

Dressing your soul: The role of brand engagement in self-concept*

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Abstract

The current study aims to contribute to the literature on brand engagement in self-concept (BESC). Supported by self-determination theory, a comprehensive model that explains the psychological drivers and consequences of BESC is tested. Based on a sample of 600 international highly engaged cosplayers, the results contribute to the literature on BESC by showing that extrinsic personal aspirations positively influence individuals' propensity to include brands in their definition of themselves. The findings show that higher levels of extrinsic personal aspirations lead to higher BESC manifestations that in turn lead to greater brand loyalty and brand advocacy. Furthermore, the findings indicate that personal aspirations have an indirect effect on brand loyalty and brand advocacy through BESC. The managerial implications for fashion brands are discussed.

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Introduction

The literature on consumer behaviour provides insights into the phenomenon of consumers expressing some aspects of themselves through products and brands (Holman, 1980; Hassenzahl, 2018).

In the consumption setting, the literature establishes the importance of cultivating specific self-presentations through personal adornment as a means of achieving a variety of identity goals (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thomson, Whelan & Johnson, 2012). When consumers engage in consumption, they can use the product to express *who they want to be*, communicating their expression of the perceived authentic self, and *who they should be*, adhering to appropriate socio-cultural conduct (Liu & Hogg, 2018).

Thus, consumers tend to define themselves by engaging with brands in public or in private (Ferraro, Escalas & Bettman, 2011). For this reason, the retail clothing industry designs and formulates a large-scale communication strategy using self-concept as the denominator for building corporate brands and attracting target customers. Consumers are also likely to use precious jewellery brands to enhance their self-image while treating the jewellery as a very special personal belonging (Jamal & Goode, 2001). The literature refers to this phenomenon as the brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) construct. Because BESC potentially explains a great deal of consumer decision making, it is crucial for understanding why consumers select one brand among others (Flynn, Goldsmith & Korzenny, 2011). Studies on BESC support the idea that consumers construe their self-concepts in terms of their favourite brands and that such construal can have important implications for marketers in terms of brand equity (Keller, 1993), attention to brands (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009) and brand preference (Liu et al., 2018). Despite the importance of BESC, the theoretical understanding of the linkage between brands and specific aspects of self remains incomplete (Ewing & Allen, 2017). For instance, studies on BESC focus on the relationship between BESC and consumer behaviour, such as brand loyalty (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009), without considering antecedents, while other studies focus only on drivers (Rasmus, Jaroszyńska & Pałęga, 2017). Consequently, a comprehensive model that considers the antecedents and consequences of BESC is still lacking.

Clothes and fashion brands, even more than other material goods, are consumed not only for their functional benefits but also as symbols of identity (Cox & Dittmar, 1995; Kim & Kang, 2015). Some individuals identify clothing as a tactical tool for self-definition, thus exercising control over the way in which individuals present themselves to others (Peluchette, Karl & Rust, 2006). A paper by Levy (1959) states that ‘People buy things not only for what they can do, but for what they mean’ (p. 118). Robertson (1970) asserts that products vary in the degree to which their social-symbolic meaning is important; he describes items of clothing as products that are recognized in our society as ‘saying something’ about a person (p. 3). Indeed, clothing is recognized as a medium of communication that expresses a range of social information (Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977).

To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, the present study adopts the self-determination theory to define the antecedents and the consequences of BESC. Scholars suggest that self-brand connections exist and can lead to favourable brand attitudes (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In particular, we would like to shed light on the relationship between engagement and brand-related constructs such as brand advocacy and brand loyalty (Grappi & Visentin, 2008; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). These two constructs, as well as BESC, are relevant determinants of the consumer-brand relationship (Dwivedi, 2015; Hsiao, Shen & Chao, 2015). While advocacy and loyalty are related to the linkage with a specific brand, BESC indicates how consumers vary in their general engagement with brands. Advocacy and loyalty can be affected by the tendency of consumers to create a deep relationship with their favourite brands and include them as part of their self-concept. Thus, the importance for companies of improving the commitment of consumers to re-buying or re-patronizing a preferred product and recommending the brand to others is well acknowledged. For this reason, it is relevant to study how brand loyalty and advocacy can be influenced by BESC and how managers can consequently develop their brand strategies.

With this aim, we propose a comprehensive model including the antecedents (as already investigated by Razmus, Jaroszyńska & Pałęga, 2017) and the consequences of BESC. Moreover, we test this model in a community of high-engagement manifestations: the cosplayer community. In general, the literature acknowledges that consumers choose brands with appealing personalities to enhance their selves (Torelli, Monga & Kaikati, 2011) or their ideal selves (Belk, 1988). It also demonstrates that consumers appear to be especially driven by their ideal selves in public circumstances (Swaminathan, Stilley & Ahluwalia, 2008). By using brands as subtle cues, consumers communicate idealized versions of their selves, even more so in aggregate

than their actual selves (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). The ideal self represents either an expansion of the self or a contraction of the self (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Indeed, brands are imbued with symbolic meanings, and, through these meanings, they can serve as a means for consumers to express aspects of their ideal self (Belk, 1988). The community of cosplayers, a form of pop culture craft consumption and masquerade (Seregina & Weijs, 2016), can be interpreted as an extreme case of dressing to express one's ideal self. This specific case can be useful in analysing the propensity to dress to transmit self-identity, representing a new turn in the conception of self (Geczy, 2016). Indeed, the wearing of a costume symbolically transforms the identity of players, enabling them to represent their ordinary self in a new guise through role play (Peirson-Smith, 2013).

