

# **“One of those brands that are always there”**

A qualitative study on brand preference development  
among young consumers in the casual wear product category

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## ABSTRACT

Brand preference is an important concept in marketing research, as it determines consumers' choices and their purchase decisions. Preference has been studied for years mostly with a quantitative approach, however, still no consensus has been reached on which concepts can be considered antecedents of brand preference, and which concepts can be seen an outcome of brand preference. Moreover, the volatile nature of brand preference concept makes it more difficult to investigate, as consumers can change preferences multiple times during the lives. Due to these reasons, there is a distinct gap in qualitative research on the topic. In the present study, the preference formation is studied through the concepts of brand image, and the degree of consistency between brand image and consumer's self-concept, i.e. self-congruence concept. This focus is especially relevant for the fashion brands and young category of consumers, as this is the market, where consumers are mostly influenced by their self-concepts and symbolic meanings of brands. Hence, by carrying out qualitative research based on thirteen semi-structured interviews with consumers, this paper aims at answering the question of how 20-24-year-olds develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands. The results derived from the thematic analysis of the interviews show that interviewed consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands through cognitive, emotional, and sensory associations they hold towards these brands and actual-individual, actual-social, and ideal self-congruence with these brand image. They are forming the perceived brand images through direct and indirect experiences and co-creating meanings together with the brands. While developing their preferences, consumers take into consideration experiences, when brands prove them to be universal, practical, trustworthy, reliable, and generally make them feel satisfied. In addition, when it comes to casual wear, interviewees do not go for their "desired" brands and pick the most familiar and comforting choices, which let them stay in their "Comfort Zone" instead. It also seems important for the interviewees, that brands correspond with their personal view on their style, as well as with the view of their social circle on their appearance. Finally, it was found that most of the interviewed consumers had valuable experiences with their preferred brands in the past, and these experiences coincided with their transition from one life stage to another. In these moments brand's image appeared to be congruent with their past ideal self, which might have indicated the beginning of the preference development process.

**Keywords:** brand preference, brand image, self-concept, self-congruence, casual wear

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*“Non est ad astra  
mollis e terris via”*

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*“There is no easy way  
from the earth to the stars”*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The first interest for consumer brand preference appeared in the 50s, and back then the term “customer preference” was used (Friedman, 1957). However, “brand preference” as a modern concept emerged only in the 60s when the active branding research on preference had started (Dolich, 1969; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Padberg et al., 1967; Stafford, 1966). Lavidge and Steiner (1961) introduced the first model that included “brand preference” as one of the components. Their model on predictive measurements of advertising effectiveness made brand preference recognized as a concept in the academic field, which resulted in the development of further research on the topic (Schultz et al., 2014). Since then, several studies have focused on examining antecedents of brand preference. For example, there are studies, that aimed at examining preference from a perspective of perceived risks (Dunn et al., 1986), advertising effects (Ayanwale et al., 2005), brand design (Lieven et al., 2015), brand equity (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Jalilvand et al., 2016), consumer aspirations (Truong et al., 2010) and sales promotion (DelVecchio et al., 2006).

Although for many years researchers were trying to understand the factors that form brand preference, there is still no agreement on what can be seen as an antecedent of brand preference, and what can be seen as an outcome. For instance, the models on brand loyalty in relation to preference change sufficiently. While Keller (1998) stated that brand preference is a predictor of brand loyalty, Chang and Liu (2009) argued that it is, on the opposite, an outcome of brand loyalty, and Rundle-Thiele and Mackay (2001) considered these concepts interchangeable (Amoako et al., 2017). It can be stated that scientists look at the concept of brand preference from different angles (Alamro & Rowley, 2011).

Another challenge in the assessment of brand preference is the nature of the concept. Schultz et al. (2014) claim, that the development of brand preference seems hard to measure, as it is “volatile” (p. 409). Preference can be changed multiple times during the life period, and the long process of brand preference formation makes it more difficult for the researchers to understand what influences a change of a previous preference and what leads to the development of a new preference (Mathur et al., 2003).

The self-congruity theory stands out among a large number of possible prerequisites for brand preference, as one of the most widely implemented concepts (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009). In the present study, self-congruity is perceived as a degree of consistency between a consumer’s self-concept and a brand’s image. The previous studies show that



consumers would likely give preference to a brand, which image matches with their self-perception (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2015).

One of the concepts that constitute self-congruity is the brand image. In addition, studies show that brand image has an independent influence on consumer preference (Alamro & Rowley, 2011; O’Cass & Lim, 2002; Sääksjärvi & Samiee, 2011). Brand image can be defined as the combination of the consumer’s perceptions and beliefs about a brand (Campbell, 1993), and is a construct that develops in consumer’s minds, and reflects consumers’ personal opinions.

Even though the self-congruity theory was examined in the past and was proved to be valid, there is still a lack of research on its role in brand preference formation (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009). Moreover, the self-congruity theory plays an important role in the fashion market (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Escalas and Bettman (2005) state that fashion brands are rich in symbolic meaning, that consumers use as assistance in creating their desired image. What is more, it is particularly true for young consumers, for whom their self-concept plays an even bigger role in purchasing decisions. As Piacentini and Mailer (2004) state: “Choices made by young people are closely bound to their self-concept, and are used both as a means of self-expression and as a way of judging the people and situations they face” (p. 254). Young people tend to suffer from uncertainty and are often at the stage of searching for their identities, therefore, symbolic meanings of brands and products are particularly important for them (Belk, 1988). As Piacentini and Mailer (2004) claim, when consumers are starting new periods of their lives, or making important decisions and changing the roles, they tend to be insecure. For this reason, a better understanding of consumers’ concerns during certain life stages could help in explaining their purchase behavior (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). For instance, when consumers are at the stage of changing their life role, they can highly rely on symbolic meanings of consumed products, as these can help them to fit with a new desired role (Leigh & Gabel, 1992). In the case of the present study, it is particularly relevant, as the target consumers are at the transitioning stage from youth to young adulthood.

### **1.1 Scientific relevance**

The scientific relevance of the present study can be explained by several factors. First of all, there is a scope of quantitative studies aiming at explaining *what* brand preference’s antecedents are. However, there is not much yet known about *how* brand preference is formed (Alamro & Rowley, 2011; Heilman et al., 2000; Singh et al., 2005). Secondly, even though

self-congruity theory itself was widely employed in the past research, there is still a lack of empirical evidence on its antecedent character for preference (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009). As far as there is no agreement on antecedents of brand preference, and a clear need for further research on this topic, the qualitative study would explain particularly *how* brand preference is built up.

The main objective of this study is to address the gap in literature, which is a lack of qualitative research on brand preference, by examining how brand preference is formed through the concepts of brand image and self-congruity. This topic is relevant especially for the young consumers in the fashion market, as they are influenced by their self-concepts when making decisions in purchasing clothes (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Finally, the present study would focus particularly on the casual wear fashion segment. Therefore, the research question and sub-questions are formulated as follows:

***RQ1: “How do 20-24-year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands?”***

*SQ1: “How do 20-24-year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands through the perceived images of these brands?”*

*SQ2: “How do 20-24-year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands through the self-image congruence with these brands?”*

The study aims at answering these questions with the methods of in-depth interviews with consumers, and further thematic analysis of the transcripts. The structure of the paper is as follows: firstly, the previous academic debates on the topic are observed and based on the academic discussion, a conceptual framework is proposed. Secondly, the method is justified and its implications are described; after that, the findings of the analysis are presented. Then, the research questions are answered together with the discussion of the most relevant findings and the theoretical implications. Finally, suggestions for the future research are proposed.

## **1.2 Practical relevance**

The practical relevance of this research can be explained by the importance of the concept in the business field. Lin (2002) states, that brand preference plays a major role, when businesses want to develop new products, and need to think of new strategies. In addition, the findings would be useful for brand managers, as they would shed light on the process of brand

preference formation. Alreck and Settle (1999) stated that if brand managers would know how prospective consumers develop preferences for their brands, they can potentially steer consumers towards a desirable kind of preference. Nilson (1998) also suggested that brand preference should be in the focus of brand management. In his opinion, the success of a brand depends on how it controls perceptions on products, and if these perceptions are superior to those of competitors. Moreover, according to Keller (2013), the impact of consumer perceptions on the brand can determine the uniqueness and the potential strengths of the brand.

