

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRAND PREFERENCE**

An investigation into how consumers develop preference for beer brands over time

Student Name: Ruben Bronsink

Student Number: 542775

Supervisor: Drs. Matthijs Leendertse

Master Media Studies - Media & Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## **ABSTRACT**

In today's consumer market, consumers have to make more choices between different brands than in the past. For almost every product, there are multiple brands to choose from, often placed right next to each other on the shelf. Therefore, creating brand preference among consumers is essential for brands. Previous studies have focused on quantitatively showing which marketing concepts affect brand preference. However, these studies only focus on brand preference at a certain point in time. In addition, the focus on quantitatively establishing correlations between marketing concepts does not provide knowledge on how brand preference is developed. This study takes a qualitative approach to answer the following research question: How do consumers develop a preference for beer brands over time? The three main constructs that are used as the basis of the research are brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. These constructs have been quantitatively proven to influence brand preference and are therefore an excellent starting point to study how brand preference develops over time. Semi structured interviews with 11 beer consumers are used to gather data and a thematic analysis with theory driven themes is used to analyze the data. The results show that for brand preference the development over time indeed plays a crucial role. For beer brands, it is mainly developed through close contact with the brand and most importantly, repeated usage of the brand. This helps to create brand experiences while it simultaneously plays a role in developing brand equity. Marketing efforts also play a role in the development of brand preference, but for the participants it is not as important as previous studies suggest. The results show that for consumers, sensory experiences and positive brand associations are important. High self-congruity is not a reason for consumers to prefer a brand. However, low self-congruity, a complete mismatch between the self-concept and brand-user image is a reason for consumers to not prefer a brand. Lastly, the results show that the development of the three main constructs cannot be seen as separate processes, but together contribute to the development of brand preference, while also affecting each other.

KEYWORDS: *brands, brand preference, brand equity, self-congruity, brand experience.*

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“Products are made in the factory,  
but brands are created in the mind.”

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Walter Landor

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## 1. Introduction

Our capitalist society provides consumers with an abundance of choice in almost every category. Whether it is food, cars, clothes, or electronics, consumers must choose between at least a couple, if not hundreds of brands. While these brands force a consumer to make a choice, they also provide information that helps the consumers distinguish products from each other. For example, branding makes it easier for consumers to know whether they are buying a premium or a private label brand in the supermarket or help them to distinguish sustainable fashion brands from fast fashion.

Even though branding as we currently know it became mainstream throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of branding products has been around for thousands of years. Initially to provide information about the origin and quality of products (Moore & Reid, 2008), later also to add value to a product (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Currently, the brand name is one of the biggest assets for companies (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and the brand value of brands like Coca Cola, Nike, and Apple represent billions of dollars (“The 2020 World’s”, n.d.).

Since consumers have to choose between many similar offerings in a product category, it is essential for brands to create brand preference in order to make consumers choose their product. Brand preference is the preference a consumer has for a certain brand in comparison to other brands that offer a similar product or service (Chang & Liu, 2009). It has been shown to have a significant effect on the choices of consumers (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko., 2009), which makes it a topic of interest for both scholars and marketing executives. Studies that have focused on finding the antecedents of brand preference concluded that several factors, such as *brand equity* (Chen & Chang, 2008; Buil et al., 2013b), *self-congruity* (Tsai et al., 2015), and *brand experience* (Ebrahim et al., 2016) influence brand preference.

These studies are predominantly quantitative studies that focus on measuring brand preference at one point in time. This leaves important information about the development of brand preference outside the scope of these studies. The study by Chen and Chang (2008) for example, concludes that a customer’s brand preference is positively influenced by brand equity, brand equity being the perceived value of a brand name. While it is very useful to know that when a brand has added value in the eyes of the consumer it increases brand preference, the study does not provide any information as to how it does

this. One could argue that to discover this, literature on the development of brand equity should be consulted. Doing this shows that there are four factors that are commonly used to determine brand equity: *brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty* (Buil et al., 2013b). However, here the same problem arises. The existing literature does not present a comprehensive understanding of how consumers develop positive brand associations or come to believe a product is of a high quality and how this subsequently makes them feel a brand adds value to a product. Vinh and Huy make a similar argument in their study on the relationship between brand equity and brand preference and suggest that: “Future research should identify the antecedents of brand equity and its dimensions” (2016, p. 82).

A similar case can be made for self-congruity and brand experience. Self-congruity, the match between a *brand-user image* and a consumer’s *self-concept*, has a positive and significant effect on brand preference (Tsai et al., 2015). But studies do not show what brands can do to make this brand-user image match a consumer’s self-concept. Brand experience is a significant direct antecedent of brand preference (Ebrahim et al., 2016), but studies do not show what brands can do to influence brand experience. The lack of qualitative research about brand experience makes Schmitt et al. (2014) advocate for more interpretive and ethnographic methodologies to study the consumption experiences of consumers. This research will study these consumption experiences in a qualitative way.

The singular focus on establishing significant correlations between marketing concepts has left little room for exploring how these concepts work together to provide the outcome that brands desire: make consumers prefer and buy their products. This thesis looks at brand preference as something that develops over time and as a process that goes beyond connecting marketing concepts in a linear way. This will provide insight into how these concepts work together to contribute to the development of brand preference.

One of the product categories in which this development is of great importance is that of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). In this category the profit margins are low, and retailers are gaining more control over shelf space. Retailers increasingly provide the consumer with cheaper options by introducing private labels which draws customers away from other brands. It simultaneously strengthens the leverage of retailers over manufacturers since they can argue they do not need the large brands anymore to attract customers, which was the case in the past. Creating a strong brand is one of the ways

manufacturers can keep or increase their leverage over retailers and protect their margins to stay profitable (Thain & Bradley, 2012). Therefore, the creation of brand preference for FMCG brands is of great interest, which is why the focus of this thesis will be the FMCG category of beer.

### **1.1 Research question**

Considering the current state of the literature about brand preference with a needed focus on development over time, together with the importance for FMCG brands to develop brand preference, this study aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do consumers develop a preference for beer brands over time?

An examination of existing literature shows that three main constructs significantly affect brand preference: brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. Other constructs can also affect brand preference, but these are sufficiently represented through one of the three mentioned constructs. This led to the following three sub-questions:

SQ1: How do consumers develop consumer-based brand equity for beer brands over time?

SQ2: How do consumers develop self-congruity with beer brands over time?

SQ3: How do consumers develop brand experience for beer brands over time?

For all three main constructs scholars have argued more research is necessary, which shows the scientific relevance of this study. As discussed, Vinh and Huy (2016) argue that future research should identify the antecedents of brand equity. Scholars that studied self-congruity find that it is not clear how self-congruity develops and that more research should be done to identify antecedents (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Roy & Rabbanee, 2015). Schmitt et al. (2014) argue that more interpretive research should be done to study brand experience which is echoed by Andreini et al. (2018). More specifically for sensory

brand experience, Iglesias et al. (2019) suggest future research should gain qualitative insights by means of in-depth interviews.

From a social perspective, the study is also relevant. As discussed, brands are an important way for companies to differentiate themselves from other companies in the same category. However, current studies provide marketing managers with little guidance on how to do this. Insight about the drivers of brand preference can help companies improve their marketing strategies and create more attractive brands (Yang et al., 2002). Especially companies that sell FMCG rely on their brand name to keep their profit margins in an increasingly competitive environment.

## **1.2 Chapter overview**

This thesis consists of five main chapters, the first of which is the introduction. The second chapter will present the existing literature on brand preference and its main antecedents. As discussed, the three main constructs that are the focus of this thesis are brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. Each of these constructs will be conceptualized individually and the chapter will show how studies have confirmed the effect of these three main constructs on brand preference but have failed to establish how they contribute to the development of brand preference over time. Literature on the development of the individual constructs is analyzed and is together with the other existing literature used to inform the conceptual framework that will guide this research.

The third chapter presents the qualitative method that is used in this research. More specifically, semi-structured interviews are used to gather data on how consumers develop a brand preference over time. This chapter also contains a detailed explanation of the sample, the operationalization, and the method that is used to analyze the data, which is a thematic analysis in which the themes are deductively derived from the theory.

The fourth chapter is the results chapter. In this chapter the findings of this research are presented. The findings will also be related back to the theory and the conceptual framework which are presented in chapter three. Since the thematic analysis consisted of themes that were deductively derived from the theory, the three main sections are related to the development of brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. A fourth theme that emerged from the data is also presented.

The fifth and final chapter provides the conclusion and answers the main research question. In addition, a theoretical reflection, limitations, and suggestions for future research are presented.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This theoretical chapter is an elaborate discussion of the relevant concepts that are related to the development of brand preference. The chapter consists of five sections, starting with a section about brands and brand preference. This is followed by three sections that discuss the three antecedents of brand preference used in this study: brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. The fifth and final section combines all concepts and introduces the conceptual framework that will guide this research.

### **2.1 Brands and brand preference**

People have been branding products for thousands of years. The first examples of branding show that branding was originally used to provide information about the origin and quality of products (Moore & Reid, 2008). The purpose of branding has since then changed to be less functional and more emotional and symbolic. In our current society, brands are used as a way to add value to a product or to portray a certain image that is associated with a brand (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Farquhar (1989) makes a clear distinction between products and brands. According to him, a product is something that has a functional benefit. A brand on the other hand, is a name, symbol, design, or mark that adds something to the product on top of its functional benefit. It can be used to distinguish and differentiate an offering from competing products or services (Dadzie & Boachie-Mensah, 2011).

Brand preference is of considerable importance since it influences for a large part a consumer's choice between a set of brands with similar offerings (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009). Brand preference is defined as "... the bias a customer holds towards a particular brand" (Chang & Liu, 2009, p. 1690). This is a bias that customers hold in comparison to other brands with a similar offering (Vinh & Huy, 2016). Psychologists see preference as a learning construct that is influenced by experience and information processing (Ebrahim et al., 2016). Therefore, preference for a brand is learned and developed over time, due to interactions and experiences with that brand.

As said, brand preference is an important predictor of consumer choice. This has been repeatedly shown in studies that examined the consequences of brand preference. The main consequences of brand preference are purchase intention (Buil et al., 2013a; Chang & Liu, 2009; Chen & Chang, 2008; Vinh & Huy, 2016) and repurchase intention

(Ebrahim et al., 2016; Hellier et al., 2003). These studies show how closely related brand preference and purchase decisions are, which makes brand preference a key interest for brands.

Due to the importance of brand preference, many studies have focused on antecedents of brand preference. This theory chapter will focus on three main antecedents of brand preference: brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. These three brand related constructs have been proven to directly influence brand preference. In addition, the nature and type of influence of each of the three constructs is very different, which means they all add something different to the conceptual framework. Other concepts that are considered potential antecedents of brand preference are either sufficiently represented through the three proposed concepts, such as brand image (Salciuviene et al., 2007) and marketing (Ayanwale et al., 2005; Godey et al., 2016), or are not uncontested in its impact on brand preference, such as individual personality and brand personality (Banerjee, 2016).

## **2.2 Brand equity**

Consumer-based brand equity, also referred to as brand equity, has received considerable academic attention since the 1980's (Farquhar, 1989). This attention continued in the 1990's when two of the most widely used brand equity models were proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Back then, brand equity was already seen as one of the most important assets of a company (Aaker, 1991). These proposed brand equity models were followed by research into the impact of brand equity on brand preference by Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995). Although this research did not include one of the two proposed models, it did show initial support for the effect of brand equity on brand preference. The following section offers an in-depth exploration of the concept of brand equity, starting with its definition.

### **2.1.1 Conceptualizing brand equity**

Farquhar (1989) defined brand equity as the added value a brand gives to a product. Aaker provided a similar definition and defined it as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (1991, p. 15).

Another often cited definition is by Keller who sees it as: “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” 1993, p. 2). What these definitions have in common is the reference to consumers. Brand equity is an asset owned by a brand, but it is determined by how customers perceive that brand. Positive perceptions of a brand increase brand equity and negative perceptions of a brand decrease brand equity. This study will use Farquhar’s definition of brand equity as the added value a brand has to the consumer.

Brand equity and brand preference are closely related concepts. This is exemplified by looking at how the concepts are measured in various studies (Buil et al., 2013b; Vinh & Huy, 2016). The important difference is that brand equity reflects an asset of the company that is determined by customers’ perceptions. Brand preference reflects a choice by consumers, the preference of one brand over another, and is therefore more directly related to consumer behavior.

### **2.1.2 Impact of brand equity on brand preference**

Since the measurements of brand equity and brand preference are closely related, it is not surprising that studies have found brand equity to have a positive impact on brand preference. One of the first studies to find a correlation was a study by Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995). They found that brands with a higher equity also had a higher preference among respondents. This is confirmed by more recent studies for airlines (Chen & Chang, 2008), the service industries (Chang & Liu, 2009), sportswear (Buil et al., 2013b), cars (Buil et al., 2013b; Satvati et al., 2016), consumer electronics (Buil et al., 2013b; Moradi & Zarei, 2011) and motorbikes (Vinh & Huy, 2016). These studies all conclude that brands with high levels of brand equity have a better chance of generating higher levels of consumer brand preference. Interestingly, all these studies are quantitative in nature and provide only a snapshot of the level of brand preference and brand equity at a certain point in time. None of the studies takes a qualitative approach with the goal of finding out how brand preference and brand equity develop over time.