This research offers an advancement of the literature by explaining the antecedents of brand engagement in self-concept and testing how this construct can affect brand advocacy and loyalty. By testing the model in the cosplayer community, the present study sheds light on the importance of BESC for the fashion industry, clarifying how individuals use clothes to convey to others a specific image of the self. In the first paragraph of the paper, we introduce the concept of BESC through the self-determination theory and we explain the antecedents and consequences of BESC, which we will test in the empirical study. Therefore, we introduce the context of the research – fashion – showing how fashion products and brands assume a crucial role regarding the self-concept expression of consumers. In the second paragraph, we describe the methodology adopted to investigate the phenomenon and to test the model. The results are then discussed, and finally we conclude by highlighting the contribution of the paper to theory and practice and suggest some future directions for research.

1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

1.1. Self-determination theory and brand engagement in self-concept

As the previous literature shows, the consumer-brand relationship is influenced by the link between the brand and the self (Belk, 1988; Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Aggarwal, 2004), leading to self-connection or other related terms such as self-congruence or self-presentation. Recent research on the consumer-brand relationship focuses on the differences between consumers (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015) with respect to their engagement with brands (Spratt, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Leckie, Nyadzayo & Johnson, 2016).

Research published over the years conceptualizes the construct of engagement in various ways, focusing on several dimensions, antecedents, outcomes and foci of interest. Traditionally, engagement is studied with reference to the relationship between the brand and the consumer. One of the first contributions defines engagement as the ‘customer behavioural manifestations toward the brand or the firm, beyond purchase’ (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 253). Similarly, Kumar et al. (2010) refer to engagement in terms of customers’ behaviours ‘that are beyond direct transactions’ (p. 297) in relation to customers’ behavioural manifestations toward the brand, as research considers recommendations, referrals, word of mouth and blogging (i.e. Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009; Kumar et al., 2010; Schmitt, Skiera & Van den Bulte, 2011; Verlegh et al., 2013). In more recent work, the construct is further developed by focusing not only on the behavioural dimension but also on the cognitive and emotional ones (Hollebeek, 2011; Harmeling et al., 2017). Cognitive activity refers to the level of concentration on and/or engrossment in the brand, while emotional activity refers to the level of brand-related inspiration and/or pride. Along with this perspective, Brodie et al. (2011) define engagement as the ‘psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal/object’ (p. 9).

Among the other studies examining customer brand engagement, the study by Sprott et al. (2009) introduces the concept of BESC, which can be considered as ‘the individual difference representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves’ (p. 92). Drawing on a theory developed by Markus (1983), the same authors contend that self-concept is the set of self-schemas that originate from stable knowledge structures about the self and that are used to interpret incoming self-related information to help people to make sense of themselves in their environment. Consequently, people’s varying tendency to possess self-schemas leads to differential attitudes and behaviour towards those objects that are relevant to those schemas (e.g. brand, community and characters). Therefore, the underlying assumption of the BESC construct stems from the varying tendency of consumers to possess brand-related schemas (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009). For this reason, people develop different brand-related cognitions, perceptions and behaviours and vary in their tendency to engage in identity building and expression through brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). In summary, Sprott, Czellar and Spangenberg (2009) posit the following logical path: stable knowledge about the self → self-schemas for interpreting the environment → self-concept → BESC (engagement with brands to build and maintain the self-concept). Thus, different schemas → different BESC.

In this vein, the self-determination theory – a theory of human motivation concerned with the development and functioning of personality within social contexts – explains how people are pushed into action by a variety of factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory asserts that people are active organisms with a natural tendency towards psychological growth and development (Sheldon *et al.*, 2001). From this perspective, individuals' behaviour is self-determined and people act to achieve their most salient goals.

The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be useful in the case of cosplayers, because they manifest their brand engagement in self-concept by dressing up as characters who reflect their personal aspirations (Winge, 2006; Kane, 2017).

The factors that push people into actions can be associated with two types of goals: intrinsic and extrinsic (Razmus, Jaroszyńska & Palęga, 2017). The number of goals in this theory has evolved from four (Kasser & Ryan, 1993) to seven (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). In this research, we adopt Razmus, Jaroszyńska and Palęga's (2017) perspective, in which six goals are considered. Namely, the intrinsic goals are represented by (1) self-acceptance (achieve psychological growth, autonomy and self-regard); (2) affiliation (have satisfying relationships with family and friends); and (3) community feeling (improve the world through activism). The extrinsic goals consist of: (4) financial success (be wealthy and materially successful); (5) social recognition (be famous, well known and admired); and (6) appealing appearance (look attractive in terms of body, clothing and fashion).