What is more, brand preference is seen as a crucial concept in marketing, because it may determine consumer choice (Banerjee, 2016). Understanding preference would be useful to marketers in establishing communication strategies (Yang et al., 2002). As the previous studies show, brand preference has a direct influence on repurchase intention (Hellier et al., 2003) and brand loyalty (Chinomona et al., 2013). Therefore, a study would help practitioners to strengthen their brands from different standpoints. The present research is conducted in cooperation with Epiphany Research-Based Consultancy, which adds to the practical relevance of the discussed topic. Regarding the fashion industry, a strong brand is particularly important (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). As Lee et al. (2000) state, the success of the fashion brand depends on how precisely it understands customers and their needs. Finally, with regard to fashion market, Ismail and Spinelli (2012) claim, that understanding the relationships between consumers and fashion brands would help marketers to raise a company's profitability.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the present chapter, the four main concepts of the study are discussed. Firstly, the existing models of brand preference are observed. Secondly, the concept of self-congruence, its place in marketing research, and possible scientific interpretations are discussed. Thirdly, the two components of self-congruence in the case of the present study: consumer self-concept and brand image are considered. Finally, the conceptual framework of the present research is proposed.

### **2.1 Previous research on brand preference**

According to Alamro and Rowley (2011), a lack of research on antecedents of brand preference results in a lack of consensus on the definition of brand preference. Chang and Liu (2009) define brand preference as “a bias that a consumer holds toward a particular brand” (p. 1690), while Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2010) define it as: “the relative preference for choosing and using the brand” (p. 400). According to Chinomona et al. (2013), brand preference is “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand and a customer’s subjective and intangible assessment of the brand, above and beyond its objectively perceived value” (p. 183). However, the most complete definition of brand preference was given by Hellier et al. (2003), who stated that brand preference is “the extent to which the customer favors the designated service provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set” (p. 1765).

Taking into consideration the complexity of the brand preference concept, scholars have proposed and examined different models of brand preference. Most of the studies are taking a quantitative approach to examine the factors that can have a direct or indirect effect on brand preference. For instance, Jamal and Goode (2001) studied the effects of self-image congruence and satisfaction on consumer brand preference. The study has shown that the degree of consistency between a consumer’s self-concept and brand image plays an important role in brand preference formation (Jamal & Goode, 2001). What is more, research has shown that brand preference is formed more “on the basis of its symbolic properties rather than its functional qualities” (p. 490).

Another example is a study by Mathur et al. (2003) on how events in life change consumers’ brand preferences. According to their model, the factors that may result in preference change are the experience of life events, the anticipation of life events, chronic stress, and consumption-related lifestyles. The tests have shown that when individuals go

through certain life stages, this can result in stress, and therefore in a change of consumption patterns. These findings were supporting previous research by Andreasen (1984).

In 2014 Schultz et al. have suggested that brand preference as a measure has declined over the past years and can be switched with a concept of “No brand preference”. The study has shown that among several brands, consumers do not have such a strong preference, as they tend to have before. Schultz et al. (2014) explain this phenomenon by the rise of competition among brands in one product category: “Brands are operating in a smaller competitive space and consumers are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate among and between them” (p. 410).

While a number of other studies were conducted with a quantitative approach (Bashir et al., 2019; Chang & Liu, 2009; Chinomona et al.; 2013; Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010; Ebrahim et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019), there is an obvious gap in qualitative research on preference. Interestingly enough, the most recent studies on the topic take a qualitative approach. For instance, Stach (2017) found out that memorable experiences have a significant influence on consumer preference. He studied the relationships between experiences and brand preference among Nutella consumers. The results of interviews have demonstrated that heavy buyers recalled brighter and more emotional positive memories about the products, than light buyers. Rahman and Yu (2019) studied consumption patterns, including preferences of aging consumers, and found out that life-changing events play a significant role in consumer behavior. The most recent study was conducted by Matthews et al. (2021), who have examined brand preference formation through interviews with “sneakerheads”, and found that while many participants were not able to engage sneaker culture in the adolescence period, they were attaching their preference to sneaker brands in their adulthood.

## **2.2 Self-congruence**

As it was previously mentioned, one of the most widely used concepts in brand preference research is the self-congruity concept (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko, 2009), which is also known as self-congruence, self-image congruence, and image congruence in academic literature (Kressmann et al., 2006). According to Dolich (1969), symbolic images owned by products and brands can be perceived differently by individuals, and are “part of the environment symbolized by the individual” (p. 80). Individuals tend to buy and use products and brands with which they like to develop and keep their identities, and at the same time, reject brands which images are highly different from their self-concepts (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). As Heath and Scott (1998) assert: “consumers may buy a product because, among

other factors, they feel that the product enhances their own self-image” (p. 1110). This thought is also supported by Gonzalez-Jimenez (2017), who states that consumers use the symbolic meanings of brands to define and express their self-concepts. In addition, symbolic consumption displays the lifestyle, and other personal characteristics of consumers, as well as it stresses social similarities and differences (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Moreover, several studies show that self-congruence plays an important role in directing consumer brand preference (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2015).

### **2.2.1 Self-congruence in marketing research**

The concept of self-congruity can be seen from different angles. The first category of studies considers congruity as the degree of consistency between consumer personality and brand personality (Lin, 2010; Maehle & Shneor, 2010; Mulyanegara et al., 2007). For instance, Maehle and Shneor (2010) look into different possible correlations between consumer personalities and brands personalities. At the same time, while Lin (2010) does not employ self-congruence as a separate concept, he examines how the congruence between two personalities may influence consumer brand loyalty. Another approach sees congruity as a match between brand personality and self-concept (Astakhova et al., 2017; Khare & Handa; 2009; Klabi, 2020). For instance, Astakhova et al. (2017) examined the relationships between different types of this congruence and obsessive brand passion. As Astakhova et al. (2017) claimed, individuals want to have self-stability and consistency between their self-perceptions and experiences with the brands.

The study conducted by Govers and Schoormans (2005) is using two approaches at the same time. On the one hand, under self-congruence scholars understand the relationships between consumer self-concept and product-user image. As they state: “people prefer a specific product because they see themselves as similar to the kind of people that are generally thought to use this product” (p. 190). However, Govers and Schoormans (2005) also introduce the second concept named “product-personality congruence”, by which they refer to the consistency between two personalities (p. 190).

However, sometimes scholars do not divide the concepts. For instance, they may consider brand personality and brand image under one concept (Banerjee, 2016; Malär et al., 2011). Banerjee (2016) states that preference may depend on the degree of congruity between consumer’s and brand’s personalities, and at the same time notes that consumers may interpret brand personality in their own way. Therefore, when discussing brand personality, Banerjee (2016) is also talking about brand image. In addition, sometimes researchers do not

divide between consumer's personality and self-concept. For example, Mulyanegara and Tsarenko (2009) state that to be successful in the market, brands should generate perceived attributes that would match with the target consumers' personalities. However, while Mulyanegara and Tsarenko (2009) refer to brand congruence as to the "concept underlying the postulation of the Big Five traits" (p. 361), they also state that "the greater the congruity between the characteristics that describe an individual's self-concept and those that describe a brand, the greater the preference for the particular brand" (p. 361). Similarly, Sheeraz et al. (2018) assert that consumers have a tendency to "purchasing a brand projecting personality like their own" (p. 600), but at the same time discuss the congruence between different dimensions of self-concept and brand personality. The tendency to mix approaches makes confusion about what self-congruity exactly is and how possibly it could be measured. To avoid this, the present study would see the degree of consistency between consumer's self-concept and brand image as self-congruity.

### **2.2.2 Congruence between a consumer's self-concept and a brand image**

There are plenty of studies that refer to congruity as the degree of consistency between consumer's self-concept and brand image (Japutra et al., 2019; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Shujaat et al., 2018). The two fundamental papers with this approach are written by Birdwell (1968) and Dolich (1969), who looked into correlations between consumer's self-concepts and products as symbols, and into how this might influence consumer buying behavior. The self-congruity theory in the modern form was firstly introduced in the works by Sirgy et al. (Sirgy, 1986; Sirgy et al., 1997). As stated in Sirgy et al. (1997): "consumer behavior is determined, in part, by the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept" (p. 230). Moreover, Sirgy et al. (1997) divided self-congruity into two possible dimensions of low self-congruity and high self-congruity. The high self-congruity, according to Sirgy et al. (1997), can occur when brand image matches consumer's self-concept, and therefore low self-congruity when the concepts do not match.