As discussed, the measurements of the two concepts are very similar. Consequently, the applicability of the correlation between brand equity and brand preference can be disputed. After all, if two concepts measure the same thing in a slightly different manner, how useful is a proven correlation? The papers by Vinh and Huy (2016)



and Buil et al. (2013b) clearly show the measurements used in their studies. Questions used to measure brand equity include: “Even if another brand has the same features as X brand, I would prefer to buy X brand” (Vinh & Huy, 2016, p. 80) and “It makes sense to buy brand X instead of any other brand of PC” (Buil et al., 2013b, p. 7). In comparison, questions used to measure brand preference include: “If I was to buy motorbike, I would prefer motorbike of X brand if everything else was equal” (Vinh & Huy, 2016, p. 80), and “I like brand X better than other brands of PC” (Buil et al., 2013b, p. 7). There seems to be little difference between the type of questions used to measure brand equity and brand preference. However, in both studies an exploratory factor analysis showed the discriminant validity of the scale, which means that there is indeed a difference between the measurements used. Despite the discriminant validity of the scale, the concepts remain close. Therefore, it is important to look at the dimensions and antecedents of brand equity itself.

### **2.1.3 Dimensions of brand equity**

There are two widely used brand equity models. According to Keller (1993), brand equity is determined by a consumer’s brand knowledge, which consists of two dimensions: *brand awareness* and *brand image*. Brand awareness is made up of brand recall and brand recognition. Brand image is a combination of the favorability, strength, uniqueness, and types of brand associations. Aaker (1991) proposed a similar, but more complete brand equity model which consists of five dimensions: *brand awareness*, *brand associations*, *perceived quality*, *brand loyalty*, and *other proprietary assets*. The dimension of other proprietary assets has been omitted in most subsequent studies related to brand equity, since it has little importance from the consumer perspective (Pappu et al., 2005; Buil et al., 2013a). An advantage of Aaker’s model is that it incorporates both perceptual dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality) and a behavioral dimension (brand loyalty). This gives a more complete overview of how brand equity develops. Behavioral measures can establish the level of brand equity and perceptual measures help to understand the reasons behind behavior (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Myers, 2003). Aaker’s model does not exclude the dimensions of Keller’s model. Both include brand awareness as a main component and Keller’s brand image dimension is similar to Aaker’s brand associations dimension (Tong & Hawley, 2009; Vinh & Huy, 2016).

Several authors have adapted the models of Keller and Aaker and added concepts such as brand credibility (Vogel & Watchravesringkan, 2017) and brand attitude (Faircloth et al., 2001). However, Aaker's model remains the most cited and has been tested in a considerable number of studies (Tong & Hawley, 2009). There has been some research indicating that brand awareness and brand associations are very similar and can therefore be seen as one dimension (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). However, Pappu et al. (2005) do find a significant difference between the two and argue that all four dimensions proposed by Aaker are distinct components of brand equity. Therefore, this research will adopt the dimensions proposed by Aaker as the basis for brand equity:

*Brand awareness:* brand awareness is a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand as being in a certain product category (Aaker, 1991). Brand recall refers to a consumer's ability to recall a brand when they see a product category, for example when a consumer names the brand of Samsung when asked for a smartphone brand. Brand recognition is a consumer's ability to recognize a brand on the basis of a brand cue, such as a logo (Chi et al., 2009).

*Perceived quality:* perceived quality is the customer's judgement of the overall quality of a brand's offering. It is a perceptual dimension and therefore does not refer to the actual quality of a product (Aaker, 1991).

*Brand associations:* Aaker defines a brand association as "anything "linked" in memory to a brand" (1991, p. 109). These associations can be related to a wide range of experiences, such as a previous purchase or marketing efforts.

*Brand loyalty:* Brand loyalty is a measurement of the attachment a customer has to a brand. High levels of brand loyalty will make customers continue purchasing a brand even when there are competitors that are potentially better, cheaper, or more convenient (Aaker, 1991). As said, brand loyalty is a behavioral dimension since it reflects a consumer's intention to stay loyal to a brand.

Even though these definitions by Aaker (1991) are relatively old, they are widely used in many recent studies, indicating they are still relevant and up to date (Algharabat et al., 2020; Buil et al., 2013b; Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016; Çifci et al., 2016; Vinh & Huy, 2016).

#### 2.1.4 Antecedents of brand equity

Interestingly, Aaker (1991), Yoo & Donthu (2001), and Pappu et al. (2005) do not talk about the four dimensions as antecedents of brand equity but rather as dimensions of brand equity and ways to accurately measure brand equity. Other studies do talk about a more causal relation between the four dimensions and brand equity. Sasmita and Suki (2015) find that all four brand equity dimensions positively affect brand equity. Tong and Hawley (2009) find a significant positive effect of brand associations and brand loyalty on brand equity in the Chinese sportswear market. They do not find a significant positive effect of perceived quality and brand awareness on brand equity. Vinh and Huy (2016) find a significant positive effect of brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality on brand equity in the Vietnamese motorbike market. They also fail to find a significant positive effect of brand awareness on brand equity. These results seem contradictory to Pappu et al. (2005) who find that brand awareness is an important dimension of brand equity. Yet, there is no direct effect of brand awareness on brand equity.

A possible explanation for this is that the four concepts are interrelated. Tong and Hawley (2009) suggest that perceived quality and brand awareness indirectly affect brand equity through brand association and brand loyalty. Similarly, Yoo et al (2000) suggest that perceived quality and brand association affect brand equity by first influencing brand loyalty. Vinh and Huy (2016) found a positive correlation between brand awareness and brand loyalty, indicating an effect of brand awareness on brand equity through brand loyalty as well.

The notion of a casual relation between the four brand equity dimensions has been explored by Buil et al. (2013b). They propose a rather complete model starting with brand awareness and ending with brand preference and purchase intention. This model is largely confirmed in their empirical research in which they find that brand awareness positively influences perceived quality and brand associations. Brand associations in turn positively

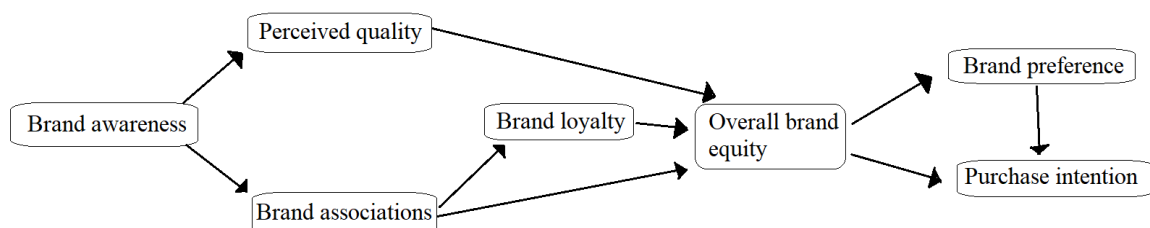


Figure 2.1: The influence of brand equity on consumer responses (Buil et al., 2013b)

influences brand loyalty. Brand equity is positively influenced by perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand associations (*Figure 2.1*). In addition to the four brand equity dimensions, a recent study by Koay et al. (2020) found that brand experience can also have a positive significant effect on brand equity. Brand experience will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Although the causal models provide interesting insights, similar to the correlation between brand equity and brand preference, how brand equity dimensions affect brand equity is not addressed in the above-mentioned studies. For example, the studies show a positive effect of brand associations on brand equity, but do not discuss what type of associations are the most important. Similar arguments can be made for the other brand equity dimensions. Besides this, the factor of time is not considered in the quantitative studies. All the quantitative studies focus on brand equity dimensions at a certain point in time. This provides an incomplete view of the development of brand preference since it is unlikely that customers suddenly perceive the quality of a brand as high. It is more likely that perceived quality develops over time and keeps developing over time as a result of a variety of factors, such as having positive user experiences. This is also suggested by Beig and Nika (2019) in a review of literature on brand equity and brand experience, but they do not provide empirical evidence. The qualitative approach that is taken in this study helps to explore how these brand equity dimensions contribute to the development of brand equity and brand preference over time.

### **2.1.5 Marketing efforts**

The sequence of concepts that has been discussed so far starts with the four brand equity dimensions, followed by brand equity, which affects brand preference. However, the four brand equity dimensions do not provide a starting point for brands for the development of brand preference. For example, how does a brand go about creating brand association or a high level of perceived quality? Identifying factors that build and affect the brand equity dimensions is therefore necessary (Buil et al., 2013a).

A factor that has received considerable attention as influencing brand equity is a brand's marketing efforts. Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995) established that brands with a higher advertising budget also have a higher level of brand equity. They make a distinction between brands with products or services that are low or high risk and have low or high

involvement. Low risk and low involvement brands may depend more on marketing efforts to create brand equity, since compared to high risk and high involvement brands, these brands often have fewer other features that can improve brand equity. For beer, being a low involvement and low-risk product, this should make marketing an important vehicle for brands to create brand equity.

Yoo et al. (2000) view the development of brand equity as a long-term strategy, in which marketing managers can build or harm a brand with their actions. Repeated exposure to a brand's marketing efforts can improve brand equity, which can improve brand preference and lead to purchase intentions. This long-term strategy suggests a process of development, which is how this thesis looks at brand preference.

Other studies have confirmed the impact of marketing efforts on brand equity (Abril & Rodriguez-Cánovas, 2016; Godey et al., 2016; Zahoor and Qureshi, 2017). However, marketing efforts will not automatically have a positive impact on all brand equity dimensions. Buil et al. (2013a) found that advertising spend only positively affects brand awareness and that attitudes towards advertisements only positively affect perceived quality, brand associations, and brand awareness. This was for a large part confirmed by Nikabadi et al. (2015) with the only difference being that in their study they did not find attitudes towards advertisement to positively affect perceived quality. These results conflict with Yoo et al. (2000), who find that advertising spend influences all their three brand equity dimensions (they combine brand awareness and associations). The difference in results could be caused by the difference in products. Yoo et al. (2000) included three types of products, of which one was a low-involvement product. Buil et al. (2013a) only used high involvement products and propose future studies should focus on low-involvement products. Besides advertising spend, Yoo et al. (2000) found that four other marketing mix elements significantly affected the brand equity dimensions, but not all these effects are positive. Frequent price promotions such as discounts and coupons negatively impact perceived quality (Buil et al., 2013a; Yoo et al., 2000).

One of the advantages of using marketing efforts to develop brand equity is that marketers can use it to influence the type of associations consumers have and create a brand image that is desirable (Faircloth et al., 2001; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). In addition, repeated exposure to advertisement positively affects perceived quality (Moorthy & Hawkins, 2005). This suggests that the development of brand equity happens over time and

is influenced by multiple interactions with a brand. Therefore, an argument can be made for focusing on long term KPIs instead of short term KPIs for marketing efforts. However, the study by Moorthy and Hawkins (2005) is somewhat outdated, and few studies have recently studied the effects of repeated exposure on brand equity dimensions.

Marketing efforts can be a useful and important starting point in the development of brand preference. It is not unlikely that a consumer's first encounter with a brand is through an advertisement. Therefore, although marketing efforts are not included in the conceptual framework, they will be discussed during the interviews to discover how it contributes to brand equity and its four dimensions.

## **2.2 Self-congruity**

In a paper on 'the extended self', Belk (1988) concluded that possessions help to form and maintain how people define themselves and that having, doing and being are integrally related. That is why consumers are not only interested in the functionality a product has, but also look at the symbolic offerings (Lee & Hyman, 2008). This is just as true for the brands that offer these products, since brands can have both functional and symbolic meaning (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). People use the functional and symbolic meaning of brands to define and express themselves. Because of that, they have the tendency to choose products or brands of which the attributes are in line with some aspect of the self. Research shows brands that are congruent with the self-image are preferred over brands that are not (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Solomon, 2019). The match between the self-concept and the brand-user image is called self-congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997). In some studies, it is also referred to as self-image congruence or self-concept congruence (Hosany & Martin, 2012), but here it will be referred to as self-congruity.

### **2.2.1 Conceptualizing self-congruity**

The most popular definition of self-congruity states that it is a "... psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept" (Sirgy et al., 1997, p. 230). Others define it slightly different as the cognitive matching or harmony between the consumer's self-concept and the perceived product image (Mehta, 1999; Sohail & Awal, 2017). Overall, scholars agree that self-congruity is a measurement of the comparison consumers make between themselves and a product or brand. It can then be

classified as high self-congruity, when the two images match, or low self-congruity, when the images do not match, or match to a lesser extent (Sirgy et al. 1997).

For the consumer side of self-congruity, self-concept is used to determine how consumers perceive themselves. It is “a set of knowledge and beliefs about one’s self that is stored in memory” (Graeff, 1996). In consumer research, the self-concept is often divided into two selves: the actual self-concept and the ideal self-concept (Mehta, 1999). The actual self-concept refers to how a person perceives himself. The ideal self-concept is more aspirational and is the way a person would like to see himself. A person’s self-concept is constantly developing and changing over time (Sebastian et al., 2008). For example, a 60-year-old person is likely to have a different self-concept than when that same person was in his or her twenties, such as seeing oneself as less sporty and more mature. This also means the level of self-congruity between a consumer and a product is constantly developing. The person at 60 years old might not feel the same level of congruity with a sports brand anymore and instead feel a stronger match with a brand that specializes in suits.

There are two different approaches for determining the brand related component of self-congruity. The first and most common approach uses the brand-user image to determine the brand image (Parker, 2009). The brand-user image is the perception consumers have of what type of people typically use a brand (Graeff, 1996). For example, Nike might have a brand-user image of sporty people. If attributes associated with the brand-user image match the consumer’s self-concept, a brand is more likely to be the preferred brand (Sirgy et al., 1997).