Intrinsic goals are internally orientated and are inherently valuable or satisfying to the individual rather than being dependent on the contingent evaluation of others (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2015). Recent literature suggests that personal intrinsic aspirations are not positively associated with entering into relationships with brands, contrary to the previous notion in theoretical analyses (Razmus, Jaroszyńska & Palęga, 2017). For example, studies demonstrate that intrinsic aspirations are negatively associated with the consumption of luxury goods (Truong, 2010; Truong, McColl & Kitchen, 2010). Indeed, a core feeling of intrinsic aspirations is autonomy: strong links between intrinsic motivations and satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence are clearly demonstrated (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Kim, Kasser & Lee, 2003). The engagement of a brand in self-concept to create and show a new identity reveals a lack of autonomy of the individual. In the context of cosplayers, this phenomenon is reflected in the use that individuals make of characters. The lower the level of intrinsic aspirations, the more the cosplayer needs the character to express and communicate the ideal self.

This enables us to hypothesize that intrinsic aspirations negatively affect BESC. Consequently, the following hypotheses is formulated:

H1: Intrinsic aspirations negatively influence BESC. Self-acceptance (H1a), affiliation (H1b) and community feeling (H1c) are negatively and directly related to BESC.

Individuals who pursue extrinsic goals tend to be concerned about how they are perceived by others and are motivated by a desire to earn praise and rewards (Truong, 2010). What really matters in this kind of motivation is the social aspect: a person may engage in actions to increase his or her value in other people's eyes. Therefore, as a considerable number of researchers state, consumers use brands to send certain signals to society (Berger & Heath, 2007; Han, Nunes & Drèze, 2010). This is specifically applicable to fashion brands, which for consumers become the means to be seen by others in specific ways (Kim & Kang, 2015; Hassenzahl, 2018). Therefore, people who want to be considered as successful, socially recognized and attractive are more likely to develop a strong relationship with brands. From this perspective, we hypothesize as follows:

H2: Extrinsic aspirations positively influence BESC. Financial success (H2a), social recognition (H2b) and an appealing appearance (H2c) are positively and directly related to BESC.

The relationship between personal aspirations and BESC leads to brand advocacy and brand loyalty. Indeed, the literature suggests that BESC is relevant because it affects brand-related consumers' attitude and behaviour meaningfully (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009). Brand advocacy consists of the promotion of a specific object embedded in the self (e.g. the brand or the character). According to Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen (2012), such promotion, or advocacy, can take place both socially and physically. Socially, advocacy includes recommending the brand to others or defending the brand when it is attacked by others. Physically, advocacy may involve buying and using brand merchandise that displays concrete references to the brand, for instance by wearing a highly visible brand logo. High-BESC consumers are likely to integrate brands towards which they hold favourable attitudes into their self-concept. For these consumers, featuring a visible name or logo on products from a favourite brand is more likely to serve as an expression of the personal characteristics that they want to show to others. From this perspective, the higher the tendency of people to engage

brands in the self-concept, the more they are willing to show, promote and defend the brand. With this premise, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: BESC positively influences brand advocacy.

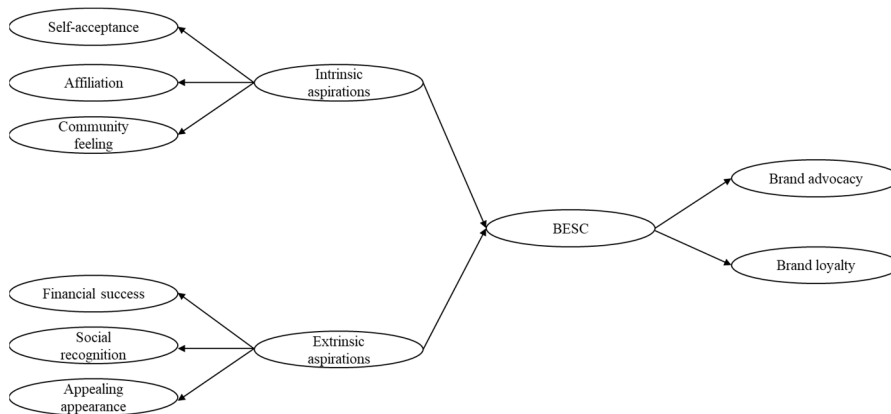
Brand loyalty is defined as ‘a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviours’ (Oliver, 1999, p. 3). Consumers develop brand loyalty by creating a positive output of brand equity, which positively engenders a preference for a certain brand over others (Vogel, Evanschitzky & Ramaseshan, 2008; Zhang, van Doorn & Leeftang, 2014).

The literature suggests that the close relationship of a brand with its consumers tends to reflect the level of positive affect generated by that brand; this strong and positive affective response is associated with high levels of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). BESC, representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves, is by definition a form of closeness to the brand. In this view, we expect a higher level of BESC to correspond to a higher level of loyalty. Formally, the following hypothesis is stated:

H4: BESC positively influences brand loyalty.