Regarding more recent studies using this approach to self-congruence, Shujaat et al. (2018) looked into the antecedents of preferences for mobile phone brands and found that consumers prefer brands, which images are consistent with their self-concepts. Moreover, Japutra et al. (2019) examined the influence of self-congruence on compulsive buying behavior and claimed that actual self-congruence is a predictor of brand attachment.

In addition, due to the digital development in the past years, the way people interact with each other, and, therefore, represent themselves, has rapidly changed (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Jain et al., 2021; Javornik et al., 2021). For instance, the study by Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) has found, that consumers use Facebook to express their selves through the various brands by posting content with these brands on their social media. At the same time, the study by Javornik et al. (2021) has examined how virtual experiences and augmented reality can affect self-concepts, and found that users construct different self-narratives for different media platforms. As Javornik et al. (2021) also state, consumers express their brand consumption experience on the internet to gain the approval of others. Concerning fashion consumption, Samala and Singh (2018) have found that users on social media nowadays express their selves through brands their wear.

Self-congruence was mostly studied with quantitative research methods (Klabi, 2020; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Wijnands & Gill, 2020). As Sirgy et al. (1997) report, there are two main ways to measure self-congruity – directly with items of self-congruity as a whole, or indirectly, through examining sub-concept such as brand image and self-concept and then combining the two (Sirgy et al., 1997). However, as Wijnands and Gill (2020) state, there is no consensus in the academic world on how a self-congruity concept should be accessed, which is the consequence of the concept's complexity (Wijnands & Gill; 2020). Thus, the present study would focus on assessing self-congruence both directly and indirectly, as the separate questions on self-concept and brand image, as well as general questions on self-congruence, would be used.

### **2.3 Self-concept**

As self-congruence shows the degree of consistency between two concepts, it is important to take a closer look at both of them. The self-concept refers to the consumer side and originally comes from the work of James (1890), where “self” was described as a sum of all that we can call ours. Later, Epstein (1973) summarized previous research on the concept and has proposed that self-concept is, in an interpretation of Anand and Kaur (2018, p. 159): “a system of hierarchically organized and internally consistent concepts held within a broader conceptual system”. Rosenberg (1979) defined self-concept as “the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (p. 9). Finally, Thompson (1995) referred to self-concept as the symbolic project of an individual that can be continuously developed by symbolic consumption.



Regarding the dynamics of the self-concept, the opinions of scholars differed. While according to Sirgy (1982) self-concept is subject to change, Epstein (1973) argued that self-concept might be considered relatively stable. According to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), individuals are in a constant process of active creation and persuasion of their identities, and they can partially achieve this through consumption. Sirgy et al. (1997) distinguished between four dimensions of self-concept:

- Actual self
- Ideal self
- Actual-social self
- Ideal-social self

The actual (real) self can be defined as “individual's perception of how he actually is” (Dolich, 1969, p. 80), while the ideal dimension of self-concept can be defined as “perception of how he would like to be” (p. 80). Kim (2015) claimed that individuals with negative actual self consume products that help them to raise their self-esteem and thus, to become their ideal selves. Therefore, the way consumers see themselves might influence the benefits that they see in potential consumption (Legere & Kang, 2020). According to Anand and Kaur (2018), actual self-concept can be expressed through consumers' choices for clothes they choose for leisure time, rather than for work.

Govers and Schoormans (2005) refer to actual-social self as “how people believe they are seen by significant others” and to ideal-social self as “how people would like to be seen by significant others” (p. 190). According to Piacentini and Mailer (2004) in situations with high perceived social risk consumers would likely anticipate the opinions of others on themselves, and this, in turn, would affect their consumption. The perceived risk is high, when there is a high degree of social visibility, as in the case of clothing (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Therefore, when people, for instance, want to show their affiliation to a certain group of individuals or want this group to see them as part of the group, they can use brands for this purpose (Anand & Kaur, 2018; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). According to Legere and Kang (2020), consumers have different levels of confidence when communicating their selves to others, and this may affect the consumption, as it would influence a message consumer delivers when expressing his/ her identity.

For a long time, the self was addressed as a single construct, however, in modern marketing research scholars are mostly focusing on studying actual and ideal selves (Astakhova et al., 2017; Hosany & Martin, 2012; Huang et al., 2017). As Anand and Kaur (2018) state, the tendency exists, because these dimensions have the most empirical evidence

in the literature and also may overlap with other self-dimensions. However, as Rhee (2012) notes, the ideal social self also drives consumers' choices.

When it comes to examining self-concept in fashion, the approaches differ. Researchers either consider self-concept in its traditional psychological sense (Phau & Lo, 2004; Tae-Im & Dooyoung, 2019; Wallace et al., 2017) or look at respondents' self-perceptions in terms of clothing (Dubler & Gurel, 1984; McNeill, 2018; Peters et al., 2011). Dubler and Gurel (1984) claimed: "clothing as physical extension of the body influences the way individuals perceive themselves, particularly perception of their own appearance" (p. 21). Appearance plays an important role in the formation of self-concept, and clothing can be seen as an indicator of one's self-concept. As Legere and Kang (2020) state: "through individual style, one expresses personality, preferences, values and the need for acceptance from others" (p. 3). Therefore, in the present research under consumer's self-concept would be understood the way consumers perceive their style (actual-individual self-concept), the way they think others perceive their style (actual-social self-concept), and the way they would like to dress/ be perceived by others in terms of their style (ideal self-concept).

McNeill (2018), studying the role of self-concept in young women's engagement in sustainable consumption, has found, that respondents use fashion to enable their confidence and emotional well-being. In particular, emotional motivators such as pleasure sensations and hedonic experience were the main drivers of their fashion choices. As McNeill (2018) asserts, fashion consumption can be moderated not only by consumer's tastes but also by what consumers consider to be accepted in their social circles. According to Astakhova et al. (2017), consumers are likely to create emotional connections with the brands, that fulfill their self-esteem aspirations, i.e. ideal self-concepts. They found relationships between ideal self-congruence and brand passion.

## **2.4 Brand Image**

According to Govers and Schoormans (2005), products have characteristics that "go beyond their functional utility" (p. 189). Thus, consumption is building up not only upon material characteristics and particular benefits of the consumed products but also upon the product's symbolic significance (Jamal & Goode, 2001). Due to the symbolic characteristics, the products with similar physical characteristics, become differentiated in the eyes of consumers (Chang & Liu, 2009; Govers & Schoormans, 2005).

Brand image can be defined as “the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in the associations held in consumer memory” (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 783) or as “a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way” (Aaker, 1991, p. 109) in relation to a brand. Campbell (1993) defined brand image as the combination of the consumer’s perceptions and beliefs about a brand. Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) also give a definition to brand image: “the concept of a brand held by the consumer and is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon formed through consumer interpretation” (p. 118).

In the present research, the concept of brand image is studied not only in congruence with self-concept, but also as an independent construct in brand preference formation. While according to Jamal and Goode (2001), the impact of brand symbolism is particularly strong, when it is seen in the relationship with consumer’s self-image, Govers and Schoormans (2005) argue that the symbolic brand’s meaning might affect consumer’s preferences independently.

Several studies are addressing the topics of relationships between the concept of brand image and consumer brand preference. O’Cass and Lim (2002) tested the effects of non-product-related associations on brand preference among South-East Asian consumers and found significant correlations between a number of brand image dimensions and the way consumers rate brands. Another study was conducted by Alamro and Rowley (2011), who examined the effects of brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes on brand preference and found that brand image affects brand preference in telecommunications services category. Finally, Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011) studied the relationships between brand identity, brand image, and preference in the context of online retailing.

#### **2.4.1 Measurements of brand image**

In academic research, it is common to use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine brand image (Chang & Liu, 2009). However, there is also a lack of agreement on its conceptualization (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 1993; Park & Rabolt, 2009). The majority of studies have focused mainly on cognitive dimensions of the concept (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Park & Rabolt, 2009), and the existing scales on a brand image are constructed to examine particularly cognitive sub-component of image. However, as Cho et al. (2015) stated, these models are missing affective and sensory dimensions of the concept, which are important components of brand image (Landwehr et al., 2012; Roberts, 2005).