The second approach uses brand personality to determine the brand image (Graeff, 1996; Parker, 2009). This approach looks at a brand as having five personality characteristics proposed by Aaker (1997): sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Looking at brands as having a personality humanizes the brand and can lead to a brand relationship that develops over time as the result of an ongoing interaction between the brand and the consumer (Fournier, 1998). Since brand personality is a perception the consumer has of a brand, the five brand personality characteristics can also change over time.

The second approach differs considerably from the first approach since it measures the personality characteristics of a brand itself. The first approach measures the image

consumers have of a brand's typical user. Despite the clear difference, some scholars use the two interchangeably. Erdoğan and Budeyri-Turan (2012) for example, use Sirgy's (1982) definition of self-congruity which includes the product-user image and then subsequently move on to use brand personality in comparison to the consumer self-concept. This could be partly caused by Aaker herself, who uses Sirgy (1982) as a source to make the following claim: "The crux of self-congruity is that consumers prefer brands associated with a set of personality traits congruent with their own" (Aaker, 1999, p. 46). Aaker sees personality traits as a component of self-congruity, but Sirgy specifically mentioned the product-image is often assumed to be the stereotypic image of the product user, which is different than a product's personality.

Parker (2009) compared the two measurements and found a distinct difference between brand user-image and brand personality. He also found brand-user image to be a better predictor of favorable brand attitudes. Since brand-user image is also the more common measurement of brand image in self-congruity (Parker, 2009), this is what will be used in this thesis.

### **2.2.2 Impact of self-congruity on brand preference**

Research on self-congruity has been less focused on the specific effects on brand preference than is the case for brand equity. Despite this, the effects have been empirically proven. Sirgy et al. (1997) found that self-congruity is predictive of product preference in clothing and of brand preference in a variety of categories, such as cars, cameras, and soft drinks. Mehta (1999) showed that respondents with high self-congruity levels were more interested in purchasing a brand compared to when they had low self-congruity levels. Jamal and Goode (2001) studied brand preference in the UK jewelry market and report a very strong effect of self-congruity on brand preference. Two recent studies by Tsai et al. (2015) and Maymand and Razmi (2017) also found a significant effect of self-congruity on brand preference. Duarte and Raposo (2010) conducted a study in which they tested the influence of 22 factors on brand preference. Only a few factors were found to directly affect brand preference, of which self-congruity was one of the strongest.

The impact of self-congruity on brand preference can be moderated by the level of consumer expertise. A higher level of expertise about the product category decreases the effect of self-congruity on brand preference (Jamal & Al-Marri, 2007; Sohail & Awal, 2017).



This is important because it sheds light on why self-congruity affects brand preference. Consumers use self-congruity as a shortcut to assess whether a brand is the right fit for them. But when consumers have more knowledge about a product or brand, they do not need this shortcut anymore, since there are other factors that are more important for evaluating a product or brand. In addition, the effects of self-congruity seem to be stronger for products that are visible to others, compared to products that are consumed in a more private setting, such as detergent (Jamal & Al-Marri, 2007).

There is also an indirect effect of self-congruity on brand preference. Multiple studies have shown that self-congruity has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2012; Sirgy et al., 2008). Since brand loyalty is seen as an antecedent of brand equity, self-congruity could influence brand preference through brand equity as well. However, no empirical research has been done to prove this, which means this sequence of causal links between all these concepts is speculative. Therefore, there is no linkage between brand equity and self-congruity in the conceptual framework. In addition, the conceptual framework that is used to guide the research does not include such causal links but views the different concepts as together contributing to the process of brand preference development.

### **2.2.3 Development of self-congruity**

Few studies have focused on how self-congruity is developed (Roy & Rabbanee, 2015). Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. (2012) recommend that future studies should seek to understand what enhances congruity between consumer and brands. Despite the lack of literature on how self-congruity develops, we can look at how the two components of self-congruity are individually developed. As established, self-congruity is the comparison between the self-concept and the brand-user image. The self-concept is difficult to influence for brands, as it is deeply personal, developed over multiple years, and affected by many factors in a person's life (Sebastian et al., 2008). A single marketing campaign is unlikely to significantly affect this. However, the development of the self-concept over multiple years does pose interesting questions about how this changes brand preference. Roy and Rabbanee (2015) aimed to fill the gap in the literature regarding the development of self-congruity by focusing on what the psychological antecedents of self-congruity are for luxury brands. They showed that people who want to be socially desirable, avoid

similarities with other people, and consume to gain status have greater congruency with luxury brands compared to non-luxury brands. While this study is a valuable contribution, it studies self-congruity as already existing and is mainly concerned with the self-concept side of self-congruity, how people see themselves. It does not focus on how self-congruity has developed over time and how a brand-user image is developed.

Almost no studies have focused on how a brand-user image is developed. Sirgy et al. (1997) argued that a brand-user image is determined by a variety of factors, such as advertising, price, and other associations. This is also a point where self-congruity could be influenced by the brand equity dimension of brand associations. However, this is in all likelihood only a part of how consumers develop a brand-user image (Sirgy et al. 1997). In addition, contrary to an effect of brand associations on self-congruity, Lu and Xu (2015) showed that self-congruity affects brand associations, meaning there is an effect the other way around as well. This is another reason for a focus away from determining causal links, that looks at how these concepts work together to create brand preference.

The effect of marketing efforts on self-congruity are not strongly supported in previous studies. One way marketing efforts do affect self-congruity is by priming feelings of congruity between consumers and brands. Graeff (1996) showed that for consumers with high levels of self-congruity, advertisements that encourage people to think about them using the product improved attitudes towards the product. For consumers with low levels of self-congruity, advertisements that focused on product quality improved attitudes. So, when marketers target people with high levels of self-congruity, they can use advertisements to remind the consumers of that self-congruity. However, this research only shows that marketing efforts can prime self-congruity, not create them.

### **2.3 Brand Experience**

Thus far, the discussed concepts are evaluative in nature. Brand equity and self-congruity are used to measure how consumers see and evaluate a brand. To get a more complete picture of how consumers develop brand preference, it is useful to examine the types of experiences they have when getting in contact with a brand. The construct of brand experience can be used to do this (Brakus et al., 2009). While brand experience is a slightly less established brand related construct than brand equity and self-congruity, its value for this research is the distinctive perspective on consumer experiences.

### 2.3.1 Conceptualizing brand experience

Brand experience was introduced in the 1980s but received renewed attention quite recently when Brakus et al. (2009) published a paper arguing for its value in marketing literature (Shamim & Mohsin Butt, 2013; Zha et al., 2020). They define brand experience as *“subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments”* (Brakus et al., 2009. p. 53). Brand experiences are what consumers feel, think, or do when they encounter a brand or brand related stimuli, such as a smell or feeling that is associated with a brand. According to Ebrahim et al. (2016), consumers seek out the brands that create such experiences, and it is one of the ways brands can differentiate themselves from other brands and create brand preference. All brand experiences result from a direct or indirect interaction with the brand and can be positive or negative and range from being a short-lived experience to a long-lasting experience (Brakus et al., 2009). For example, the smell of a store that was visited one time might be remembered for a few hours, but the color of a regularly visited supermarket can create a long-lasting experience.

Brand experience consists of four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). The sensory dimension refers to stimulations that relate to one of the senses, such as visual or auditory. Examples of such stimulations are the color and shape of the McDonalds logo or the sound of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox intro at the start of a movie. It also includes taste, which is an important sense for beer brands. Sensory experiences can reinforce the other three dimensions and could be central to brand building (Hultén, 2011). However, Hultén also notes the impact of this dimension has not been studied enough. The affective dimension refers to moods and emotions that are experienced when interacting with a brand, such as the associations of Coca Cola with having a good time. The intellectual dimension includes making the consumers think when seeing the brand. An example is Patagonia making their consumers think about the environment when buying clothes. The behavioral dimension refers to actions and bodily experiences, such as working out at a large gym chain. Together, these four dimensions make up brand experience. This means that brands do not have to focus on one specific dimension but can strengthen the brand experience by stimulating all four dimensions. However, the four dimensions are not antecedents of brand experience. Unlike brand

equity, which can be measured without taking the four brand equity dimensions into consideration, brand experience is measured through its four dimensions. A potential downside of this way of measuring brand experience is that all four dimensions are given the same weight in all situations. For example, for a beer brand the sensory experiences have the same weight as for a holiday provider, which seems counterintuitive. For this study this will not be a major limitation, since it is not the exact way of measuring that is relevant. Instead, the four dimensions are used only as a starting point to study how consumers develop brand experience.

The literature on brand experience in general has been criticized by Andreini et al. (2018) and Zha et al. (2020) who argue that since the paper by Brakus et al. (2009) there has been too little conceptual work on the subject. According to them, the lack of theoretical evaluation of the concept and the focus on quantitatively testing causal relationships has caused the brand experience literature to have a minimal academic impact. They argue that too little is known about how experiences develop. While this study is not a conceptual one, it does go beyond quantitatively establishing causal links between antecedents and outcomes by focusing on what underlies these links and how brand experience develops.

### **2.3.2 Effect of brand experience on brand preference**

Due to the only recent interest in the brand experience construct, there are less studies on its consequences compared to brand equity and self-congruity. Despite this, some studies have shown a direct effect of brand experience on brand preference. Ebrahim et al. (2016) studied mobile phone brands and found that brand experience has a positive significant effect on brand preference. The authors argue that brand experiences can set a brand apart from other brands, resulting in consumers preferring the brand over alternative brands. Tsai et al. (2015) also showed this in a study on Tablet PC brands in Taiwan. Although both studies show that there is an effect of brand experience on brand preference, the results must be interpreted with caution for two reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of research in countries other than Egypt and Taiwan. Secondly, both studies focus on consumer electronics, which means the direct effect has not been proven in other product categories. Despite this, the results of these studies are promising and have not been disproven in other studies. In addition, the construct of brand experience can be valuable

in researching the development of brand preference, because it focuses on what customers are experiencing when interacting with a brand, which brand equity and self-congruity do not do.

Brand experience research has also focused on its influence on other brand related constructs, most prominently brand equity and brand loyalty. These studies show that brand experience has a positive effect on brand equity (Koay et al. 2020; Moreira et al., 2017; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Studies on the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty and other brand equity dimensions produce mixed results as some find a significant effect of brand experience on brand loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009) and others do not find a significant effect (Iglesias et al., 2011; Nysveen & Pederson, 2014). Ding & Tseng (2015) show a significant effect of brand experience on brand awareness/association and perceived quality, but no effect on brand loyalty. Since the conceptual framework does not include causal correlations between concepts, these connections are not included in the framework. However, these studies do show that marketing concepts are interrelated and together contribute to the development of brand preference.

### **2.3.3 Development of brand experience**

Since brand experience consists of four dimensions, developing brand experience can be done by creating stimuli that target one or more of the four dimensions. The strongest experiences occur when consumers are in direct contact with the brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). This is one of the things that makes it distinctive from brand equity and self-congruity. To build brand equity and self-congruity, pre-purchase communication such as marketing is considered an effective tool (Buil et al., 2013a; Sirgy et al., 1997). For brand experience, consumption experiences are considered more important, since the contact between a consumer and a brand is more direct (Schmitt et al., 2014). Andreini et al. (2018) argue that brand experiences are created when consumers interact with the brand cues they are provided with. Unfortunately, the elements that these studies show to be important for the creation of brand experience are still relatively broad and provide brands with little specific information about the creation of brand experience.

A study by Moreira et al. (2017) has a more specific focus on the sensory dimension of brand experience. They concluded that sensory information, such as sounds or tastes, positively affect brand experience. The other three dimensions have not been the specific

focus of studies, but Zarantonello & Schmitt (2013) indicate how marketers can use stimuli to create strong brand experience. The sensory dimension can be used to create strong brand experiences by providing strong sensorial stimulation through sounds, tastes, visual cues, and smells. Triggering positive emotions in consumers will create strong brand experience through the affective dimension. Making customers think in new and different ways targets the intellectual dimension and physical interaction with brand representatives and the product creates behavioral experiences.

The qualitative nature of this study is helpful in exploring what types of experiences consumers most vividly remember and what types of experiences they use to form their opinion of a brand. This information can be used to determine how brand experiences contribute to the development of brand preference over time.

## **2.4 Conceptual framework**

In this theory chapter, three main antecedents of brand preference have been discussed: brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. The three antecedents focus on different aspects of a brand and are therefore all valuable for this research. Brand equity focuses on the value a brand has to a customer. Research has shown there are four main antecedents to brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The second antecedent of brand preference is self-congruity. Self-congruity focuses on the perceived match between the consumer and the brand. Brand experience is the third antecedent of brand preference and focuses on how consumers experience a brand. The theory that was discussed in this chapter led to the conceptual framework that is visualized in *Figure 2.2*. This conceptual framework will guide the rest of this research.

In the conceptual framework, the development of brand preference is presented by the blue arrow as something that develops over time. The green arrows in the blue box reflect the importance of each of the three main constructs as contributing to the development of brand preference over time. The three main constructs themselves are also subject to a development over time.

Previous studies have clearly taken a mostly quantitative approach and looked for causal links to determine and explain the antecedents of brand preference. Quantitative measurements allow for a strict distinction between concepts and a focus on causal links

between these concepts. However, qualitative research could show that the differences are less distinct as quantitative studies might suggest.