The hypotheses are summarized in the model shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Theoretical model: antecedents and consequences of BESC



1.2. Cosplayers, fashion and the self

To test our hypotheses, we developed an empirical study in the context of cosplayers, a community with high-engagement manifestations that represents an extreme case of dressing to express oneself. The fashion industry offers products that can be used by consumers as tools of self-presentation, whereby an individual can create, maintain and modify the image to align with perceived social norms (McNeill, 2018). In this context, products and brands assume a crucial role for the self-concept that represents the primary determinant of people's self-presentation and the specific aspects of the self that individuals wish to control and portray. As an important aspect of non-verbal behaviour, clothing serves a wide variety of communicative functions. Veblen (1899) emphasizes that clothing consumption is far more than the physical need to protect the body, underlining the symbolic value of fashion in society. One relevant function of clothing is the interaction with other people. According to Bovone (2006), since individuals can have limited access to another person's identity through appearance, the body is the first element for discerning a person's character or personality. Another important role of clothing is the desire to differentiate oneself from others and furthermore from what others would normally expect. In this sense, clothing represents a tool for controlling the images that others have of us (Bruner, 1963). Clothing has another function; it can indicate the wearer's group membership or position within a group. Accordingly, fashion, adding aesthetic touches, is mostly a means of adhering to a specific social order (Hendricks, Kelley & Eicher, 1968). Aiken (1963) tries to link clothing style with social position and personality. He finds that decoration in dress correlates positively with such traits as conformity, sociability and non-intellectualism. Therefore, the literature recognizes clothing as an instrument of communication that expresses a range of social information (McCracken & Roth, 1989; Niinimäki, 2010). Considering all these functions of clothing, this research focuses on the link between people and the self.

An extreme case in which the communicative role of dressing clearly emerges is the phenomenon of cosplayers. The term cosplay is a linguistic mash-up that derives from the combination of the English words 'costume' and 'play' (Ito & Crutcher, 2014) and refers to the practice of dressing up as characters from various fictional media (movies, series, videogames, anime and comics) during events, usually when attending various fan or industry conventions (Winge, 2006). The costume building draws inspiration mostly from 'geek culture' – that is, the increasingly popular consumption field of superheroes and fantasy – and is primarily (though not entirely) related to TV, comic book and video game franchises (Seregina & Weijo, 2016).

The practice of cosplay spans a vast geographical area, as many large national and international fan conventions and events demonstrate, such as Comic-Con International, Worldcon, World Cosplay Summit, Katsu Con, EOY Cosplay Festival and Lucca Comics.

Cosplay dress may be the most important tool that cosplayers have to communicate their chosen character and character traits non-verbally. The purposes of cosplaying can vary but include expressing adoration of the character, enjoying attention or approval from audiences/peers and experiencing the creative process of the costume construction (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013). According to some authors, cosplayers annihilate their self-concept and achieve the death of the ‘original self’ (Geczy, 2016). According to other authors (Peirson-Smith, 2013), cosplayers do not completely destroy their original self but emphasize the characteristics of the original self and/or the characteristics of the character by coming closer to the ideal self. Adhering to the second branch of the literature, we underline how cosplay dress allows cosplayers to move from their actual identity to their chosen cosplay character and sometimes back again (Winge, 2006). According to Evans (2006), cosplayers escape from the regular communicative acts of their normal selves by expressing a fantasy self in public through the performative component of self-identification. However, in cosplay, the image and identity of an individual are never stagnant. It is possible that many cosplayers move between different characters according to their changing interests and passions. Individuals tend to wear different masks to construct, transform or reshape their temporary identity over the course of self-formation and transformation (Rahman, Wing-Sun & Cheung, 2012). This phenomenon illustrates how clothes, even more than other material goods, are consumed not only for their functional benefits but also as symbols of identity (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). Rosenberg and Letamendi (2013) suggest investigating this community and the relationship with the self. They state that similarity between one person and another often leads to increased liking, which could be true in the case of cosplayers and the characters that they portray. Some similarity between the cosplayer and the character increases identification, which in turn increases liking and a desire to be – albeit it temporarily – that character.

Therefore, we turn to the literature on the consumer–brand relationship. Indeed, from this point of view, comics represent a limit case, in which the main character of stories is immediately overlapped with the comic brand and conveys its desired identity and personality. In other cases, branding strategies may consider the opportunity to create an ad hoc character for communication needs. Characters may benefit the associated brands by establishing a strong identity and favourable associations (Dotz, Morton & Lund,

1996). Three broad typologies of characters exist: brand characters in animation and comics (e.g. Spider Man), brand characters with an identity (e.g. Michelin Man) and brand characters in pure design (e.g. Diddle). The case of cosplayers is embedded in the brand character in animation and comic typology. Brand characters in animation and comics offer a rich storyline and typically include other supporting characters as background. The storyline and visual animation impart personalities to the characters and relate to consumers' fantasies (Hosany et al., 2013). Consequently, a strong relationship is generated between brand, character and consumer.