Cho and Fiore (2015), with the reference to Keller (2001) and Roberts (2005) proposed a conceptual framework for a qualitative examination of brand image in a fashion

brands market. They divided the concept into three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and sensory associations. Under cognitive associations they understood a “consumer’s personal beliefs, thoughts, and evaluations of a brand, related to its product attributes (e.g. style), service attributes, performance and meaning of a brand” (Cho & Fiore, 2015, p. 256). These associations can be formed through both direct and indirect associations with the brand (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Cho and Fiore (2015) gave an example situation, when consumers, being familiar with an advertisement of the brand, can form a set of beliefs about the type of product, occasions where this brand can be used, etc. This dimension can also refer to the “mystery” dimension, which is a legend or set of stories that are told around a certain brand (Roberts, 2005). These stories might be shaped by memorable experiences with the brand, or by dreams and expectations about a brand (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Perceived quality of the brand’s items (Esch et al., 2006; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012) or style of the brands’ clothes (Low & Lamb, 2000) can be also related to cognitive brand image associations. Zhang et al. (2002), studying the importance of product attributes for consumers in the casual wear category also found attributes such as fit, comfort, and style of the clothes to be particularly important in brand image formation. Interestingly enough, Cho and Fiore (2015) saw self-congruity as one of the themes attributed to the cognitive brand image dimension.

Emotional associations (intimacy), according to Cho and Fiore (2015) reflect “subjective feelings, such as excitement, happiness, and joy” (p. 257). This dimension of brand image is related to the feelings and emotions consumers might have due to both direct and indirect interactions with the brand. These emotions can be an outcome of a successful experience with a brands’ customer service or a visit of special events provided by a brand (Cho & Fiore, 2015). As the study conducted by Fournier (1998) shows, consumers feel more comfortable when having solid good long-term relationships with brands. This dimension can also refer to the “intimacy” dimension, which includes pleasant emotional associations (Roberts, 2005) and can be further divided into a firm’s empathy, consumer commitment, and consumer enjoyment (Cho & Fiore, 2015, p. 259). Concerning firm’s empathy, Chi and Fiore (2015) found out that consumers mostly report about emotional attachment to the brands which show understand their preferences. Other possible positive emotional associations with the brands are the reliability of the brand (Low & Lamb, 2000), the brand being satisfactory (Chang & Chieng, 2006), and the brand, giving consumer excitement (Faircloth et al., 2001). However, while Roberts (2005) conceptualized brand image with regard to the concept of brand love, Maxian et al. (2013) note, that brand love is not the same, as brand preference. In opposite to preference, love is a tendency when a consumer chooses a brand without a reason.

As the findings of this study indicate, positive emotional associations with a brand, and, therefore, emotional connection happens rather when a consumer has a brand love, and not a brand preference (Maxian et al., 2013).

Sensory associations (sensuality) are related to “engagement of the consumer’s physical senses (i.e. vision, smell, sound, touch, and taste)” (Cho & Fiore, 2015, p. 257). In this case, part of brand image is particularly formed due to direct interactions with a product of a brand. Roberts (2005) proposed, that consumers develop images to the brands through auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile sensations. This might include such aspects of fashion products as physical appearance and material, packaging (Peck & Childers, 2003), scent and lightning in the store (Hulten et al., 2011), or even music in the store (Jain & Bagdare, 2011). Finally, sensuality can be also related to branding elements (Cho & Fiore, 2015).

Several studies are using both cognitive and emotional dimensions of the brand image (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Esch et al., 2006; Low & Lamb, 2000). Other studies distinguish the third dimension of sensory associations (Faircloth et al., 2001; Hsieh & Li, 2008; Korchia, 1999). However, with the lack of a complex approach, these studies focus only on certain parts of possible sensory associations concerning clothes. For instance, in the study by Korchia (1999), only the softness and comfort of clothes are observed, while in the study by Faircloth et al. (2001), sensory associations refer only to the colorfulness of clothes.

#### **2.4.2 Experience as a driving force**

As Vargo and Lusch (2008) state, firms do not deliver value, but instead offer propositions that give customers an opportunity to co-create value together with a firm. Kowalkowski (2011) confirms, that the value is developed and determined by the customer, during his experience with a firm. As previously mentioned, in relation to casual wear fashion brands, the value proposition dynamics can refer to the process of purchasing the clothes from the store, wearing the clothes, or having experience with the customer service (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Regarding the brand-consumer relations, this can be applied in a way the brand is a full-fledged participant in the relationship that may arise between the brand and a consumer (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Jamal & Goode, 2001). As Fournier (1998) states, these relationships may develop, and therefore change over time, concerning the experience that consumer has with a brand, and his personal story with it.

With regard to brand image, numerous studies also show, that consumer’s relevant past experiences play an important role in the brand image development (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Rindell, 2007; Wiedmann et al., 2011). Present brand images, thus, are the images a

consumer has developed due to the combination of different factors, such as a previous experience and context of this experience (Rindell & Iglesias, 2014). Halinen et al. (2012) also support this statement, by stating that past, present and future experiences altogether interflow in the way consumer sees a brand. Finally, Rindell and Iglesias (2014) claim that investigations of a brand image should take this process and the dynamic nature of the concept into consideration. For these reasons, in the present study, when looking into the concept of brand image, and into its role in the brand preference development, the previous experiences of consumers would be also observed.

## 2.5 Conceptual framework

In the theoretical framework, it was identified that brand image is an important concept in brand preference formation. However, it makes sense to look at the role of brand image in preference development not only independently, but also in dynamic congruence with consumer's self-concept. The degree of consistency between these two concepts is called self-congruence. As these constructs also represent the main themes that would drive the present study, the following conceptual framework is proposed (Figure 2.5).

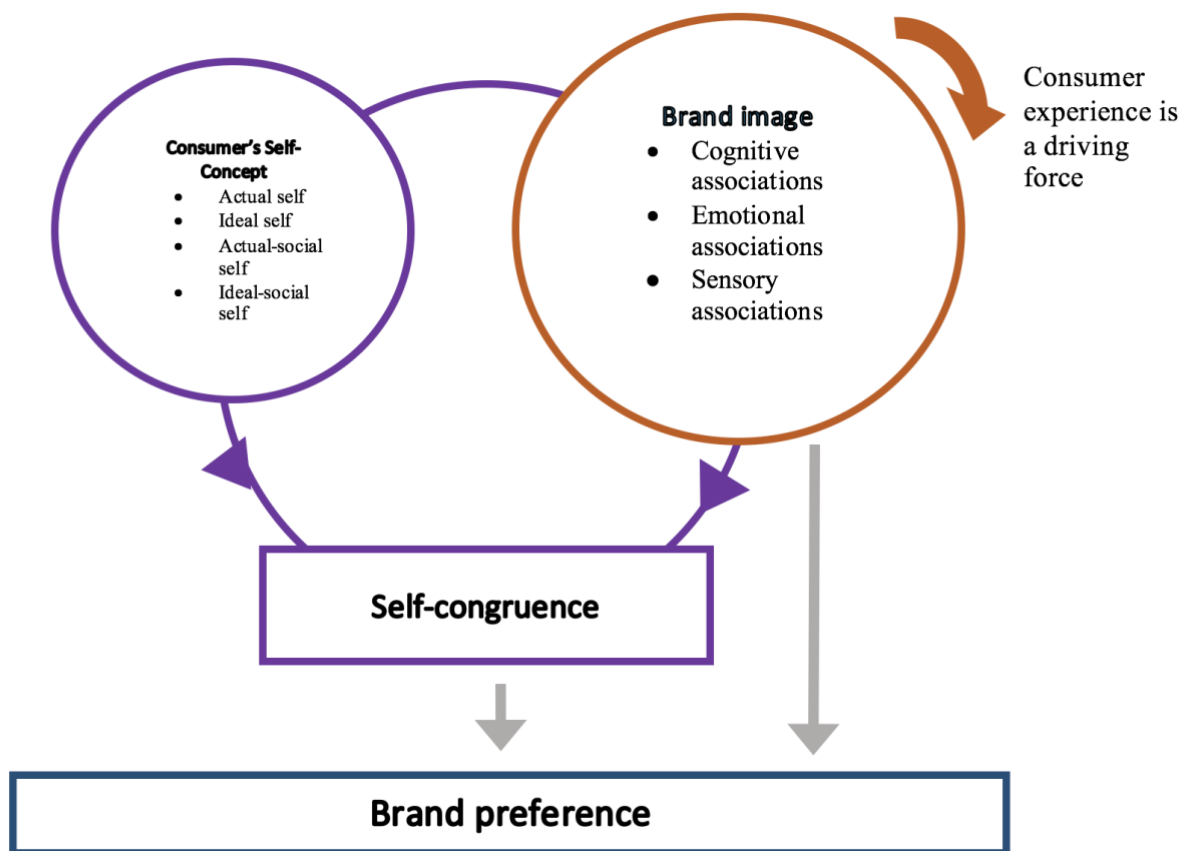


Figure 2.5. Conceptual framework

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Rationale for qualitative method

Qualitative methods are widely used to achieve the depth of understanding, while quantitative methods are used to achieve the breadth of understanding (Patton, 2002). The goal of the present paper is to get a deeper understanding of what and how steers young consumers towards establishing brand preferences for casual wear brands. Moreover, the research question is aiming at understanding *how* brand preference is built up. Therefore, qualitative analysis suits the aim of the study better, than a quantitative one.