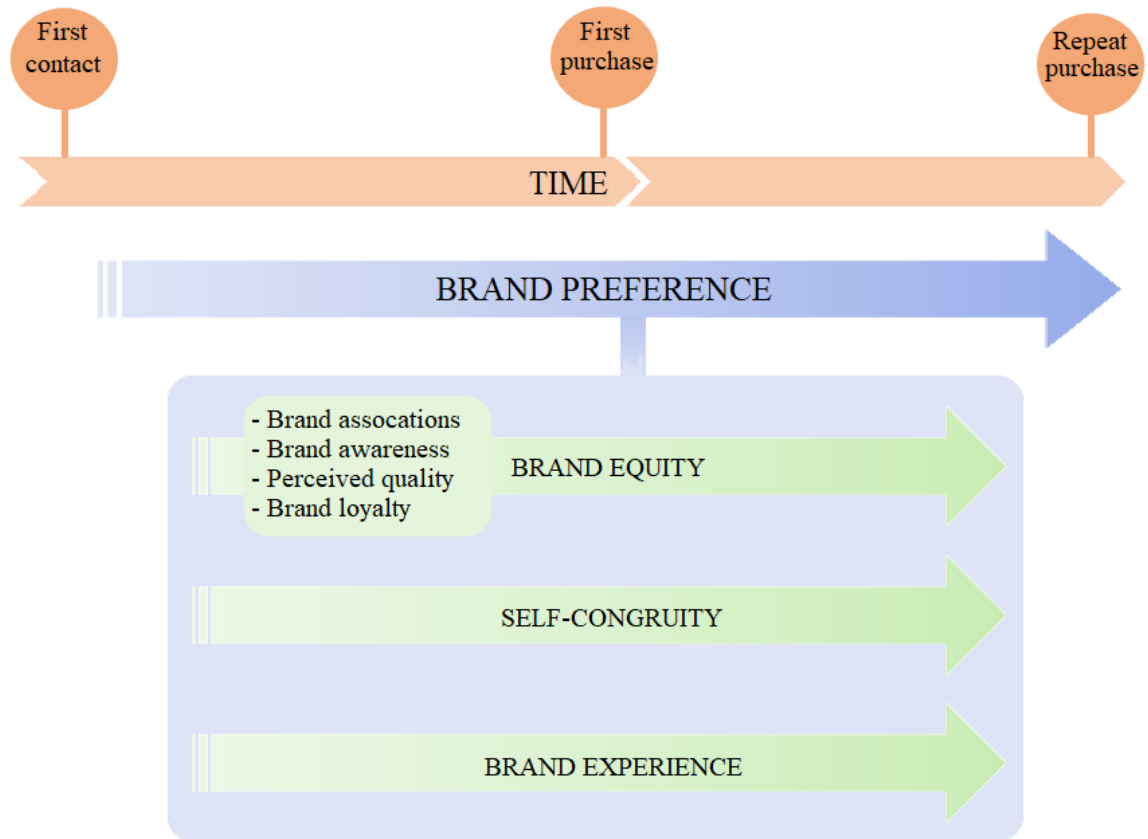


Figure 1.2: Conceptual framework

### **3. Methodology**

In this chapter, the methodology of the research will be discussed. First, the rationale for qualitative interviews is explained. This is followed by a discussion of the research design, the sampling criteria and technique, the data collection, the operationalization, and finally the data analysis.

#### **3.1 Rationale for qualitative interviews**

To investigate how consumers develop brand preference over time, this thesis takes a qualitative approach. More specifically, in-depth interviews with consumers are used to gather data. A qualitative approach is chosen for several reasons. As established in the theory section, the development of brand preference can be seen as a process that takes place over time, a process that cannot be measured at a specific point. Therefore, central to this research is the question of how consumers go from having no brand preference to preferring one brand over another and what process they go through between these two states. With a qualitative approach, researchers can gather rich descriptions that can lead to understanding such a process. It does this by getting descriptions of the context of these processes and the types of experiences consumers have (Bryman, 2016; Tracy, 2020). For this research, a qualitative approach provides the opportunity to go beyond measuring brand preference at a certain point in time and instead discover what types of experiences lead to brand preference and in what context this happens. The goal of the qualitative approach is not to confirm or disprove previous quantitative findings. The goal is to discover how these quantitatively established processes work and put them into context by gathering in-depth data.

The qualitative method that will be used is in-depth interviewing. According to Rubin and Rubin, in-depth interviews allow a researcher to "... explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others..." (2012, p.3). The goal of this research is to explore in detail how brand preference develops over time. Therefore, it is important to get insights into what experiences lead to brand preference, and what motives people have for preferring one brand over another. As pointed out by Rubin and Rubin (2012), in-depth interviewing is a good method to get these insights.



### **3.2 Research design**

The type of in-depth interviewing that is used to gather data in this study is that of semi-structured interviews. There are three types of interviews: unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and structured interviews. For this research, semi-structured interviewing has advantages over both other types of interviews. Firstly, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to focus on themes and topics that are especially relevant for the study, something an unstructured interview is not suited for. The theory section shows that there are already some established themes and concepts, such as brand equity or self-congruity, that guide the research. An unstructured interview would not allow for these concepts to be addressed during an interview, which a semi-structured interview does allow. Secondly, a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to adapt the questions according to what the interviewee talks about, which a completely structured interview does not do (Brinkmann, 2014). As becomes clear from the theory section, brand preference can be developed through a large variety of factors, which can be different per person. This means the interviewer needs to have the possibility to adapt to the situation of the interviewee. Some interviewees might primarily develop brand preference by using a product and have rich descriptions on their brand experiences while others are primarily influenced by a brand's marketing efforts. In these situations, a semi-structured interview gives the researcher freedom to go more in-depth into what is important to the interviewee.

### **3.3 Reliability and validity**

Ensuring the reliability of a study can be more difficult for qualitative research compared to quantitative research (Silverman, 2015). Reliability refers to the extent to which the results are separate from accidental conditions that occurred during the study. It deals with the replicability of a study, whether future researchers can replicate the study and find similar results (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). To ensure the reliability in this study, the research process is made as transparent as possible. The thesis contains a detailed documentation of the steps that were taken, such as that of the gathering and the analysis of the data. In addition, the full interview guide is provided in Appendix A which gives a clear insight into the interviewing process. The results section provides an extensive

description of how the data was interpreted, which increases the transparency of the analysis.

The validity of a study is related to whether the study accurately measures the issues that are being explored (Silverman, 2015). One of the ways this is ensured in this study is by basing the interview guide on the conceptual framework. Kallio et al. (2016) conclude that previous knowledge is an important factor in designing an interview guide and that it helps the researcher to have a good grasp of the subject that is of interest. By basing the interview guide on a thorough examination of previous knowledge, the validity of the research is ensured (Kallio et al., 2016). In addition, the data from different interviews was constantly compared to find similarities and differences between cases. This ensured that deviant cases were detected (Silverman, 2015).

### **3.4 Sampling criteria and technique**

The topic of this study is the development of preference for beer brands among consumers. Therefore, the interviews were conducted with consumers. Purposive sampling was used to sample the participants, since the participants needed to have a few specific characteristics and had to be relevant for answering the research question (Bryman, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016). The sample consists of 11 participants from the Netherlands that are between the ages of 18 and 24. This age group was chosen because in the Netherlands the legal drinking age is 18. That means that people in this age group might have recently developed or are still developing a brand preference. This makes it easier to identify the drivers behind the development, since the memories of what causes participants to prefer a brand are recent. To ensure participants had relevant experiences to talk about, the sample only includes participants that drink beer.

This study is done in the Netherlands, so the group of participants consisted of Dutch people. This limits the research slightly since the collected data only contains information about the development of brand preference for the Dutch culture and market. The development of brand preference might be different depending on where people come from. However, including people with many different cultural backgrounds is beyond the scope of this thesis and could lead to a dataset that is scattered and not suitable for an analysis.

The sample size for qualitative studies that use interviews is often difficult to determine. Some papers conclude that enough interviews have been conducted when no new information comes up during the interviews (Mason, 2010) and other papers argue that it also depends on the nature and purpose of the study (Baker & Edwards, 2012). This study includes 11 participants, since the last few interviews did not produce new insights, indicating the point of saturation was reached. The full list of participants can be found in Table 3.1. All names have been changed to pseudonyms for privacy reasons.

*Table 3.1: Participants*

<b>Name (age)</b> Interview date	<b>Background information</b>	<b>Favorite brand</b>
<b>Adam (23)</b> 12/04/2021	Adam is a student at a university of applied science who lives with his friends. He works 6 hours a week and likes to go out in his free time.	Hertog Jan
<b>Bas (24)</b> 13/04/2021	Bas is a student who has just completed his Master's. He likes playing football and drinking beer with friends.	Heineken
<b>Casper (23)</b> 14/04/2021	Casper is on a full-time board of a foundation. He likes sports, drinking beer, and active holiday's	Bavaria
<b>Daan (20)</b> 15/04/2021	Daan is a student at a university of applied science. He is a member of a student association	Grolsch
<b>Emma (22)</b> 16/04/2021	Emma is a human resource employee at a firm in Amsterdam. She likes sports.	Hertog Jan
<b>Femke (23)</b> 19/04/2021	Femke works part-time in retail and does a study.	Grolsch
<b>Gwen (23)</b> 21/04/2021	Gwen is an intern at a consulting firm. She likes to sit on the terrace with friends.	Gebrouwen door Vrouwen
<b>Hugo (22)</b> 03/05/2021	Hugo works full-time at a supermarket chain where he is responsible for all products except meat, vegetables, and fruit.	Hertog Jan

<b>Ivan (23)</b> 05/05/2021	Ivan works for a company that does dike reinforcements. He is living with his parents.	Hertog Jan
<b>Julia (22)</b> 06/05/2021	Julia is a master student. Together with her two roommates she likes to eat, drink, and do sports.	Heineken
<b>Kyra (23)</b> 07/05/2021	Kyra is a master student who has moved to a new city in September. She likes sports, reading, and meeting up with people.	Heineken

### 3.5 Data collection

Ideally, interviews are conducted in a face-to-face setting (Bryman, 2016). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic all the interviews were conducted via video calls. Zoom was the application that was used to conduct these video calls. It is important that interviews take place in an environment where the interviewee feels comfortable (Bryman, 2016). Video calling has been a common way to communicate during the pandemic, making it a familiar way of communicating for interviewees. In addition, the nature of video calls allows the participants to call from a place where they feel comfortable. All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in Dutch, since this was the native language of both the interviewer and the participants.

All interviews were double recorded using both the recording function in Zoom and a smartphone recorder. All participants agreed to this verbally after reading the consent form that can be found in Appendix B. By recording and transcribing the interviews, the research process becomes more transparent, which ensures the reliability (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In addition, the recordings and transcriptions allow the researcher to analyze the exact wording and phrasing of the participants multiple times, which increases the validity of the research (Silverman, 2015).

### 3.6 Operationalization

The questions that were used in the interview mostly emerged from the chronological process of brand preference development as proposed in the conceptual framework. First, the participants were asked about the consumption of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages in general. This helped to place the consumption of beer in the overall

consumption behavior of the participants. Then the focus went to beers and questions were asked to establish what role beer played in the participants' lives and to find the most preferred brand. For this brand, a timeline was established by asking participants to describe moments where they drank the brand at different points in their lives. The goal of this is to establish the development of beer brand preference over time. The theoretical constructs of the conceptual framework were used as a base for the remainder of the interview guide. The goal of these questions was to focus specifically on the development of brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to prepare them for the analysis. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns or recurring themes that appear in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To identify, analyze and report these patterns, the data is first segmented by attaching codes to meaningful parts of the data. The data is then reassembled by combining the codes to form a coherent structure of themes, which is used to report the findings (Boeije, 2010). To facilitate this process the software program Atlas.ti was used.

The themes and patterns that are used in the thematic analysis were deductively derived from the theory that was discussed in the theoretical framework. A deductive approach to a thematic analysis can provide a more detailed analysis of specific aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The extensive quantitative research about the antecedents of brand preference provides some clear main themes, such as brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. This thesis aims to qualitatively study how these concepts contribute to the development of brand preference over time. This means that the theory provides some aspects on which this study focuses, which makes a deductive approach to the development of themes the preferred approach. Despite being theoretically driven, the coding scheme was not set in stone and because of important information in the dataset that did not fit the theory driven themes, emerging themes were added to the coding scheme.

## **4. Results**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, previous studies have shown that brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience can be used to predict brand preference. However, these studies only measure these constructs quantitatively and at a certain point in time. The goal of this thesis is to examine how these constructs develop over time, which is made more explicit by the three sub-questions. The codes that were used in the analysis were theoretically driven, with as main themes brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. These main themes had theoretically driven sub-codes that were used to separate the data even further. From the data, five other codes emerged that are important for the development of brand preference: company or occasion, availability, marketing, repeated use, and price. These will be discussed throughout this chapter as elements that influence how the three main constructs develop. The code of company and occasion will also be discussed separately as its influence goes beyond the three main constructs. The full code list can be found in Appendix C. Since the interviews were conducted in Dutch, all quotes that are included in this chapter were translated into English.

### **4.1 Brand equity**

Brand equity is the value a brand name has in the eyes of the consumer (Farquhar, 1989). Previous quantitative studies have shown that it is a reliable predictor of brand preference. This section will discuss brand equity by looking at the data that is related to the four brand equity dimensions. The goal is to discover and put into context the elements that contribute to the development of brand equity.