2. Methodology

2.1. Procedures and measures

To test the theoretical model advanced in the previous section, we ran a structural equation modelling (SEM) with IBM AMOS Version 23. We developed a questionnaire on Qualtrics and submitted it by email to 600 members of 2 different cosplayer communities on Facebook. We decided to collect responses from online cosplayer communities to target the questionnaire to cosplayers and reach an appropriate number of valid respondents. Each respondent received an email with a brief explanation of the survey and the link to complete it on Qualtrics. A filter question was asked first: 'Can you define yourself as a cosplayer?' People answering 'no' to this question were discarded. A second filter question tested the active role as a cosplayer of the individual. Accordingly, we asked the respondents whether they used to or usually dress up as famous characters, providing examples of the characters in whom we were interested (i.e. characters from various fictional media, such as movies, series, videogames, anime and comics). Again, for this question, people answering 'no' were discarded from the sample. The questionnaire was administered in English for the international community of cosplayers (actually formed by 37,450 members) and in Italian for the Italian community (actually consisting of 24,202 members). The Italian questionnaire was professionally translated from English into Italian and back from Italian into English to limit translation biases. The survey included 46 items (see Appendix – Table 2) employing a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (Likert, 1932). The items were randomized to improve the quality of the responses. Personal aspirations were measured using Razmus, Jaroszyńska and Pałęga's (2017) description of 6 aspirations, based on the Kasser and Ryan (1996) model. We used 18 items related to intrinsic (self-acceptance, affiliation and community

feeling) and extrinsic (financial success, social recognition and appealing appearance) aspirations basing on the Truong (2010) and Sheldon et al. (2001) scale. Following Sprott, Czellar and Spangenberg (2009), BESC was examined through 8 items. We measured brand advocacy using Kemp and Bui's (2011) 3-item scale adapted from Kim, Han and Park (2001), and we measured brand loyalty using Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneswar and Sen's (2012) 3-item scale.

2.2. The sample

Of the 600 cosplayers approached, 416 responded to the questionnaire. More than half of the sample was female (63.3%). The majority of the respondents were aged 21 to 25 (33.3%). Around 20% were between 16 and 20 years old; 20.5% were 26 to 30; 5.8% were 36 to 40; and 8.3% were over 40. The composition of our sample reflects the overall composition of the cosplayer population. Indeed, statistics (ATA Blog, 2018) reveal that the majority of cosplayers are female (about 64%) and aged between 23 and 39 years (about 60%). In addition, we asked cosplayers whether they used to dress up as the same character or whether they have changed who they dress up as: 35.1% declared that they had changed their costume, while 64.9% had maintained the same one.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Validity and reliability tests

The measures' reliability was first assessed through the measurement of Cronbach's alphas. All the constructs show Cronbach's alphas greater than .70 (all the Cronbach's alphas are reported in Table 2).

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the measurement model with latent variables. To be able to make decisions regarding reliable constructs, the following features of the solution were investigated: unidimensionality, convergent validity, reliability and discriminant validity (Janssens et al., 2008). Unidimensionality and convergent validity are satisfied, since all the variables' measures have a high loading ($> .50$) on the latent variables and are significant (critical ratio = C.R. = t -value > 1.96 ; Table 1).

Table 1 – Regression weights (group number 1 – default model)

		Estimate (unstandardized)	Estimate (standardized)	S.E.	C.R.
Com_Feel_Tot	<--- Intrinsic_asp	1.000	0.619		
Affiliation_Tot	<--- Intrinsic_asp	0.897	0.634	0.150	5.979
Self_Acc_Tot	<--- Intrinsic_asp	0.687	0.512	0.111	6.167
Financ_Succ_Tot	<--- Extrinsic_asp	1.000	0.619		
Appeal_Tot	<--- Extrinsic_asp	1.415	0.865	0.130	10.849
Soc_Rec_Tot	<--- Extrinsic_asp	1.031	0.728	0.092	11.191
BESC_1	<--- BESC	1.000	0.833		
BESC_2	<--- BESC	1.116	0.871	0.049	22.834
BESC_3	<--- BESC	1.200	0.907	0.049	24.485
BESC_4	<--- BESC	1.104	0.823	0.053	20.773
BESC_5	<--- BESC	1.197	0.895	0.050	23.931
BESC_6	<--- BESC	1.173	0.885	0.050	23.458
BESC_7	<--- BESC	1.090	0.853	0.049	22.030
BESC_8	<--- BESC	1.018	0.8	0.051	19.884
ADVOC_1	<--- Advocacy	1.000	0.772		
ADVOC_2	<--- Advocacy	1.140	0.837	0.069	16.472
ADVOC_3	<--- Advocacy	1.026	0.753	0.068	15.001
LOYALTY_1	<--- Loyalty	1.000	0.733		
LOYALTY_2	<--- Loyalty	1.262	0.861	0.075	16.798
LOYALTY_3	<--- Loyalty	1.333	0.877	0.078	17.008

The overall fit determines the degree to which the covariance matrix generated by the model corresponds to the actual (observed) covariance matrix (Janssens et al., 2008). In our case, the chi-square value (discrepancy) is 536.656 with a p-value of $< .001$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a bad fit of the overall measurement model. However, examining the chi-square value alone often leads to the model having to be rejected (particularly with larger samples). Accordingly, the overall fit is poor considering the $CMIN/df$, which is 3.35, and the goodness of fit index (GFI), which is equal to .89. However, the model is acceptable according to the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), which is greater than .80 (equal to .85). In addition, the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) are both greater than the .90 cut-off (Byrne, 2016), respectively equaling .92 and .93, which indicate an acceptable model. The RMSEA is .08

here. According to Browne and Cudeck (1993), values up to .08 indicate an acceptable fit.