Specifically, in-depth interviews were chosen as the main research method. A qualitative research interview is “an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1983, as cited in Opdenakker, 2006, para.1). Through qualitative interviews, it is possible to understand experiences and reconstruct events in which the researcher did not participate (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The choice can be explained by the fact that brand preference development is a process, that can be investigated by gathering views and perspectives of consumers (Legard et al., 2003). The study aims at collecting multiple perceptions of consumers on their appearance, as well as on the brands they use. This way, it is possible to examine how these consumers’ views cohere and study what role it plays in the process of their brand preference formation.

#### 3.2 Research design

All interviews were conducted semi-structured, which means that the order and type of the questions were possibly changed depending on the flow of the conversation (Adams, 2015). According to Matthews and Ross (2010), the format of semi-structured interviews allows to “explore with the participant different aspects of the social phenomenon and to identify and elaborate on, for example, perceived advantages and disadvantages” (p. 224). A major advantage of a semi-structured qualitative interview is that it allows to be flexible during the process of interviewing (Turner, 2014). This is particularly useful in terms of the present research on brand preference, as limited qualitative research for the topic has been previously done.

Reliability in qualitative research refers to being able to obtain the same or similar results when conducting the research with similar conditions (Matthews & Ross, 2010). An



important aspect of qualitative research's reliability is the transparency of the researcher's decision-making process (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Reliability in a qualitative study can also mean "adopting research methods that are accepted by the research community as legitimate ways of collecting and analyzing data" (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008, p. 390). In the case of the present study, the reliability was ensured by the detailed description and justification of the chosen methods, i.e. in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The interviews were conducted under the same conditions, and the process of data collection and analysis was accurately described.

Validity in qualitative research refers to "selecting an appropriate method for a given question and applying that method in a coherent, justifiable, and rigorous manner" (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008, p. 391). To be considered valid, the gathered and further analyzed data should be a representation of the social reality being studied (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In the case of the present study, the operationalization of the questionnaire for the interviews was done based on theoretical discussion. It was also made sure that the right data was gathered in a way that final results, coming from this data, were addressing the stated research question.

### **3.3 Sampling criteria and technique**

According to Alreck and Settle (1999), consumers do not develop a brand preference for different products in the same way, therefore the present study is focusing on the process of brand preference development in the casual wear category. As Chang et al. (1996) state, casual apparel includes items, mostly made of comfortable materials, such as cotton. The casual wear brands often have a moderate price, as they are targeting young consumers (Chang et al., 1996) and sell leisure attire with a relaxed fit (Shin & Dickerson, 1999). The interviewees in the present study are consumers of at least one of the casual wear brands, males and females, 20 to 24 years old. The final list of participants is presented in the Table 3.3.

There are several reasons for the stated sampling criteria. According to Piacentini and Mailer (2004) consumers are mostly influenced by self-concept when it comes to clothing. Moreover, Mulyanegara and Tsarenko (2009) state that studies widely use self-concept to explain consumer behavior particularly in the fashion markets. Regarding the age of participants, the research by Sung and Choi (2010) has shown that young consumers have positive attitudes towards apparel brands when these match with their actual self-concepts. In

addition, the present study aimed at building an international sample of consumers from different countries to ensure that the results are not attached to one specific country.

The sample of the present study consists of 13 informants. The final number is explained by the actual length of the interviews (around one hour each) and the quality of the transcripts. The goal of the interviews was to reach saturation, which means reaching a full understanding by continuing to sample until no new information emerges (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A non-probability purposeful criterion sampling was used, as participants were picked up, according to their fit with the stated parameters (Patton, 2002). This sampling technique is the most appropriate for the present study, as the aim is to select cases that meet predetermined criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). Moreover, Matthews and Ross (2010) state that non-probability sampling techniques are mostly used in qualitative research, and purposive sampling is the most common technique for semi-structured interviews. While probability sampling techniques guarantee higher generalizability, the findings from the non-probability samplings still can be “considered in terms of their transferability to other settings or cases” (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 172).

**Table 3.3. The list of interviewees**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. <b>Romano</b> , 24 years old, Dutch	Lives in Leiden, the Netherlands. Studies psychology. Works as an assistant at the university. The preferred brand is Scotch & Soda.
2. <b>Liza</b> , 21 years old, Russian	Lives in Moscow, Russia. Bachelor student in HSE. Loves going out, and meet new people. The preferred brand is Uniqlo.
3. <b>Caroline</b> , 22 years old, Dutch	Lives in Leiden, the Netherlands. Studies biology. Works at Dutch healthcare service. The preferred brand is H&M.
4. <b>Paria</b> , 24 years old, Iranian	Lives in Iran. Studies media and public relations. Loves travelling and exploring cultures. The preferred brand is Mango.
5. <b>Leonard</b> , 21 years old, German	Lives in Helsinki, Finland. Studies computer science and business. Loves coding, games, and travelling. Preferred brand is Adidas.
6. <b>Alina</b> , 22 years old, Russian	Lives in Moscow, Russia. Works as a copywriter in the educational company. Loves drawing and reading. The preferred brand is Uniqlo.
7. <b>Eva</b> , 20 years old, Russian	Lives in Enschede, the Netherlands. Bachelor student, international business. Plays ice hockey. The preferred brand is H&M.
8. <b>Anna S.</b> , 20 years old, Russian	Lives in Moscow, Russia. A bachelor student. Her hobbies are music, reading and traveling. The preferred brand is COS.
9. <b>Antonia</b> , 21 years old, German	Lives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Studies psychology. Spent 2 years in New Zealand as an Au Pair. The preferred brand is Cotton On.
10. <b>Heidi</b> , 24 years old, Malaysian	Lives in Malaysia. Does a barrister course. Enjoys playing games and going shopping in her free time. The preferred brand is Cotton On.
11. <b>Marta</b> , 22 years old, Polish	Lives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Studies economics. Works part-time. Loves sports. The preferred brand is H&M.
12. <b>Len</b> , 24 years old, German	Lives in Stuttgart, Germany. Studies Business. Tutors part-time. The preferred brand is Scotch & Soda.
13. <b>Anna N.</b> , 23 years old, Dutch	Lives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Master student, degree in medicine. Loves drawing. The preferred brand is Only.

### 3.4 Data collection

To ensure the reliability of the present study, all interviews were conducted under the same conditions. While the interviews were designed semi-structured, it was ensured that asked questions are alike (Opdenakker, 2006). As Hermanowicz (2002) states, when conducting a semi-structured interview, it is still important to guide interviews by the topics formulated in advance, to uphold the standardization level.

Due to the circumstances caused by CoVid 19 pandemic (Burki, 2020), all of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Certain factors were taken into consideration due to mediation. Namely, interviews were double-recorded in case of unexpected inconvenience, as

well as in terms of safety of the records (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Moreover, they were conducted with a video to view and be able to interpret non-verbal reactions (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Was also made sure that participants are comfortable with the interview conditions (Opdenakker, 2006).

To ensure research ethics, before the interviews, the informed consent from each of the participants was taken (Appendix B). The form considered information on the anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of interview's data, as well as information about their participants' rights and an explanation of the data usage purposes (Matthews & Ross, 2010). During the interview, various techniques for developing better communication, such as rapport establishment and using prompts and probes were used (Matthews & Ross, 2010). As the result, a total of 14 hours of interviews were recorded. All interviews were manually transcribed verbatim.