#### **4.1.1 Brand awareness**

Brand awareness is a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand as being in a certain product category (Aaker, 1991). This is critical for the development of brand preference since a consumer must be aware of a brand in order to prefer it. The interviews showed that most participants were able to describe the color and the logo of their preferred brand with much detail. Especially the color was something that all participants mentioned when asked to describe a brands' visual appearance, like Bas, a 23-year-old student, did with Heineken: "Well Heineken has a really nice green crate". For the

participants, it was also often the color of their preferred brand that made the crate jump out when they were in the supermarket. For example, Casper mentioned he recognized Bavaria easily because of the blue color: “[...] cause normally it is always green or yellow you know, so then the blue jumps out pretty well”. Interestingly, Julia says something similar but then for Heineken: “I see that immediately, like I said, that green just really stands out.” So, both participants have the same opinion about the color of their preferred brand, even though the color is different. Therefore, the specific color might not necessarily matter for the development of brand awareness, but it is an important point of recognition for consumers. One way to make consumers recognize a color is through marketing.

The effect of marketing efforts on brand equity and some of its four brand equity dimensions has been well established in previous studies (Buil et al., 2013a; Nikabadi et al., 2015). Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that only four of the eleven participants talked about marketing efforts of their preferred brand. This is even less when Heineken is excluded. Out of the eight people who did not have Heineken as their preferred brand, only two could remember marketing efforts by their brand, but not even very specifically, like Adam: “I know that Hertog Jan makes commercials about the quality. So how they brew it”. This is different for Heineken. The majority of the participants (7 out of 11) remembered commercials or sponsoring by Heineken even if their preferred brand was not Heineken. Adam was no exception to this: “You see it a lot on TV, you see it for example with the Formula 1. They sponsor football a lot as well I think”. An often-heard comment from participants was that they could not remember a commercial from their preferred brand, but they could remember one from Heineken, like Ivan (23 years old) said, when he was asked whether he could remember a commercial from Hertog Jan: “No, but I can remember it for Heineken for example”. Even though participants had trouble remembering marketing efforts of their preferred brand, the fact that they do remember Heineken commercials shows that marketing contributes to brand awareness. Heineken is known for its extensive advertising campaigns and sponsoring of events. The interviews show that this is a way to create great awareness for a brand, since the majority of the participants can remember marketing efforts by Heineken. This is in line with previous studies that suggest marketing efforts mostly contribute to creating brand equity by increasing brand awareness (Buil et al., 2013a; Nikabadi et al., 2015). There is a slight

difference in how participants talked about marketing efforts in the interviews compared to how it is measured in previous studies. Buil et al. (2013a) show that when consumers feel that a brand is spending more on advertising, brand awareness increases. However, the participants in this study focused more on how often they saw the advertisements and did not talk about the monetary aspect of advertising.

Besides the visuals of the brand and its marketing efforts, another thing that contributes to brand awareness is the availability of a brand to the consumer. One of the first places brands were available for some participants was their elderly home. Six of the eleven participants talked about how one of their preferred brands was always the brand their parents bought or drank, like Emma (22 years old): “And here there are just always in the storage a few crates of Hertog Jan”. Even though at a young age the participants were not allowed to drink beer, the brand was always there which contributed to the development of brand awareness over time. Seeing a family member always drink the same brand or seeing that same crate in the garage throughout an entire childhood makes consumers recognize and recall a brand more easily. This is also the case for other places where participants often come. Seeing the same brand logo at every party of the student association because it is the only brand that is available is something that makes that brand easier to recognize over time.

The last element that contributes to the development of brand awareness is the repeated use of a brand. Five participants mentioned that they were able to recognize a brand easily because they used it so often, like Femke, a 23-year-old student: “And if you order it somewhere on a terrace, then you get a glass with the logo on it [...]. So, I think that does play a role, you just have it in your hand a lot.” This shows that even trying a brand a few times or drinking it a lot at a certain place can build up the awareness of a brand and make it easy for consumers to recall and recognize the brand. Repeated use is possibly even more important for brand awareness than availability since consumers are more actively engaging with the brand compared to when they just see it.

Looking at how brand awareness contributes to the development of brand equity over time, there are a few elements that play a role. Firstly, it is important that a brand has recognizable visual components, such as a logo or a bright color since this helps consumers to recognize the brand. A second element that contributes to brand awareness is marketing. The last two contributors to brand awareness are availability and repeated use.



How often a brand is available to or consumed by a consumer contributes to an increased awareness. These last two elements are not discussed in previous studies regarding brand awareness and brand equity.

#### **4.1.2 Perceived quality**

In the case of beer, perceived quality was mostly described by participants in relation to the taste of a beer. Taste is part of the sensory dimension of brand experience. Therefore, perceived quality is largely determined by consumers' sensory experiences of taste. During the analysis, data about the taste of a beer was coded under the sensory experience of taste since this is more specific than perceived quality for the beer category. These sensory experiences will be discussed later in this chapter. Two other elements emerged from the data that explain how perceived quality develops.

The first one is the price point of a beer brand. Beers with a lower price are considered to be of lower quality by most participants. While some do remember the taste of these cheaper beer brands, most participants just do not buy these brands because price is seen as an indication of its quality. Take for example Adam, who uses price to determine which beer brands are premium brands: "[...] that is more on the basis of, probably the price, because it falls in the same price range, so that makes it a premium brand [...]". This effect price has on perceived quality is not new and has been proven in previous studies (Völckner & Hofmann, 2007). The results put this effect in context by showing that people feel the taste of expensive beer is better than that of cheaper beer. So, participants do not need to taste a cheap beer to perceive the quality as low. In this case it is not the sensory experience that is used to determine the quality, but the price of a brand. However, for the participants quality is still measured by describing the taste.

An exception to the effect of price on perceived quality is brands that use discounts to lower their prices. Every single one of the participants mentioned that they would often buy the brand that is on discount. In the Netherlands, premium brands like Heineken, Hertog Jan and Grolsch are on discount every few weeks. Participants indicate that sometimes they even wait for the brands to be on discount to then buy it like Ivan does: "I would look like, 'oh now is Hertog Jan on sale', so then I go to the store now". For none of the participants these frequent discounts influence the perceived quality of the beer. This is contrary to previous studies by Buil et al. (2013) and Yoo et al. (2000) that conclude

frequent price promotions have a negative impact on perceived quality. The difference in results might come from the high frequency of discounts that makes consumers feel it is normal for premium beer brands to offer discounts.

Besides price and taste, the participants mention the packaging of beer as an indication of its quality. Beer brands that sell beer predominantly in cans are considered cheaper and of lesser quality than beer that is sold in glass bottles, exemplified by a quote from Bas: “[...] then I rather pay a few euros more to have a crate of Heineken, and to just have it out of the bottle instead of those half liter cans”. Participants associate bottled beer in crates with premium brands and high quality, while canned beer is associated with less premium brands and lower quality.

A study by Moorthy and Hawkins (2005) concluded that repeated exposure to advertisements positively affects perceived quality. In the interviews, none of the participants talked about this, so it is difficult to determine how repeated exposure to marketing affects perceived quality. If there is indeed a causal relation, participants could have trouble describing it themselves, since this might be an unconscious effect.

#### **4.1.3 Brand associations**

Aaker defines brand associations as everything that is linked in memory to a brand (Aaker, 1991). This is a very broad definition and can include anything from specific situations to vague associations. For this thesis, it is important to find how these associations develop over time and contribute to an increase in brand equity for beer brands.

Because brand associations can be so broad, participants mention many ways in which they develop. One of the most common ways associations are created among participants are by situations in which the brand is consumed. For example, Gwen (23 years old) explained why she associates her preferred brand, Gebrouwen door Vrouwen (Brewed by Women) with the sun: “Because I often drink it in summery situations, so the sun and free time maybe”. Similarly, Kyra (22 years old) explained why she associates Heineken with her sports association: “Because we always drank it there”. All the participants had stories like this, where drinking the brand at a certain place or in certain circumstances contributed to the development of an association. For the preferred brand these are often positive associations. For less preferred brands these are more negative associations, like

Bas has with Bavaria: “[...] it reminds me a little of festival beer, at the football club when it should just be drunk in the highest possible quantities”. For him this is one of the reasons he does not drink Bavaria when there are other options. Ivan noted that it is the negative associations that are easy to remember, which are reasons for him not to buy certain brands, while he has a harder time coming up with associations for his preferred brand.

A second way brand associations are created is by the visual elements of a brand. In some cases, the visuals are an association itself, such as an association of blue with Bavaria and the image of a Duke with Hertog Jan. These visual associations are then used to describe feelings or emotions about a brand, like Bas does: “[...] I just have a good positive association with the nice green crate [...]”. In other cases, the visuals determine the type of associations. For example, how dark or bright the color of a brand or the bottle is, plays a role in creating the type of association. Emma explains why she associates Hertog Jan with the winter: “[...] I associate that more with the winter, because it is really dark [...] and Hertog Jan looks really dark and heavy, which it not even is, but still, I associate it with that”. This is important for brands to realize, because in Emma’s case it makes her more likely to buy Hertog Jan in the winter, while in the summer she is more inclined to buy a beer that has a brighter color, like Kornuit. For Kyra, the color partly determined how she felt about a brand: “[I am] more inclined to be more positive about Heineken than about Hertog Jan, because I see that then a little more as dark and the other more as light”. Ivan also has certain brand associations with the dark colors of Hertog Jan, but for him these are more positive: “That classic gold together with black makes it feel a little classic”. Earlier he explained that this classic feeling is really appealing to him. These last examples show how color can create brand associations very quickly, rather than develop them over time. This is also concluded in a study by Jin et al. (2019), who showed that due to the immediate impression colors can make, they can influence brand associations. However, Jin et al. (2019) also argue that consistent presentation of colors can strengthen associations, which indicates the factor of time is still relevant. This is exemplified by the quote from Bas about his positive associations with the green crate. Repeatedly seeing the green crate in positive situations makes him develop a positive association with the color.

The impact of visuals on brand associations is closely related to the concept of visual sensory experiences. The data that was relevant to both has been discussed above. The situations discussed above can therefore also be seen as visual sensory experiences.

Other sensory experiences that are less relevant for the creation of brand associations will be discussed later in this chapter.

A third way brand associations develop is through the branding or marketing of a brand. This is the case for Gwen, who associates Gebrouwen door Vrouwen with female empowerment, because the branding makes it clear the beers are brewed by women. For her this is a positive association, but she also notes that this might work in an opposite way for men: "Men might not like that their beer is being brewed by women". Marketing can be an indirect way to create associations, for example when brands sponsor events, which created the association of Formula 1 with Heineken for Adam: "And now when there is Formula 1, you see Heineken, and with a Formula 1 race comes a beer, so you think, ah let's get a beer". An interesting difference between the two examples above is how they develop over time. For Gebrouwen door Vrouwen for example, it is likely that consumers immediately make the association with women brewing beer. For sponsoring of the Formula 1 however, the development of the brand association might take longer, because a brand needs to be seen together with Formula 1 repeatedly for the association to develop. Previous studies have also pointed out the effect marketing efforts can have on brand associations (Buil et al., 2013a; Nikabadi et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2000). However, just as for brand awareness, studies see marketing as one of the most important ways to create brand associations. Although the results indeed show that marketing plays a role, the participants do not discuss it as being the only or most important way brand associations are created.

A last common association that participants have is with the taste of a beer. In some cases, the taste or type of taste is an association itself. For five of the eleven participants, taste was one of the first things they mentioned when asked to name things that came to mind when thinking about their preferred brand. This was also the case for Emma: "I always think of brown for Hertog Jan, delicious, and fuller in taste". Here, the taste itself is a brand association. During the interview, the participants were also asked to describe their preferred brand as if it were a person. Two participants used the taste of their brand as a reason for describing the brand in a particular way, such as Ivan who used the word pleasantly to describe Hertog Jan as a person: "Pleasantly, because it is not a very hard taste, but also not a wimp in terms of taste." So, it is also possible to create more indirect associations through taste.

These results show that in some cases the development of brand associations happens over time. One example of this is when sponsoring and marketing are used to create associations. When situations of consumption create brand associations this development over time also plays a big role. The situations that participants described as creating associations were almost always situations that occurred repeatedly, such as summery days or weekly drinks at the sports association. Consuming a brand in these situations more than once is what creates a strong association between the brand and the situation. In other cases, brand associations develop by only seeing or consuming a brand once.

Besides studies that focus on the effect of marketing on brand associations (Buil et al., 2013a; Nikabadi et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2000), few studies have focused on other ways brand associations develop. Although the results in this study show that marketing can play a role in the development of brand associations, the answer to how participants develop brand associations is that this is mainly by using the brand.

#### **4.1.4 Brand loyalty**

The data about the development of brand loyalty is not as full of examples as for the other three brand equity dimensions. One of the reasons for this is that for participants it is more difficult to describe why they are loyal to a brand than it is to name a few things that come to mind when thinking about a brand. In addition, the difference between brand loyalty and brand preference is in practice hard to determine.

What did become clear from the results is the strength of participants' brand loyalty. Although all participants had one preferred brand, they also all had at least one other brand they would not mind switching to if the situation called for it. The single most important reason for choosing another brand are discounts. As discussed before, in the Netherlands beer brands have regular discounts that are quite significant, often between 25 and 50 percent. Therefore, buying beers that are on discount can save a consumer a lot of money. This was of importance for the participants in this study, who were between the ages of 18 and 23 and of which some were still students who did not have a lot of money to spend. This is also the case for Julia (22 years old): "It just saves a lot of money. For me that is more important than that it maybe tastes a little less than Heineken". What is often the case for the participant is that they have adopted a few beer brands that they are always

willing to buy. Then when they go to the store, they look at which of these brands is on sale and buy that brand. This was also the case for Adam who named his top three brands: “Hertog Jan one, then Heineken two, and Bavaria three. And then it just depends what is on sale [...] we are students, and we live together so usually we look for what is on sale”. Although this can be interpreted as a certain lack of brand loyalty, nine of the eleven participants only had a few that they would buy, meaning they are loyal to a small group of brands, while still disregarding all other brands.