Reliability was assessed through the variance extracted criterion. Each construct has a value greater than .50, and the variance extracted for each latent variable is shown in Table 2.

Finally, discriminant validity was assessed through the mutual variances between the latent variables. As shown in Table 3, none of the variances that is shared by two constructs is higher than the average variance extracted of these constructs. This finding indicates discriminant validity for the five constructs that were formed.

In conclusion, the measurement model proves to be unidimensional and reliable and indicates convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 2 – CFA results

Construct	Items	AVE	CR	C.α
Intrinsic aspiration	Com_Feel	0.615	0.349	0.803
	Affiliation			
	Self_Acc			
Extrinsic aspiration	Financ_Succ	0.785	0.554	0.876
	Appeal			
	Soc_Rec			
BESC	BESC_1	0.957	0.738	0.957
	BESC_2			
	BESC_3			
	BESC_4			
	BESC_5			
	BESC_6			
	BESC_7			
	BESC_8			
Advocacy	ADVOC_1	0.831	0.621	0.831
	ADVOC_2			
	ADVOC_3			
Loyalty	LOYALTY_1	0.865	0.683	0.858
	LOYALTY_2			
	LOYALTY_3			

Notes: Model fit: $\chi^2 = 536.656$, $df = 160$, $NFI = 0.907$, $IFI = 0.933$, $CFI = 0.932$, $GFI = 0.885$, $RMSEA = 0.075$.

Table 3 – Discriminant validity

	Intrinsic aspiration	Extrinsic aspiration	BESC	Advocacy	Loyalty
Intrinsic aspiration	0.615				
Extrinsic aspiration	0.007	0.785			
BESC	0.003	0.011	0.957		
Advocacy	0.004	0.041	0.462	0.831	
Loyalty	0.004	0.052	0.404	0.490	0.865

3.2. Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses were tested using path analysis, which involves the estimation of structural relationships between latent variables. Although the model presents low scores for the GFI (.87) and AGFI (.84), it is acceptable due to the good scores of the TLI (.91), CFI (.92) and RMSEA (0.08). In Tables 4 and 5, the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients are shown, respectively.

Extrinsic aspirations appear to have a significant influence, while intrinsic aspirations have no influence, on the degree of BESC. Thus, H1 is not confirmed, while H2 is supported. This suggests that intrinsic aspirations, such as self-acceptance, affiliation and community feeling, are not negatively associated with BESC, as suggested by Razmus, Jaroszyńska and Pałęga (2017). However, the literature on intrinsic aspirations and brand identification is quite confused, since some studies show a positive relationship between intrinsic aspirations and brand identification (e.g. Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, 2012), whilst other studies provide empirical evidence of a negative relationship between intrinsic aspirations and brand identification (e.g. Truong, 2010). Despite the dissonance among the results about the link between intrinsic aspirations and brand identification, the predominant materialistic component of BESC hardly justifies a positive association between intrinsic aspiration and BESC, as we showed in our analysis. This means that individuals are almost indifferent to treating their inclusion of characters in their self-concept as a substitute for relations with people. This study aligns with recent reports about the need to distinguish the nature of emotional attitudes towards brands from that of emotional attitudes towards people (Marketing Science Institute, 2016). The obtained result seems to limit the role of emotional motives in choosing cosplay characters, since they are not associated with BESC. However, emotional attitudes towards people

appear to play a significant role in the choice of the cosplay dress, since H2 demonstrates that extrinsic aspirations are significant in explaining consumer behaviours.

The tests of H3 and H4 are strongly significant and show that BESC positively influences respectively brand advocacy and brand loyalty. The evidence sheds light on the consequences of BESC. The analysis confirms that higher levels of extrinsic aspiration generate a higher BESC level, which consequently increases the willingness to spread positive word of mouth related to the brand/character (brand advocacy) and the willingness to repurchase items related to that character or to dress multiple times as that character (brand loyalty). Figure 2 summarizes the comprehensive analysis of the antecedents and consequences of BESC that we ran.

Figure 2 – SEM results of the model

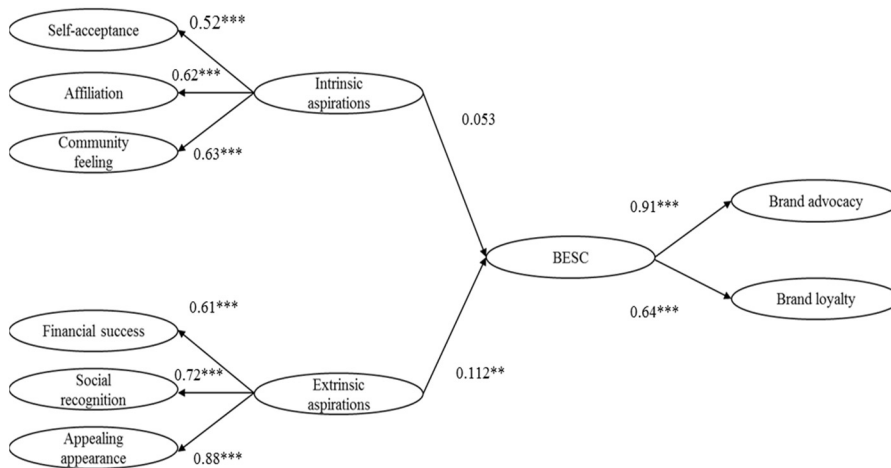


Table 4 – Regression weights (group number 1 – default model)