### **3.5 Operationalization**

To ensure validity and consistency of the data in the present study, the interview guide was developed in accordance with the conceptual framework, and the interview questions were formulated based on the discussed theory. The main concepts that were examined are brand image, self-concept, and self-image congruence. This section addressed the operationalization of the measurement of these concepts. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A of the present paper.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is known as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), and is chosen for analyzing and interpreting the data in the present study. The transcripts of the interviews were considered as the units of analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is widely used to search for repeated patterns of meanings across the data sets of qualitative interviews. Moreover, it was chosen as the most useful method in the case of the present study, as the study aims for explaining the process of brand preference formation.

Through the thematic analysis, the transcripts were restructured and reassembled to transform data into new findings. For this reason, the stages of thematic analysis that were described by Boeije (2010) were implemented. In the first stage, the transcripts were carefully read through several times, and the data was coded to find repeating patterns (Boeije, 2010).

The coding was conducted via ATLAS.ti software. At first, the relevant fragments of data were reorganized into small codes. A code is “a summarizing phrase for a piece of text which expresses the meaning of the fragment” (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). As the interview questions were initially developed based on theory, most of the codes were based on the topics elaborated in the theoretical framework. This coding stage allowed to reduce the data to the relevant number of labels, which made the process of the analysis easier (Boeije, 2010).

The main purpose of the second stage was to determine which elements in the data are playing the most important role (Boeije, 2010). During this phase, the relationship between codes was identified, and the dominant sub-themes from the codes were derived. At the same time, the researcher moved “from codes to data”, and the propositions that were generated through the first stage, were tested by confronting them with the other material (Boeije, 2010, p. 108).

In the third stage, the relationships between core themes were found and key concepts were established (Boeije, 2010). This was done by looking at which of the dominant themes repeat most, and by identifying the main messages within the data. To find the relationships between consumer’s self-concept and their perceived images, the extra-analysis step was taken. During this step, the connections between two concepts were found, and the patterns in self-congruence were determined. As a result, the final findings were shaped (Boeije, 2010).

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 The role of brand image in brand preference development

As previously explained, brand image can be measured through three types of associations: cognitive, emotional and sensory (Cho & Fiore, 2015). In the present section, the role of brand image associations in the brand preference development is discussed. This section aims at answering the following sub-question: *How do 20-24 year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands through the perceived images of these brands?*

#### 4.1.1 Cognitive associations

As previously stated, cognitive associations can be defined as “consumer’s personal beliefs, thoughts, and evaluations of a brand-related to its product attributes (e.g. style), service attributes, performance and meaning of a brand” (Cho & Fiore, 2015, p. 256). The findings of the present study show that this group of associations is the most prominent for interviewees, when it comes to preference, as interviewees devote a lot of their attention towards cognitive characteristics of the brands. Therefore, the present section is the biggest in the chapter, and is divided into smaller sub-sections.

##### 4.1.1.1 The preferred brand is a “smart choice”

The analysis shows, that most of the interviewees form a preference for casual wear brands through developing “reasonable choice” images of these brands. These images are formed through a combination of different cognitive associations. The findings indicate that many interviewees had experiences when their preferred brands provided them with perfect fit items. For instance, some interviewees were struggling to find some items for a relatively long time, and then suddenly found their perfect fit at one of the brands. While for Anna N., it was always problematic to find good-fitting jeans, she found suitable ones at Only: *“I was very happy because I always wore jeans that were too loose at my ankles (...) And now I finally found something that was tight-fitted”*. Eva had a similar experience with the brand H&M, when brand positively surprised her with the fit of the items: *“I thought that it's a very good fit for me, which is rare. Because for me to find sometimes, it's a challenge”*. Alina was satisfied with Uniqlo for the same reason: *“They have jeans that are really good for my legs, because I'm tall, and it's really difficult for me sometimes to find jeans that would be a great fit”*. In the process of consumer-brand relations, these brands were able to provide good-

fitting products for interviewees in a desperate moment of time, and therefore are now seen as the most reasonable choice in comparison to other brands.

What is more, most of the interviewees had a positive experience with the quality of the preferred brands. When Anna S. talks about COS, she reports:

For example, I bought a t-shirt from COS one and a half years ago. It was my first item, that I bought here. (...) You know, it looks the same even after one and a half years.

While some time ago Anna S. has purchased items from COS, wore them, and made sure the quality is sufficient, now she translates this association to the total brand image. Moreover, for Anna S., it was the first-ever experience with a brand, which might have made this association even stronger. A similar pattern is seen in the interview with Leonard, who says about Adidas:

I was actually really satisfied because it was holding up really-really well and going through a lot. (...) Sometimes I was expecting a bit more. But in general, I would still say it's good quality.

When Marta talks about the quality of H&M, she admits that first, she was worried about the durability of some items. However, throughout the process of consumer-brand relations, H&M fulfilled her expectations and proved its quality, as she says: *“Nothing happens to it, although I worried a lot and washed it a lot. It's still in a very good condition”*.

While it is clear, that for most interviewees the association of a high-quality brand comes from their direct positive experience with the clothes, it is interesting to note, that for some of the interviewees, this image was influenced by the right brand representation. Len states about Scotch & Soda: *“By how would they make the advertisements, you get the feeling of it being more high quality”*. Therefore, the association was developed in Len's mind not only from his direct experience with the clothes but also from the message that the brand had communicated to him.

It also can be said that the quality attributes are tightly attached to the price attributes, as they determine how much interviewees are willing to pay for the brand. Respondents have a price range to spend on casual wear and try to make sure they purchase brands that fit in this range. For instance, Heidi points out about Cotton On's price: *“The price is actually okay.*

(...) *It's not cheap, but it's not expensive. (...) It's a good mid-range brand*". Most of the interviewees, while choosing between casual wear brands, try to give preference for the brand with the right balance between quality and price. However, in the end, they have to choose towards one of the advantages. Some of the interviewees are more likely to choose a brand with a higher price, but only when this brand outperforms other brands in quality. Talking about Uniqlo, Liza states: *"I have already bought it several times and I know it was good. So, I just put it on for one second and was like: "I'm buying it", even though it's kind of expensive"*. Liza had a positive experience with the quality of Uniqlo items and therefore believes, that it is worth paying more for them. Alina also developed her preference to Uniqlo and says:

Because for me it's the best combination of quality and price. Sometimes I find some of the items a bit expensive for me, but, I prefer buying those instead of, for example, H&M (...) because you think that they last longer.

However, taking into consideration the demographic characteristics of interviewees, who are mostly students and just-graduates, many of them are ready to sacrifice the quality of the clothes for a better price. While Caroline developed her preference for the H&M brand through associations with its affordability, she also admits that this way she sacrificed the quality: *"It's not that I think negatively about H&M, but (...) I feel like I shouldn't really rely on the quality too much"*. Antonia also says about Cotton On: *"It is very, very affordable"*. This way, for some of the interviewed consumers an association with brand being affordable was more prominent in the process of brand preference development, than the association with the brand being of a high quality.

Finally, the findings show, that many interviewees had experience with a brand being accessible to them, which also adds to the "smart choice" brand image. Eva says about H&M: *"I think because it's accessible. Every mall, everywhere you go, in any kind of country, there probably will be an H&M"*. She started to prefer H&M over other casual wear brands because she felt an advantage of the brand being located all over the world and being always easy to reach. Antonia also feels this way about her preferred brand Cotton On:

I lived in New Zealand for one and a half years (...) I was able to go to the shopping mall, that was close to my home, where was very easy to go by the train. (...) If there were different shops, there was probably a Cotton On as well. It was hard to miss.



For Antonia, Cotton On is associated with the time she spent in New Zealand, where she was able to always find the store in the shopping mall. Even though now the brand is out of reach for her, as she lives in another country, she still perceives the brand as accessible, because she has developed this image in the past. In both of these cases, a brand being associated with accessibility is another factor that makes a brand reliable and plays a role in interviewees' preference formation.

To sum up, young interviewees developed a preference for certain brands in the casual wear category through the reasonable brand image of these brands. The image is formed through different types of cognitive associations, such as comfortable quality-price balance (Esch et al., 2006; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012), suitable fit (Zhang et al., 2002), and accessibility of the brand stores. Moreover, for the category of young interviewees, who still do not have a lot of their own money, the choice between price and quality of the purchased brands becomes crucial in a process of preference formation. In this case, preference is developed not only on the basis of the brand's symbolic properties (Jamal & Goode, 2001) but also with regard to the functional qualities of the brand's items. With accordance to Cho and Fiore (2015), the analysis demonstrates cognitive associations are formed through both direct and indirect interaction with the brand. It shows that interviewees base their beliefs mostly on their personal experience, however also can be influenced by the messages the brands communicate to them. These findings also partly support the statement by Rindell and Iglesias (2014), who claimed, the present view on the brand is formed due to the combination of different factors, such as previous experience and context of this experience.