When asked if they would consider switching to other brands outside the few brands they already bought, most of the participants said they are open to switching if there is a good reason to switch. These reasons that were mentioned are mostly things that have been discussed above for other brand equity dimensions, such as perceived quality, price, availability, and a few good experiences with the brand. This suggests that the three other brand equity dimensions are the drivers behind the development of brand loyalty, which supports the study by Buil et al. (2013a) who conclude that brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations are driving factors behind brand loyalty. A possible explanation for this is the fact that brand loyalty is a behavioral dimension, and the other three brand equity dimensions are perceptual dimensions (Cobb-Walgreen et al., 1995; Myers, 2003). The current results as well as the study by Buil et al. (2013a) suggest that a consumer’s behavior, the loyalty to a brand, is influenced by how a brand is perceived, which is measured by the three perceptual brand equity dimensions.

#### **4.1.5 The development of brand equity over time**

The first sub-question was designed with the goal to determine how the four brand equity dimensions contribute to the development of brand equity over a longer time. The results show that the development of brand equity does in fact take place over time. Creating brand awareness is the first step in this process, because to build brand equity there must first be brand awareness. A single exposure to a brand might create a certain brand awareness, but the results show that multiple contacts with a brand strengthen brand awareness. This can be through multiple channels, such as marketing and the use of a brand. It is strengthened by the availability of a brand and recognizable visuals. Only after a consumer is aware of a brand, the other three brand equity dimensions start to play a role and increase the overall brand equity.

Perceived quality in the beer category is by participants predominantly linked to the taste of a beer, which is at the same time a sensory experience. Later in this chapter, the results regarding the sensory experience of taste will show that a consumer can start to appreciate a taste more over time, again showing the importance of a focus on the development over time. Beig and Nika (2019) suggested that through repetition of usage a consumer's perceived quality can change, which the results of this study also show. Other elements that play a role are price and packaging.

The results show that the main way people develop associations is by repeatedly consuming the brand, which strengthens the associations over time. The visual component of a brand can also play a role in creating brand associations. Perceived quality and brand associations help develop brand equity over time, since a good perceived quality and positive brand associations improve the value that a brand has to the consumer.

The results do not clearly show how brand loyalty contributes to the development of brand equity over time. A reason for this can be that the concepts of brand loyalty and brand preference are closely related, since having a strong loyalty to a brand already indicates a certain amount of brand preference. The results do suggest that frequent discounts work against the creation of brand loyalty, since it makes participants switch frequently between brands.

Quantitative studies have shown that the four brand equity dimensions have an effect on brand equity (Sasmita & Suki, 2015; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Vinh & Huy, 2016). However, these studies did not show how the dimensions have that effect. Overall, it can be concluded that the development of brand equity over time mainly takes place through frequent positive points of contact with a brand, preferably during consumption. This creates brand awareness and brand associations and determines the perceived quality. Previous studies suggest that marketing plays a major role in the development of brand equity. Surprisingly therefore, participants had very few explicit memories of marketing efforts by their preferred brand.

## **4.2 Self-congruity**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, self-congruity is the psychological comparison between the brand-user image and the consumer's self-concept (Sirgy et al., 1997). The development of self-congruity is largely determined by how these two interact

with each other in the consumer's mind. Therefore, the development of both the brand-user image and the self-concept should be considered when studying the development of self-congruity over time.

#### **4.2.1 Self-concept**

In the theoretical framework the argument was made that it is difficult for brands to influence the self-concept side of self-congruity, since this is deeply personal and affected by many factors in a person's life (Sebastian et al., 2008). The data indeed does not suggest that beer brands can influence consumers' self-concepts. What the data does show is that all the participants who are able to describe the typical user of their preferred brand see mostly commonalities between themselves and the typical user they describe. On the contrary, they see many differences between themselves and the typical users of their less preferred brands. This suggests that it is important that there is a certain level of self-congruity for a brand to be preferred, which is in line with previous studies (Maymand & Razmi, 2017; Tsai et al., 2015). However, it can also mean that consumers unconsciously adjust the brand-user image of a preferred brand to match their self-concept. It is not clear from the data in which order this happens.

In the interview with Hugo the development of his self-concept and its effect on his choice of brands is clearer than in other interviews. Hugo's preferred brand is Hertog Jan, and he sometimes drinks Heineken and Bavaria. But besides these three brands, he would not consider any other beer brands and indicated that he would switch to another type of alcoholic beverage completely if one of these was not available. He was also not very positive about the typical users of other brands, for example about people who choose Grolsch: "[...] can you not make a better choice?" He also talked about people who drink cheap beers as people who receive benefits from the government. However, he explained that two years ago he was in a situation where he would drink almost any beer brand, as long as it was cheap. At that time, he was struggling with his health and drank more than he wanted to. During the interview he was doing much better and had a more positive self-concept than two years ago. This is reflected in which beer brands he prefers, which are more expensive brands, with a positive brand-user image. To relate this to the question of how self-congruity develops: the self-concept develops regardless of the brand, and at different points during this process it is congruent with different brands.



For the self-concept it is not only important how a person sees himself, but also how he wants other people to look at him. Five of the eleven participants indicated that they would rather not be seen with some brands, since this could negatively impact the image people had of them. This is related to the study by Roy and Rabbanee (2015) who conclude that people who want to be socially desirable and consume to gain status have high self-congruity with luxury brands. An example is given by Adam:

[...] I do find it important what people think about me. [...] if I am sitting in the park, and they see Schultenbräu, then they associate, at least I would associate that immediately with something that I do not want people to associate me with.

This shows that it is not only the match between brand-user image and self-concept that is important, but also what consumers think other people's image is of the typical brand-user.

The development of the self-concept of the participants over time was not discussed in much detail during the interviews, since it is in many ways beyond what brands can influence. However, the results show that the comparison between the self-concept and the brand-user image is an element that should be considered for the development of brand preference.

#### **4.2.2 Brand-user image**

The brand-user image is the image a consumer has of other people that use the brand, or in other words: the typical brand user. While previous studies have not explicitly linked the brand-user image to brand associations, in practice the brand-user image can be seen as a type of brand association, since it is linked in memory to a brand. During the coding process however, data related to the brand-user image was treated as separate in order to better analyze how self-congruity develops over time.

When participants were asked to describe who they thought other users of their preferred brand were, there were three ways in which this was answered. Firstly, not all participants were able to give a clear description of what they perceived to be the typical user of their preferred brand. Femke was one of these participants, and she said the following about what she thinks the users of Grolsch are like: "You do not only want to get drunk, but you also just want to drink something tasty as well. But really personality traits,

yes I find that really difficult". The second way in which the question was answered was by giving a general description with some character traits that belong to the brand-user image. An example of this is the description the 22-year-old Hugo gives of what in his mind the typical Hertog Jan user is like: "[...] just people who enjoy doing their own thing in life. [...] Just really social people, really nice people with who I can have a great night". The third way to describe the brand-user image of the preferred brand is by naming groups of people that drink the brand. Daan described the typical user of Bavaria as people from Brabant or students, with the following reason: "Well, it comes from Brabant, it is a thing there [...] and there are some student associations in the country who drink it [...]".

When giving a description of the brand-user image of their preferred brand, participants often had to think for a while and came up with new characteristics in the middle of their answers. However, all the participants answered quickly and decisively when asked to describe the typical user of brands they would never buy, in most cases cheaper brands. The descriptions are also more clear and more negative than for their preferred brand. One common example is people who receive benefits from the government, also mentioned by Hugo: "I would then rudely say those are, yeah benefits recipients". Besides people who receive benefits from the government, cheap beers are in general associated with poor people, which is also the case for Julia, who describes people who according to her drink Dors, a private label from the Jumbo: "[...] I think students that are just really a bit shabbier and are not really willing to spend more to just buy good beer [...]". This exemplifies the first element that influences the brand-user image, which is price. However, in the examples that the participants gave, this only applied to low priced brands. Low priced brands are commonly associated with people that do not have the financial means to buy more expensive brands, but more expensive brands are not explicitly associated with people who do have the means to afford these brands.

The brand-user image is developed in a few other ways. One of the most important ways is knowing or seeing people who drink the brand. In the interview, Gwen explained why she thinks the typical user of her preferred brand is young, female, and educated: "So mainly those people with who I actually drink this, of who I also know that they buy this in the supermarket". This is also the case for the brand-user image of brands that participants do not prefer, with the difference being that participants did not drink together with these people. Adam described why he thinks that people who drink Schultenbräu, Klok, and Dors

are poor: “[...] when you walk through the city and you see homeless people, you see really quickly these homeless people with those cans, so yes that, I think that really gives a good image [...]”. So, either positively or negatively, seeing or knowing people who drink a brand contributes to the development of a certain brand-user image.

Another way participants develop a brand-user image is related to the areas in which people drink a brand. For example, Grolsch is headquartered in Enschede in the eastern Netherlands, a region commonly associated with farmers. Grolsch is very popular in this part of the country, which leads Adam to have a clear brand-user image for Grolsch: “Grolsch I would characterize as more farmers. A bit more Twente so to say. That is very clear for me”. So, he assumed people from Twente drink a lot of Grolsch, which makes them more likely to be the typical Grolsch user. Another example of this was mentioned above when Daan said he saw people from Brabant as the typical user of Bavaria, a brand that is from Brabant.

Overall, the brand-user image mainly seems to develop by seeing other people who drink it. Even the way price influences the brand-user image is rooted in seeing homeless people drink cheap beers. Interestingly, the data shows that a brand-user image for a preferred brand is mostly developed when a person has already started drinking a brand. Take for instance Casper, who started seeing students as the typical user of Bavaria after he already drank it for a while: “[...] that really came when I came to live here and at first you do not really notice that [...] and slowly that becomes clearer”. This shows that the development of the brand-user image, and with that self-congruity, happens over time after repeated contact with what a consumer believes to be the typical user of a brand.

The lack of evidence in previous studies about the effect of marketing on self-congruity that was discussed in the theoretical framework is reflected in the data of this study. None of the participants mentioned marketing efforts as a reason for the brand-user image of their preferred brand. Sirgy et al. (1997) suggested that the brand-user image is determined by a host of factors, among which are price and psychological associations. The results of this study show that this is in fact the case, but that in essence a consumer’s brand-user image is often determined by brand-users that are in close proximity to that consumer.

### **4.2.3 The development of self-congruity over time**

The second sub-question is aimed at uncovering how self-congruity develops over time. The results show that the self-concept is something that already exists regardless of beer and that the brand-user image is more flexible. The development of that brand-user image therefore determines whether it matches the self-concept of consumers and what level of self-congruity a consumer has with a brand. This is something to consider for future research, since recent studies have mostly looked at the self-concept component of self-congruity (Roy & Rabbanee, 2015). As was assumed in the sub-question, the development of the brand-user image takes place over time. The main way participants developed a brand-user image is by frequently seeing or knowing people who drink a brand. So, the image of homeless people drinking a cheap brand is not created by a single encounter with a homeless person who is drinking the brand, but by repeatedly seeing similar people drink the same brand.

## **4.3 Brand experience**

The third main construct that was included in the conceptual framework as a contributor to the development of brand preference is brand experience. Four types of brand experience dimensions are used to measure brand experience: sensory experiences, affective experiences, behavioral experiences, and intellectual experiences. The analysis showed that for the beer category, sensory experiences and affective experiences are the most important. Behavioral experiences and intellectual experiences are of less importance.

### **4.3.1 Sensory experiences**

The sensory experiences are experiences that are related to one of the senses. For the category of beer, visual and taste senses are the most important.

#### **4.3.1.1 Taste**

Not surprisingly, the sensory experience of taste is a major element in the development of beer brand experience. When asked what participants in general look for in a beer, they all mentioned that the taste should be good, like Kyra did: "What do I look for in a beer? Well that it tastes good". When asked specifically about their preferred

brand, every participant named taste as a major reason they drink it. This is also the case for Casper: “If I had to summarize it in a few points. Good but accessible taste that is not too outspoken [...]”. These results show that a good experience with the taste is a key element in the development of the overall brand experience for beer brands. A negative taste experience can be a reason to not buy a brand again. This is the reason Emma does not buy Schultenbräu: “I just think that tastes like a very cheap beer”.

The results seem very clear, good taste experiences result in a good brand experience and an increase in brand preference, bad taste experiences do the opposite. However, it is not always that black and white. The interviews show that beer is something most people have to learn to drink. The bitter taste of many beers is not something the participants naturally liked from the beginning, and they had to repeatedly drink it before they started to like it. During the interview, Kyra reflected on how her taste for beer changed in her first half year as a student:

Well in the first [year] it was still new, and I just did not like the taste, and it was more of an obligation that I started drinking it. [...] And after that I just really liked it. [...] I think after my first year, or halfway through my first year.

Many participants had similar stories where they did not like beer at first but got used to the taste and ended up loving the taste of beer. This poses interesting opportunities for brands to get consumers to like the taste of their beer. When Kyra started to learn drinking beer, it was mostly at her sports association. At this sports association Heineken was the only beer that was available, so naturally she started drinking this. To this day, she still prefers Heineken over other beers even though she is not sure what other brands taste like. So, being the brand people consume when they start drinking can create a long-lasting brand preference.