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
BESC	<---	Extrinsic_asp	0.183	0.09	2.026	**
BESC	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.112	0.134	0.842	0.4
Advocacy	<---	BESC	0.655	0.053	12.357	***
Loyalty	<---	BESC	0.581	0.051	11.355	***
Com_Feel_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	1			
Affiliation_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.873	0.146	5.968	***
Self_Acc_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.686	0.112	6.134	***
Financ_Succ_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	1			
Appeal_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	1.454	0.138	10.502	***
Soc_Rec_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	1.03	0.093	11.097	***
BESC_1	<---	BESC	1			
BESC_2	<---	BESC	1.113	0.049	22.831	***
BESC_3	<---	BESC	1.197	0.049	24.499	***
BESC_4	<---	BESC	1.104	0.053	20.846	***
BESC_5	<---	BESC	1.193	0.05	23.897	***
BESC_6	<---	BESC	1.17	0.05	23.481	***
BESC_7	<---	BESC	1.089	0.049	22.092	***
BESC_8	<---	BESC	1.018	0.051	19.932	***
ADVOC_1	<---	Advocacy	1			
ADVOC_2	<---	Advocacy	1.146	0.072	15.985	***
ADVOC_3	<---	Advocacy	1.035	0.07	14.787	***
LOYALTY_1	<---	Loyalty	1			
LOYALTY_2	<---	Loyalty	1.293	0.079	16.405	***
LOYALTY_3	<---	Loyalty	1.362	0.082	16.533	***

Table 5 – Standardized regression weights: (group number 1 – default model)

			Estimate
BESC	<---	Extrinsic_asp	0.112
BESC	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.053
Advocacy	<---	BESC	0.691
Loyalty	<---	BESC	0.643
Com_Feel_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.625
Affiliation_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.623
Self_Acc_Tot	<---	Intrinsic_asp	0.517
Financ_Succ_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	0.612
Appeal_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	0.878
Soc_Rec_Tot	<---	Extrinsic_asp	0.719
BESC_1	<---	BESC	0.834
BESC_2	<---	BESC	0.870
BESC_3	<---	BESC	0.906
BESC_4	<---	BESC	0.824
BESC_5	<---	BESC	0.893
BESC_6	<---	BESC	0.884
BESC_7	<---	BESC	0.854
BESC_8	<---	BESC	0.801
ADVOC_1	<---	Advocacy	0.768
ADVOC_2	<---	Advocacy	0.838
ADVOC_3	<---	Advocacy	0.756
LOYALTY_1	<---	Loyalty	0.721
LOYALTY_2	<---	Loyalty	0.867
LOYALTY_3	<---	Loyalty	0.881

Since the model can be read as implying that BESC mediates the relationship of motivations with brand loyalty and advocacy, we provide mediation analysis results. We performed the mediation analysis with PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). We determined whether mediation exists by interpreting the indirect effect of extrinsic aspirations on brand loyalty and brand advocacy through BESC. Mediation analysis for intrinsic motivations was not performed, as no relationship was found between intrinsic motivations and BESC. Using the bootstrap sample distribution (the number of bootstrap samples for the percentile bootstrap confidence interval is 5,000), the upper and lower limits of the bootstrap confidence interval, as reported by PROCESS, are (.007 to .188) for loyalty ($\beta = .095$) and (.004 to .173) for advocacy ($\beta = .089$). As the 95% confidence interval does not include 0, we can infer significant mediation of extrinsic aspirations' effect on loyalty and advocacy through BESC at $\alpha = .05$. Next, the importance of the mediation was assessed by interpreting extrinsic aspirations' direct effect on loyalty and advocacy. The p -value of the direct effect on loyalty is .001, while the direct effect on advocacy is .004. Both effects are significant. Thus, we can conclude complementary partial mediation (Zhao, Lynch & Chen, 2010).

Conclusions

This study contributed to the literature on BESC by developing and testing a comprehensive model aiming to explain the antecedents and consequences of BESC. The sample of respondents belonging to two cosplayer communities helped to provide further insights into the literature on fashion. Adopting the view that individuals use cosplayer clothes to express themselves and communicate either who they want to be or who they should be (Liu & Hogg, 2018), the tendency to view a character as part of how they view themselves is mainly triggered by the strength of extrinsic aspirations. In other words, the higher is the individual's willingness to achieve financial success, gain social recognition and be appealing to others, the stronger is the propensity of the individuals to view characters as parts of themselves. As a consequence, these individuals show higher levels of loyalty and advocacy to their favourite characters.

