Already numerous wearables with big health implications are available or under development.

- Sensing for sleep disorders by tracking breath, heart rate, and motion
- Detecting possible onset of Alzheimer’s by monitoring a person’s gait via a GPS embedded in his or her shoes
- Tracking ingestion of medication via sensors that are activated by stomach fluid
- Measuring blood sugar via a contact lens with a chip that can track activity in a patient’s tears
- Assessing the impact of blows to a football player’s head via sensors inserted in his helmet.

Virtual Makeovers

New virtual makeover technologies make it even easier for each of us to involve the digital self as we choose products to adorn our physical selves. These platforms allow the shopper to superimpose images on their faces or bodies so that they can quickly and easily see how products would alter appearance, without taking the risk of actually buying the item first. L’Oreal offers a Makeup Genius app that turns the front-facing iPhone and iPad camera into a makeup mirror so that the customer can virtually try on hundreds of cosmetics products. The shopper can change facial expressions and lighting conditions; the virtual makeup stays on her face. The online glasses merchant Warby Parker allows consumers to upload a picture of themselves and try on frames virtually. Other apps such as Perfect 36 5 and Face Tune let you touch up your photo so you can remove a pimple, a wrinkle, or even a few pounds before you post it on Instagram or Facebook for others to admire.

Objective 6-3

Gender Identity

The Indian government banned a TV spot for Axe men’s deodorant: The spot shows a man who turns into a walking chocolate figurine after he sprays himself with the brand’s Dark Temptation deodorant. As he walks through the city, women throw themselves at him as they lick him and bite off various parts of his body. Although the same ad played in Argentina and Europe without any problem, traditional Indian culture doesn’t approve of such blatant imagery. The government yanked another ad for Amul Macho underwear, in which a young woman comes to a river to do...