In other instances, it is not one brand that is dominant from the beginning, but rather the development of a better knowledge of how multiple beers taste. This is the case for Hugo who prefers Hertog Jan, because after multiple years of drinking beer, he has more experience in which beers he likes and which beers he does not like:

Mostly because in the beginning, you were just drinking beer a little. And then over time, you just fine tune your taste more, what you like, what you do not like. And now I am aware that Hertog Jan is good beer, so preferably when I get it [beer], I just get Hertog Jan.

This shows that it is not just about making consumers drink a brand from the beginning to get them used to it, but also about creating a taste that is distinctive from and better than other brands. This is why Hugo decided he likes Hertog Jan more than other beers: “It has a unique taste. And there is just a little more character in it than with Heineken and Grolsch”.

Another taste related aspect that was important for participants is the lightness or heaviness of the beer. This is related to how easy it is to drink a beer, as Julia explains when she describes the taste of Hertog Jan: “Yeah, a little heavier [than Heineken] or something. I would not be able to drink it that fast I guess”. How light or heavy participants perceive a beer to be can sometimes determine what brand they buy for specific occasions. For situations where participants know they are going to drink a lot, they buy what they think are lighter beers. For situations where they do not drink as much, but want to genuinely enjoy the taste of beer, they buy heavier beers: “Actually I go for a Hertog Jan as standard. [...] Suppose I have a heavy drinking evening, then I would go for a Heineken sooner, because it is a bit lighter” (Ivan). Similar to what Hugo described about fine tuning his taste, tasting the difference between heavy and light beers is something that develops over time, like for Bas: “Every now and then I got the feeling of, maybe this drinks away just a bit easier. And later I got to find the taste also better of Heineken relative to Amstel”. So, the lightness or heaviness of a beer is not positive or negative per se but fits different situations. Participants find this out after having at least a few experiences with drinking a brand, which suggests a development of sensory experiences over time.

#### **4.2.1.2 Visual**

The second sensory experience that is important is the visual sensory experience. The visual experiences that create brand associations have already been discussed in the section on brand equity. One other visual experience that participants talked about that does not necessarily create a strong association is the first impression of a brand’s visual appearance. When trying a new beer, the visual element plays an important role in

deciding what brand to buy, as it does for Gwen: “So it is the combination I look at, if either the logo or the label appeals to me [...] I do find it important that the label looks a bit nice”. However, the participants explained that after the beer has been bought because of the visual impression it made, a second purchase is only made if the taste was good the first time, which exemplifies the importance of taste again.

The results for both the visual and the taste senses are in line with previous research by Moreira et al. (2017) who conclude that sensory information has a positive effect on brand experience. What the results add to this is what underlies this effect. For beer, this is mostly consumption of a brand. In addition, there can be a development over time. A first negative experience does not always mean later experiences will also be negative. What must be considered is that the product category determines for a large part which senses are important. In the case of beer, taste is important. However, this is unlikely to be an important sense for detergent.

#### **4.3.2 Affective experiences**

Affective experiences refer to the moods and emotions that consumers have when they are interacting with a brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). The data shows that for preferred beer brands, these affective experiences are exclusively positive. The two most dominant moods or emotions that participants mention are relaxation and happiness. This comes mainly from situations in which the beer is consumed, such as it is for Gwen, who described what she feels when thinking about the last time she had her preferred brand: “It is relaxed and nice and free and just sitting there with your bitterbal in your hand and your beer”. Similarly, Julia describes how she feels thinking about an early memory of drinking Heineken: “Really positive, also happiness, a lot of chatting, also dancing and that you really get drunk. [...] But just really positive, a lot of fun, with friends and other students”. None of the participants had trouble coming up with good memories of drinking their brand and had positive emotions when thinking about the brand. When there were negative memories, such as drinking too much, the association was made with alcohol in general or with a bad choice from the participants themselves, and not with their favorite brand.

The affective experiences consumers have with a beer brand mostly come from repeatedly being in positive situations where they drink the brand, such as with friends or

in the summer. However, some participants mentioned that these emotions were not solely connected to their favorite brand, but also to drinking beer in general, like Ivan explains: “It is not specifically Hertog Jan for me that gives me that feeling. A Heineken can also do that just fine”. Later he did note that there are brands that give him a less positive feeling, such as Grolsch.

Overall, participants connected very positive moods and emotions to their preferred brands. This is partly because of the social nature of drinking beer, which often creates positive situations and memories. Affective experiences are created by repeated use of a brand in these types of situations. Since previous studies have not studied specifically how affective brand experiences are created, these results are a first suggestion of how this development works. The results also show that beer brands should be careful to assume the positive emotions are connected exclusively to their brand, since in many cases the positive associations come from drinking alcohol with other people in general.

#### **4.3.3 Behavioral and intellectual experiences**

The two types of brand experience dimensions that are scarce in relation to beer brands are behavioral and intellectual experiences. Behavioral experiences refer to actions and bodily experiences. For the beer category in general, people start to behave differently after drinking beer due to the alcohol. However, this is unrelated to specific brands. The only difference in behavior between brands that was mentioned during the interview was that three participants would drink less of brands that they do not like or that have heavier beer. In these instances, it is the sensory experience that leads to a change in behavior.

For intellectual experiences there were even less examples in relation to beer brands. Brands in the beer category do not make people think in a particular way, with the exception of one participant. As discussed, Gwen’s favorite beer brand is Gebrouwen door Vrouwen, a brewery that only employs women. For her this was appealing: “It does evoke a little, and then we might come to that women's point, a kind of female empowerment or something that makes me think 'I think it is cool that it was made by girls'”. What is different about this is that during the interview with Gwen a specialty beer brand was discussed instead of more mainstream beer brands like Heineken or Hertog Jan. It is not unlikely that smaller breweries try to be more distinctive and create more intellectual experiences than mainstream brands who have to appeal to the masses.



The results show that there is a lot of room for improvement for beer brands regarding the behavioral and intellectual experiences. However, seeing as these two dimensions are almost not present in the data, it also suggests that for beer brands not all types of experiences are equally relevant. Previous studies do not adapt the measurement of brand experience to the product category and see all four brand experience dimensions as equal in all categories (Brakus et al., 2009; Ebrahim et al., 2016). The results of this study suggest that it could be beneficial to put more value on a few of the brand experience dimensions in different product categories.

#### **4.3.4 The development of brand experience over time**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Andreini et al. (2018), too little is known about brand experiences and how they develop. The results of this study show that like for brand equity and self-congruity, brand experience in the beer category is developed over time. The most significant factor is repeated use of a brand. For beers, this helps to develop sensory experiences through taste and affective experiences through situations in which the brand is consumed. This is in line with the argument made by Zarantonello and Schmitt (2013) that the strongest experiences occur when consumers are in direct contact with a brand. Beer brands have difficulty developing experiences related to the behavioral and intellectual dimensions of brand experience. For these two dimensions, the results show no development that takes place over time in the beer category. Since brand experience is measured through all four dimensions, the overall brand experience might not be as strong as it ideally should be. However, the results also suggest that it could be beneficial to place more value on a few of the brand experience dimensions in different product categories, instead of always placing equal value on each of the four dimensions.

#### **4.4 Company and occasion**

From the data, two other themes emerged that influence for a large part which brand people prefer: company and occasion. These were combined in one code, since participants often mentioned both in the same sentence. Company and occasion influence either overall brand preference, or brand preference in specific moments. These two themes have been shortly discussed throughout this chapter as having an impact on the

three main constructs. However, they go beyond just influencing these three constructs and contribute to the development of brand preference in other ways as well.

The data shows that beer drinking is an extremely social activity for the participants. Every participant talked about how drinking beer is done together with friends, family, colleagues, roommates, and other groups. This is important in two ways. Firstly, since most of the time, participants drink beer together with other people, they are influenced by what these people drink. At a typical party, there is only one type of beer available, which means that this is the beer people are going to drink that night. If a person always drinks with the same people, this is often the same brand every time. This means people get used to the brand because they drink it more often. It also makes it more likely that drinking the brand becomes a habit. Consequently, people will less frequently come in situations where they try other brands. Situations in which participants met new people, were therefore also situations in which they started drinking a new brand. Casper was in such a situation when he started studying in a new city and noticed everyone around him was drinking Bavaria:

It really came when I started living here, and at first you do not really notice it, but you know, then it happens to be in your house, and then you come at other people's houses and then it is also the case there.

So, meeting new groups of people that have a standard beer was often a reason for participants to switch brands. These moments are potentially interesting for brands to focus on, since it is when consumers are open to switching between brands.

Secondly, the social aspect of beer drinking influences the participants' brand preference for specific situations. Nine of the eleven participants said that they take into account what other people want to drink when they buy beer. Ivan gives an example of this: "Say I would know; half of my friends prefer Heineken, and the other half prefers Hertog Jan. Then I would make sure that half of the crates, that it is mixed so to say". So, the preferences of people for whom the beer is bought are considered when choosing the brand. In these situations, a personal preference can be overruled by what other people prefer.

An overall brand preference can also be put aside when the preferred brand does not fit the occasion. Nine of the eleven participants buy different beer brands for different

occasions. As already discussed shortly, participants choose light beer for situations where they drink a lot, and heavier beers for situations where taste is more important. Another common behavior is to buy heavier beer in the winter, and more light or fresh beer in the summer. Hugo gives an example: "For a nice summery afternoon I would go for a light beer. [...] Say I have a night with friends, then I go for a normal beer, then it is more quantity that matters". Together the company and the occasion have a considerable influence on what brand is preferred at a certain moment.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand how brand preference develops over time. Previous literature has shown that high levels of brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience predict high levels of brand preference. However, there is a gap in the literature on how these develop brand preference over time. This research aimed to fill this gap by answering the following research question: *How do consumers develop a preference for beer brands over time?*

### 5.1 Significant findings and theoretical reflection

The interviews with beer consumers revealed many new insights that quantitative studies were not able to uncover. The results show that the development of brand preference is indeed for a large part driven by the development of brand equity, self-congruity, and brand experience. How these three main constructs contribute to the development of brand preference will be discussed in this section. In addition, the social character of drinking beer also plays a role.

The answer to the first sub-question regarding the development of brand equity showed that the first step to creating brand equity is creating brand awareness. Besides being important for creating brand equity, brand awareness is also important for the development of self-congruity and brand experience. A consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand is a necessary first step in creating any conscious memory that is related to a brand, whether it is a brand association, the image of another user, or an experience. The main ways consumers develop awareness for beer brands is through repeated consumption and marketing. Availability and recognizability contribute to this by making it easier for consumers to consume the brand and to recognize the brand. Relating this to the broader question of how consumers develop brand preference, brand awareness is the start of this process. The more aware consumers are of a brand, the easier it is to start developing a preference. This is in line with research by Buil et al. (2013a) who conclude that brand awareness is an essential means to anchor associations to. Previous studies showed that the effect of brand awareness on brand equity and brand preference is not a direct effect (Tong & Hawley, 2009; Vinh & Huy, 2016). The results provide a possible explanation for this, which is that brand awareness itself does not create any sort of emotional connection or positive experience but facilitates the development of those.

Two other brand equity dimensions, brand associations and perceived quality, play a role in the development of brand equity and brand preference. Firstly, perceived quality in the beer category is mainly determined by the taste of a beer, which means it reflects whether people enjoy drinking it. The interviews showed that taste and perceived quality are crucial for creating preference for beer brands. This goes hand in hand with the sensory experience of taste. A first perception is important for perceived quality, but not a definitive one. Over time, consumers can start to appreciate the taste of a beer more by repeated consumption which shows the importance of looking at the development over time. Another way repeated consumption is important to the development of brand equity and brand preference is by creating brand associations. Again, the development over time is important here. While brand awareness was mostly a first step in the development of brand preference, perceived quality and brand associations play a much bigger role. A high perceived quality and positive brand associations were for all participants connected to their preferred brand. Again, this is in line with research by Buil et al. (2013a) who conclude that perceived quality and brand associations are how consumers start to form opinions about a brand.

Yoo and Donthu (2001) concluded that brand awareness and brand associations can be seen as a singular dimension. Pappu et al. (2005) did find a significant difference, which is why this thesis used the four brand equity dimensions as proposed by Aaker (1991). The results of this thesis show how both brand awareness and brand associations are distinctive elements for the development of brand equity and brand preference. Brand awareness is a first step in the process and helps participants to anchor meaningful thoughts and memories to a brand, which are often brand associations. It is therefore useful to keep separating brand awareness and brand associations in future studies.

For the fourth brand equity dimension, brand loyalty, the results do not provide clear examples of how it contributes to the development of brand equity or brand preference. However, this does not mean that it does not contribute at all. During the qualitative interviews, brand loyalty was difficult to distinguish from general brand preference. A possible explanation for this is that brand loyalty is already defined as a measurement of how attached a consumer is to a brand (Aaker, 1991), which is similar to how much a consumer prefers a brand. This attachment is created by being aware of a brand, perceiving it to be of high quality, and having positive brand associations, which

shows how important the other three brand equity dimensions are. What the results do show is that beer brands have trouble creating high levels of brand loyalty among participants. Even though they all had one most preferred brand, the participants switched very easily between a few brands, mainly due to the frequent discounts. It is not unlikely that the frequent switching between brands is counterproductive to creating a strong brand preference.