#### **4.1.1.2 The preferred brand is universal**

Almost all of the respondents reported that they had an experience with the versatility of their preferred brands. The simplicity and neutral characteristics of clothes, in this case, are also attached to cognitive brand associations (Cho & Fiore, 2015). The versatility for respondents mainly refers to the ability to style the clothes with the rest of the wardrobe, or easily use them in different combinations with each other. Eva says about H&M: *"They have a lot of basic clothes that you can mix and match"*. Antonia also reports about Cotton On: *"They're very easy to wear to different occasions and very easy to style, which is, again, something that I've really enjoyed in clothing"*. For Anna S., COS is a brand that always matches with other clothes in her wardrobe: *"From one item I can create at least seven outfits (...) I just know that I can combine these clothes with my wardrobe as well"*. A similar opinion on the items of her preferred brand has Heidi: *"It's a piece of clothing that I have in*

*my outfit that would fit in a lot of different outfits. So, it's a very versatile piece of clothing*". In these cases, the image of the brand being versatile comes from the direct experience with the brands' clothes. The ability to easily style brands' items leads to the positive feelings interviewees have towards them, which further leads to preference.

The importance of versatility can be possibly explained by the examined product category. When interviewees choose something to wear daily, they want it to be simple in look, to be easy in use and to save their time. For instance, this assumption is supported by Anna N. who describes Only items: *"It just always fits everywhere. And that's kind of nice, especially if you have a lot of different things to do today in the day"*.

Besides the versatility of their preferred brands, interviewees stated about the positive practical experiences with the preferred brands' clothes. Liza says about the jackets she purchases frequently at Uniqlo: *"Like these jackets (...) which you can wear when it's + 15 and they're really warm"*. Paria says about one of her purchases at Mango: *"The material is the sort of raincoat material that you have, that is waterproof. So, you know, you don't get wet"*. In both of these cases, interviewees see the brands as practical, because they already had a positive experience with the brands' items, and, therefore, this strengthens their preference towards these brands.

However, when consumers perceive these brands as universal, it results in the lack of special features consumers associate with these brands. In other words, the simplicity and versatility often result in brands being perceived as ordinary. Liza says about Uniqlo: *"I don't think it represents the way I want to dress at all. (...) No one probably would even notice if I would be dressed up in Uniqlo only"*. Even when Liza does have congruence between Uniqlo's image and her style, which is going to be discussed later, she personally does not see how Uniqlo can represent her style. The reason is, she perceives the brand as basic, simple, and even unnoticeable. At the same time, Eva also holds a neutral attitude towards H&M, because of its basicness: *"Just a place to go, if you need clothes. Nothing more, nothing less (...) So, nothing really super special"*. This vision of a brand being too simple is an outcome of an indirect brands' communication with their consumers, and can result in a situation when an interviewee distinguishes neither a personally nor a deep story behind the brand. A good illustration to this is Paria's comparison of her casual wear preference brand Mango and another preferred brand Ralf Lauren:

For example, with Ralph Lauren, there's a distinct story behind it (...) But with Mango, it's more like, it's like a commercial brand in a way. (...) You don't know the designers, you don't really know much about the background.

Therefore, it can be assumed, the lack of exclusivity or of an outstanding story, associated with a brand does not disturb brand preference development in this clothing category. Consumers form preferences through experiences with the brands despite their simplicity and commonness. At the same time, for most of the interviewees, this basicness is still perceived as an advantage. Marta describes her feeling wearing H&M: *"I was just wearing the most basic t-shirt and I knew that no one cares about that. And I also didn't have to care. It was just comfortable and nice"*. She felt comfortable exactly because of the simplicity of the clothes. Similarly, Len, when talking about his general preferences, admits, that he values clothes being universal:

When I go shopping, I usually try to buy something I know I would like to wear every day. So that's why I don't have super much in my wardrobe, but at the same time, everything that I have in my wardrobe, it's usually something I'm comfortable wearing a lot.

To conclude, interviewees had positive experiences with the brands, following basic style, being simple, and therefore being easy to use. The experiences, both direct and indirect (Cho & Fiore, 2015), included past shopping experiences, wearing the brands' clothes and the interpretation of brands' communication. These experiences formed cognitive associations with the brand, that led to further preferences for the interviewees. Moreover, it was found that the participants consider basic characteristics of the brands as preferable, as they connect them to the versatility of the items, easiness in matching brand's clothes with other clothes in the wardrobe, and clothes being practical in use. In line with the study by Zhang et al. (2002), this finding supports the statement about the crucial role of the clothes' style for consumers in the casual wear category. According to Roberts (2005), a favorable brand image is formed when consumers generate iconic stories about brands. The findings of the present study do not support this statement with regard to preference. Even though the simple image of the brand was also viewed by some of the interviewees as a bit of a downside, as due to it they do not have any specific associations with the personality of the brand or the history behind the brand, these associations with the brand as ordinary do not negatively affect brand preference

development. It also can be assumed, that these findings are tightly attached to the product category, as simplicity can be an important factor in casual wear preference formation. Therefore, in this category, the simple image of the brands is perceived by consumers as positive.

#### **4.1.1.3 The preferred brand is not perfect**

While interviewees have many positive associations with their preferred brands, none of them seem to be satisfied with everything about the brands. All of the interviewed consumers reported about one or several downsides attached to these brands. One of the most common “complaints” is the quality of the clothes. In some cases, consumers experienced problems with the items only once or twice throughout the whole history of their purchases. For instance, Paria says: *“That was the one piece of clothing with Mango, where I had a problem with, because, the seam on the neck, it's very quickly fell apart. (...) And I was very annoyed”*. Antonia was in a similar situation with the jumper from Cotton On: *“It didn't lose its softness, (...) But one of the knits opened. So, I kind of have a tiny hole in there”*. However, for some interviewees, the problems brands have with their quality became more obvious. When Eva talks about her experience with H&M, she says: *“The zipper is not in the place it's supposed to be. (...) I've seen a couple of times the items, that were for selling, but they were damaged basically”*.

Except for quality, some of the interviewees had an unpleasant experience with the fit of the clothes. For instance, Anna S. states about COS: *“Sometimes I can find some clothes that don't fit me at all. Like just not for my body shape. For example, I can really like something, but it will not suit me”*. Or, possibly, the style of the clothes, as in the case of Alina and Uniqlo: *“I guess I don't like some of the silhouettes they have”*. However, while the negative associations interviewees had with the brands were mainly cognitive, some respondents also have mentioned the sensory downsides of the brand. For instance, Leonard is generally unsatisfied with a color palette from Adidas: *“I actually think that a lot of the colorways that Adidas puts out are just really ugly”*.

Even though these downsides did not seem to influence the preference development for the interviewees in the past, they might affect their future purchases. Eva says: *“It makes me want to buy from this brand less”*. In the long term, the majority of interviewees state that would start to buy from other brands, as soon they would have money for it. Marta admits: *“I want to spend as little money as possible on clothes, so it doesn't stop me from buying from there. Although I really would like to buy something more expensive. But so far, I can't afford*

*it*". Another example, that illustrates the upcoming switch in brand preference is the statement, made by Anna N. about Only: *"For a student, it's very nice, but I think I will switch when I actually earn money"*. It is an interesting finding, as it shows the possible fragility of brand preference in the long run, especially in the casual wear category among young people.

In conclusion, interviewees developed their preferences for casual wear brands, despite certain negative cognitive associations with them. While Cho & Fiore (2015), were mentioning only positive associations with a brand, attached to brand image, the present study reveals the negative cognitive, and sometimes also sensory associations towards brands, that might occur during brand preference formation. For the present moment, interviewees develop preferences for these brands despite the obvious flaws associated with them, however, in the long run, some disadvantages might be seen as crucial for the interviewees. Therefore, in the future, they might reconsider their preference, once they would gain a new financial status. This finding also supports the results of previous research on the correlation between life changes and brand preferences conducted by Andreasen (1984), who found the positive relationships between life events of interviewees and their preference for brands. Moreover, with regard to several factors that influence the change of consumer brand preference, found by Mathur et al. (2003), in the present case, the change of financial status can be related to the factor of anticipation of life events. These findings also partly align with the work by Schultz et al. (2014), who have suggested that brand preference as a measure has declined over the past years and can be switched with a concept of "No brand preference", as in the present case the preference of young interviewees in the casual wear category seems fragile and can be changed in the nearest future.