Since the literature justifies the similarities to brands (e.g. Dotz, Morton & Lund, 1996), the same comprehensive model may reflect what happens between fashion brands and consumers. Thus, individuals' extrinsic aspirations increase their propensity to engage with fashion brands that in turn lead them to advocate and be loyal to their favourite brands. Moreover, mediation

analysis (Hayes, 2013) revealed the indirect effect of extrinsic personal aspirations on brand loyalty and brand advocacy through BESC. Thus, this study confirmed the previous studies that attempt to provide a psychological explanation of brand loyalty and brand advocacy through the self-determination theory (e.g. Lin, Tsai & Chiu, 2009). In this sense, BESC represents a psychological mechanism able to explain the effect of personal aspirations on brand loyalty and brand advocacy.

The peculiarity of the cosplayer community is useful to control the role of strong brand self-connection, maintaining its stability within the sample. As Sprott, Czellar and Spangenberg (2009) point out, measuring BESC on a large-scale basis might be impractical; consequently, firms are more likely to benefit from investigating specific target segments to adapt brand communication strategies according to their levels of BESC. Moreover, the cosplayer community is useful for investigating the role of brand engagement in the fashion industry. Indeed, as scholars show, fashion goods are usually used to express part of the self; thus, the concept of identification and the self-concept conveyed by a brand or a product is considerably relevant to the decision-making process of consumers. Consequently, the more a brand is able to convey its personality by exploring its own personification process (in some cases, with the help of a character), the higher the likelihood that consumers will choose that brand because they feel close (in terms of identity or personality) to it. As Razmus, Jaroszyńska and Pałęga (2017) state, product brands convey to consumers certain meanings that, in the process of identification, may become part of their self-concept. In this sense, each brand can be represented by a collection of unique meanings generated in the course of marketing communications. Consequently, the tendency to include specific brands in one's self-concept can be highly varied in the context of building an appropriate image of the consumer. Moreover, brands need to enhance their capacity to be part of consumers' self-concept to be advocated and repurchased by them. Indeed, the consumer-brand connection relies both on the natural tendency of individuals to consider brands as part of their self-concept and on the consumers' propensity to be loyal to specific brands. However, it also depends on the ability of brands to strengthen those associations and meanings that are relevant to consumers. Consequently, brands that are able to establish stronger connections with their customers (i.e. brands that gain higher levels of BESC and higher levels of loyalty) achieve a higher value than brands that are poorer in terms of relationships. Accordingly, managers should actively consider how to incorporate their brands into high-BESC consumers' self-concepts and how to inhibit other competing brands that threaten the existing relationship. Consequently, consumers' dif-

ferent natural tendencies (e.g. personal aspirations) must be considered, because they are able to determine different natural inclinations to engagement that lead to different propensities for brand loyalty and brand advocacy.

Given that this research does not consider moderators of the relationship between personal aspirations, BESC, brand loyalty and brand advocacy, future research should study other variables that affect this relationship (e.g., self-brand congruity). Another future development comes from the description of our sample that about 30% of the respondents are not loyal to a specific character, as they dress up as different characters at different events, rather than always dressing up as the same superhero. Accordingly, future studies could consider individuals' propensity to be loyal to brands as a possible moderator of the effect of personal aspirations on BESC. This could provide a relevant contribution to the literature on brand engagement in self-concept, as the literature on the drivers and moderators of BESC is still lacking.

APPENDIX

Table 2 – Construct items

Variable	Items
<i>Intrinsic aspirations</i>	
Self-acceptance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. At the end of my life, to be able to look back on it as meaningful and complete. How important is this to you? 2. To know and accept who I really am. How important is this to you? 3. To gain increasing insight into why I do the things I do. How important is this to you?
Affiliation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To have good friends whom I can count on. How important is this to you? 2. To share my life with someone I love. How important is this to you? 3. To feel that there are people who really love me and whom I love. How important is this to you?
Community feeling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To assist people who need help, asking nothing in return. How important is this to you? 2. To help others improve their lives. How important is this to you? 3. To help people in need. How important is this to you?
<i>Extrinsic aspirations</i>	
Financial success	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be personally wealthy. How important is this to you? 2. To be financially successful. How important is this to you? 3. To be rich. How important is this to you?
Appealing appearance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To hide the signs of ageing successfully. How important is this to you? 2. To have people comment often about how attractive I look. How important is this to you? 3. To have an image that others find appealing. How important is this to you?
Social recognition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To have a strong influence on others' beliefs and behaviour. How important is this to you? 2. To be appreciated and liked by many people. How important is this to you? 3. To be popular. How important is this to you?
BESC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I have a special bond with the brands that I like. 2. I consider my favourite brands to be a part of myself. 3. I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me. 4. Part of me is defined by important brands in my life. 5. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer. 6. I can identify with important brands in my life. 7. There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself. 8. My favourite brands are an important indication of who I am.
Advocacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I stick with the brand (character) I chose because I know it is the best for me. 2. I will buy the brand (character) I chose the next time I buy. 3. I intend to keep purchasing the brand (character) I chose.
Loyalty	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I will continue to use this brand (character) because I am satisfied and acquainted with the brand. 2. I will use this brand (character) in spite of competitors' deals. 3. I prefer the brand (character) to others.

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