Previous studies placed much emphasis on marketing efforts as a way to develop brand equity (Abril & Rodríguez-Cánovas, 2016; Godey et al., 2016; Zahoor and Qureshi, 2017). While the participants did talk about marketing efforts, the extent to which they did this does not come close to how much they talked about repeated use. The results therefore suggest that in studying the development of brand equity and brand preference, studies should focus on a wider range of factors besides marketing efforts.

Related to marketing efforts, studies by Buil et al. (2013a) and Yoo et al. (2000) show a negative effect of frequent price promotions on perceived quality. The way participants in this study talked about the frequent discounts for beer does not reflect these findings. Quite contrary, frequent price promotions led participants to wait for a preferred brand to be on discount and then buy it, which ultimately leads to repeated use. Perhaps it is the abundance of price promotions by all beer brands that counteracts the negative impact discounts can have on perceived quality.

The effect of brand equity on brand preference has been well established by previous studies (Buil et al., 2013b; Chang & Liu, 2009; Chen & Chang, 2008; Moradi & Zarei, 2011; Satvati et al., 2016; Vinh & Huy, 2016). However, none of these studies focused on what underlies this effect. Therefore, the purpose of the first sub-question was to determine how the development of brand equity contributes to the development of brand preference for beer brands over time. Essentially, brand equity, the value a brand name has to the consumer, is a way to accumulate all the opinions and thoughts consumers have about a beer brand. Together these opinions and thoughts determine the overall value a brand has to a consumer, the brand equity. That overall value is an important element that makes consumers express a preference for certain brands.

Data related to the second-sub question, how consumers develop self-congruity over time, produced no examples of how brands can influence the development of the self-concept of consumers. The results did produce clear examples of how consumers develop

the brand user-image. The brand-user is for a large part developed by seeing other people drink a brand, predominantly in real life situations. The results showed that for preferred brands the brand-user image was not as strong as for brands that were not preferred. This suggests that it is not crucial for consumers to have high self-congruity with beer brands, but that low self-congruity can be a reason to not prefer a brand. The development over time is important for self-congruity, since it is mostly created by repeatedly seeing other people consuming a brand. Regarding marketing efforts, Graeff (1996) showed that marketing efforts can prime self-congruity, but no study has shown that marketing efforts can be used to create self-congruity or a brand-user image. The results of this study reflect this and show no clear examples of how marketing efforts contribute to the development of self-congruity.

Although previous studies have established that there is an effect of self-congruity on brand preference (Duarte & Raposo, 2010; Jamal & Goode, 2001; Maymand & Ramzi, 2017; Mehta, 1999; Sirgy et al., 1997; Tsai et al., 2015), self-congruity was not as relevant for participants as brand equity. However, a complete lack of self-congruity does work against developing brand preference. The studies above have focused on establishing the effect between self-congruity and brand preference but ignored the 'how' question. The results of this study show that when consumers feel that a typical brand-user is different from themselves in a negative way, it can keep them from buying that brand and developing brand preference.

The results also showed how interrelated the three main constructs are. Self-congruity cannot be seen as separate from brand equity, which a study by Lu and Xu (2015) also concluded. Since the study by Lu and Xu was quantitative, it did not show why these two concepts are connected. The results of this study do provide some insights into that question. For example, when consumers see the brand users as completely different from themselves, this is often in a negative way, which means the value of a brand name decreases, and the brand is seen as inferior to other brands. In addition, the brand-user image can be seen as a type of brand association since it is linked in memory to a brand.

The interrelation of the three constructs continues with brand experience, especially in the beer category. Since consumers mainly determine the perceived quality by thinking about the sensory experience of taste, brand experience is closely related to brand equity. Previous studies showed a positive effect of brand experience on brand equity

(Moreira et al., 2017; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). The results show how for beer brands that effect is created by the way sensory experience and perceived quality are connected. Together, the sensory and affective dimensions are the most important brand experience dimensions in the beer category. While a first impression of the taste is important, repeated use can improve this sensory experience. Repeated use is also important for the development of affective experience since situations in which a beer is consumed are predominantly how affective experiences develop. So, through the sensory and affective dimensions, repeated use can over time increase the brand experience. Brand experience then plays a role in the development of brand preference over time since consumers will prefer brands with which they have positive previous experiences. These results are a first attempt to fill the gap in the literature regarding the development of brand experiences that was identified by Andreini et al. (2019).

As previous studies showed, direct contact between the consumer and the brand is the best way to create strong brand experiences (Schmitt et al., 2014; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Currently, the strength of brand experience is measured by using the four brand experience dimensions. However, the results show that for the beer category, sensory and affective experiences are much more important than behavioral and intellectual experiences. This can mean two things. First, it can point to an area of improvement for beer brands since beer brands have not been able to create behavioral and intellectual experiences. On the other hand, it can mean that not all four dimensions are equally relevant in every product category. In this case, the measurement of brand experience should be further investigated and adapted to specific product categories.

The emerging theme of company and occasion shows that there are also elements outside the three main constructs that influence the development of brand preference. In the case of beer, company and occasion are important because drinking beer is often done in a social environment. The company with whom beer is consumed frequently, can influence long term preference. The company or occasion can also result in a consumer deciding to go with a less preferred brand to make the brand fit the situation. This is likely to be very specific for beer brands and is therefore difficult to generalize to other product categories.



## **5.2 Societal relevance**

The results of this study go beyond establishing a causal chain of marketing concepts and provide brands with actionable insights, such as how to create strong brand associations and increase brand experience over time. The results of this study will help brands to understand what is important to their customer which they can use to focus on improving their offering and strengthening brand preference. For marketing managers of FMCG brands this can be especially relevant, since manufacturers of these brands are under pressure from retailers (Thain & Bradley, 2012). The study is also beneficial to consumers since they will enjoy a better offering when brands take actions to increase the consumers preference for their brands.

## **5.3 Limitations and future research**

This study comes with both minor and major limitations. Some of these are related to the methods and the circumstances in which the research was done. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the results are an interpretation of the researcher. It is possible that researchers with a different background draw different conclusions. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study only allowed for a limited sample of 11 participants. Even though the last few interviews provided few new insights, suggesting a certain matter of saturation, the results cannot be generalized with much certainty.

Besides that, the research took place in the Covid-19 pandemic. This possibly affected the study since during the Covid-19 pandemic social contacts are limited, which changed the participants' consumption of beer in the last year. It is not unlikely that this influenced the data. However, due to the importance of development over time in this study, it is not expected that the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic changed the results in a major way since this only influenced drinking behaviors during the last year.

Other limitations are related to the sample and the product category. First, the sample consisted of Dutch participants between the ages of 18 and 24. Interviews with people in this age group provide a good understanding of how people develop preferences for beer brands when they just started to consume beer legally. However, the interviews lack information about how such preferences develop over a lifetime. The current study also does not show whether preferences created at a young age are able to withstand the test of time. The selection of only Dutch participants is another limitation, since the results

only provide insight into the development of brand preference for Dutch people. Consumers in other countries might have different consumption behaviors and other ways to decide which beer they prefer. In addition, the participants all preferred what are in the Netherlands considered A-brands, like Heineken and Hertog Jan. None of the participants preferred cheaper brands, which means it is not clear whether preferences develop in the same way for these brands.

The last limitation is the focus on a very specific and unique product category. Beer is an FMCG, but due to the social character of drinking beer it is very different from other beverage and food categories. The important role previous drinking occasions play in the development of brand preference and the way these shape the emotional connection with beer is likely to be different in other food and beverage categories and even more different for products that are not considered an FMCG.

Some of the directions future research should go in are rooted in the limitations that are presented above. Future qualitative research should focus on consumers in different stages of their life and with different nationalities to determine whether there are differences when it comes to the development of brand preference. Other research should focus on extending the research into the development of brand preference over time to other product categories. Extending research into other product categories is likely to provide different findings. Taste, for example, is a large determinant of perceived quality in the beer category and the taste experience can become more positive over time, which means the perceived quality can increase over time. In categories besides food and beverages taste is less important, and the development of perceived quality over time could be very different. Lastly, future studies can focus specifically on how brand loyalty contributes to the development of brand preference. Previous quantitative studies find it is an important factor for the development of brand equity and brand preference, but the results of this study provide few examples of what underlies this effect.

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## **7. Appendix**

### **Appendix A – Operationalization – Interview guide**

#### **A. Introduction**

Thank you for participating in this interview. In this interview we will discuss how you develop a preference for certain beer brands.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may quit at any time during this interview or take a brake if you feel that is necessary. If you do not understand a question and need clarification, feel free to say so. The interview will be recorded to transcribe and analyze it afterwards. In the report, I will leave out all the information that could be linked back to you, like name and city. The interview will take about 45 minutes.

In this interview we are going to explore your relationship with beer. Sometimes it might feel like you are repeating yourself, but that is absolutely fine, that helps me to capture the details and look at things in different times. Even if I ask a question that you have never really thought about, I want to ask you to answer the question and say what comes to mind. There is also no right or wrong, I just want to hear what you really think.

#### **B. Personal information/warm-up**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What you do, where you live.

#### **C. Drinking habits**

I want to talk a little bit about your drinking habits in general.

2. Can you tell me what you usually drink?
3. At what occasions do you drink?
4. And when do you like to drink beers?
5. Why do you like to drink beers at these occasions?

#### **D. Beer consumption and beer brands**

6. When you are buying beer, what do you look for in a beer?
7. What beer brands do you usually buy?
8. Do you have a preferred brand or brands?
9. Can you tell me three words that come to mind when you think about brand X?

- Follow up on each word and ask why that comes to mind.

10. How often do you drink brand X?

11. Can you tell me where you usually drink brand X?

12. With whom do you usually drink brand X?

13. Can you tell me how you usually drink brand X, is that out of a bottle, or a glass or a can?

- Why is that?

#### **E. Timeline**

14. When was the first time you drank beer from brand X?

- Go back in time, explore this moment.
- Where was that?
- With whom was that?
- Why was that?
- What feeling or emotion does thinking about that evoke?

15. If we fast forward a few years, can you describe a situation one or two years later (depending on when the first moment was) where you were drinking brand X?

- Where was that?
- With whom was that?
- Why was that?
- What feeling or emotion does thinking about that evoke?

➔ Ask these questions for as many situations as relevant.

#### **F. Last purchase**

16. Can you remember the last time you bought brand X?

17. When was that time?

18. Can you describe that situation?

- Where did you buy it? (supermarket/club/online etc.)
- With whom did you buy it? (alone/friends/family)
- For what occasion did you buy it? (quick drink/for a party/use at home)

19. Is that also where you usually buy brand X?

Let us discuss the last time that you bought brand X. So, imagine you are back at that moment, having to decide what beer to buy.

20. What were you looking for in a beer when you had to decide what to buy?
21. Why did you eventually choose to buy brand X?
22. Has this always been the reason for you to buy this brand?
23. If you compare brand X to other brands, what are the good and bad point of brand X?

## **G. Brand equity**

### *Brand awareness*

24. How easy is it for you to recognize brand X among other brands?

Things that could make it recognizable:

- Logo/color
- Advertisements
- Repeated use
- Other people using it.
- Social media

25. Can you describe the color of brand X?
26. Can you describe the logo of brand X?
27. Can you describe the bottle of brand X?
28. If the participants are able to answer the questions above: why do you think you are able to answer these questions?

### *Brand associations*

29. If brand X was a person, how would you describe it?
30. How similar do you think brand X is to other beer brands?
31. Compared to other brands, how premium or not premium do you find brand X?
  - Why?

32. Are there things or thoughts that you immediately associate with brand X?

- Situations
- Memories
- Feelings

*Perceived quality*

33. What do you think of the quality of brand X?

- Taste
- Service
- Bottle

34. Why do you think that about the quality?

*Brand loyalty*

35. Would you recommend brand X to other people?

- Why?

36. How easily would you switch to a different brand?

37. What are the things that would make you switch?

**H. Self-congruity**

38. If you had to describe other people that drink brand X, how would you describe those people?

39. Could you name a few characteristics of those people?

40. Can you name some of the reasons why you think these people drink brand X?

41. Why do you think those are the people that drink brand X? (try to find how that image developed)

42. What are the similarities between you and the people you just described?

43. What are the differences between you and the people you just described?

*Only ask if these have not been discussed explicit enough previously.*



## **I. Brand experience**

Let us talk about the moment you are drinking brand X. This does not have to be the last time, but try to think about the typical situations where you drink brand X.

44. What feelings or emotions do you associate with drinking brand X?

- Go back in time

45. Does drinking brand X make you behave in a particular way?

- Go back in time

46. Are the things that you just described exclusive to brand X or do other brands offer similar experiences?

## **Appendix B – Consent form**

### CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Ruben Bronsink

Place or residence

Email

Mobile Phone number

### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research about the development of brand preference for beer brands. The purpose of the study is to understand how this preference is developed over time. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions interview will be related to why you prefer certain beer brands and how you came to prefer certain beer brands.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape / video recorder for the interview. You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information (such as place of residence or occupation) not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by using a pseudonym and only mentioning age and gender.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take 45 minutes to an hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

## **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

## **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

## **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish – the thesis supervisor Matthijs Leendertse, leendertse@eshcc.eur.nl.

## **SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name:

Signature:

Date:

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name:

Signature:

Date:

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

## Appendix C – Code list

Main theme	Sub-codes
Brand equity	Brand awareness
	Brand associations
	Perceived quality
	Brand loyalty
Self-congruity	Self-concept
	Brand-user image
Brand experience	Sensory experience
	Affective experience
	Behavioral experience
	Intellectual experience
Emerging codes	Availability
	Company or occasion
	Marketing
	Price
	Repeated use