#### **4.1.2 Emotional associations**

According to Cho and Fiore (2015), emotional associations that form brand image reflect "subjective feelings, such as excitement, happiness and joy" (p. 257). The findings of the present study indicate that all of the interviewees developed preferences for casual wear brands through one or several positive emotional associations with these brands. For instance, the preferred brands satisfied the needs of most of the interviewees. Leonard describes one of his purchases at Adidas, as follows: *"I was really happy, satisfied with the purchase. I mean (...) after some time they had the haul, where I was buying basically pretty similar shoe again from the same brand"*. For Leonard, the satisfaction from the single purchase resulted in more repetitive purchases.

However, even when interviewees sometimes did not search for anything in particular, the brand could have satisfied their needs, by providing a suitable range of products. For instance, Anna S. was always able to find something in COS, even when she did not know exactly what she wanted. This feeling of connection between her needs and the brand's offerings, that she gained during shopping, resulted in a stronger preference. Anna S. describes an experience with COS:

You're walking through the shop and you see some items, and you didn't think about them before, and now you are thinking about them, and now you want to create some new outfits.

Sometimes a feeling of satisfaction is tightly connected to the feeling of a brand being trustworthy and reliable. Marta says about H&M: *"I have never been disappointed by not being able to find what I was looking for"*. In Marta's case, one of the factors that she appreciates about the brand H&M the most, and, thus, prefers it to other brands, is the feeling that she is always able to find something at H&M, and therefore can rely on it. For Alina, the cognitive association with a raincoat was tightly attached to the emotional feeling of the brand being trustworthy: *"I guess this is the best purchase I've ever had because I went to the Netherlands with it and it never let me down"*. The experience with a Mango helping Paria out in the past also resulted in a strong emotional association with a brand being reliable, and therefore, in a further preference for the brand:

I think it's one of those brands that are always there. In a way, and that you can kind of count on. (...) I remember I was looking for a belt (...) And I went through so many different stores (...) But then I found it in at Mango. And that was quite great.

In addition, the preference among interviewed consumers was also formed through an association with a brand being able to raise their confidence. Describing her feelings wearing Uniqlo, Alina says: *"I feel great. I feel confident and comfortable"*. A similar feeling has Leonard when wearing his Adidas sneakers: *"I'm always really confident to go out and meet people"*. In Alina's and Leonard's cases, the feeling that brands gave them about their appearance resulted in preference formation. Moreover, in some cases, participants were generally lacking the confidence, that the brand gave them. Antonia describes her associations with Cotton On: *"Way cooler than I normally would (wear). Yeah, it gives me a confidence"*



*boost, I guess*". In addition, mental comfort and confidence are tightly attached to the feeling of happiness that interviewees associate with their preferred brands, as Heidi says: *"This is the best purchase I had like in a while. I love this outfit. It was quite cute. I was really happy about it"*.

The positive emotional associations attached to the brand can be a result of a positive experience in a store. Supporting this statement, Caroline says, that she likes to go shopping alone, and usually does shopping in H&M: *"I usually go alone, because I find going alone is much easier. (Last time) I felt relaxed and glad, I think"*. The fact that the brand lets consumers spend time the way they like, results in positive emotional associations attached to the brand. In oppose to Caroline, Paria loves shopping with her friends. Particularly, her preferred brand Mango gave her the right environment for this time spending:

When I think of Mango, I think of times that I've been shopping there. So, I associate it with my friends, having a day out, going to different stores, and Mango is one of them.

It is also can be seen that in Paria's case Mango is more than just a store: it is a familiar place, with a lot of emotions and feelings attached. The clothes in the store itself might be simple and not so special, but Paria has many memories connected to the brand, that makes her feel comfortable purchasing from it. When comparing these two types of time spending, it is obvious that these interviewees have different attitudes towards shopping. However, what unites these two cases is that both Caroline and Paria felt like their preferred brands provide them an atmosphere to do it the way they like. They felt comfortable and relaxed when doing shopping at these stores.

To conclude, all this aligns with existing literature, according to which products that have similar physical characteristics become differentiated in the eyes of consumer due to their symbolic properties (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Jamal & Goode, 2001), what plays an important role in consumers' decision making (Chang & Liu, 2009). As opposed to the findings of Maxian et al. (2013), the present results show, that consumers develop emotional connections to the brands when it comes to brand preference. The analysis also shows, that for young interviewees the feelings of satisfaction (Chang & Chieng, 2006; Hellier et al., 2003), trust (Low & Lamb, 2000), mental comfort (Fournier, 1998), happiness (Cho & Fiore, 2015) and a feeling of confidence (McNeil, 2018) are particularly strong in brand preference development. Moreover, these findings support the study by McNeil (2018), who found that

consumers use fashion to enable their emotional well-being. Even though Cho and Fiore (2015) state that emotional associations can be formed both through direct and indirect experience, for the interviewees these kinds of positive feelings come mainly from their direct experience with wearing the clothes, as well as purchasing experience in the brands' stores. The present study supports another finding by Cho and Fiore (2015), who asserted that consumers develop a particular emotional attachment to the brands when they think that brands understand their preferences.

#### **4.1.3 Sensory associations**

As previously stated, the third category of associations, that form the perceived image of the brand is sensory associations. As Cho & Fiore (2015) claimed, sensory associations are related to “engagement of the consumer’s physical senses (i.e. vision, smell, sound, touch and taste)” (p. 257). The overwhelming majority of the interviewees reported about the situations, when, their preferred brands gave them physical comfort. Heidi said about her recently bought outfit from Cotton On: *“I think it's very comfortable. I took a nap earlier in these clothes”*. In Heidi’s case the comfort is tightly connected to the tactile sensations of the clothes. Eva also recalls her feelings about the shoes she bought at H&M: *“That surprised me because usually, the inside material is rough, but the shoes were soft on the outside and on the inside as well. And I really liked the feeling”*. Even though Eva did not expect high-heeled shoes to be comfortable, H&M has surprised her with pleasant tactile sensations, and therefore after this experience, she established a vision of a brand being comfortable.

Moreover, the association with a brand as comfortable might come not only from the experience with this brand itself but also from the way a brand image is communicated by the brand. When talking about his preference for Adidas, Leonard admits that he was influenced by the advertisement. Being familiar with a message the brand was translating, Leonard started to perceive the brand and its items as comfortable. However, in his case, the translated message was also further supported by his positive direct experience with a brand. He says:

I also know, that Adidas was actually introducing new technology to the shoes, which made the sole a bit more fluffy and comfortable. (...) And then I just tried on the shoes and they were really comfortable.



Moreover, many interviewees reported about a group of positive sensory associations, related to experience in the brands' stores. For instance, for Antonia, the color was always very important, as she wears only certain colors and feels conscious about wearing new ones. Then, she noticed, that the brand Cotton On provides good lightning in the stores:

The lighting is good. It's brighter than some of the other stores that I've been to, which is nice. (...) I'm very conscious of the way colors look compared to my skin color. (...) So, that's something that I've really enjoyed.

While for other consumers it might be not that important, this sensory experience played a major role in Antonia's preference development. Heidi also shares her experience with Cotton On stores: *"They are always quite big and stuff. (...) It's bright. It's really easy to navigate through"*. In her case, she did not expect any sensory advantages from the brand but still was pleasantly surprised by how the stores of the brand were designed.

However, many of the interviewees also reported, that they never had any specific sensory associations attached to the preferred brands. For instance, Liza says about her items from Uniqlo: *"Nothing special about the material"*. At the same time, Romano describes the packaging of Scotch & Soda clothes as neutral: *"It was just in a very neutral package"*, as well as his attitude towards the smell of the brands' clothes: *"I don't care about smell. And that's also because the smell depends on what laundry detergent you use"*. In addition, Caroline admits that she also does not remember anything particular about the colors or smells of the H&M clothes: *"No, I don't have any like sensations, nothing really comes to mind"*. All of these cases illustrate that interviewees sometimes do not pay attention to the sensory side of brand image, with regards to casual wear brands.

To sum up, while Roberts (2005) proposed, that consumers develop images to the brands through auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile sensations, in the case of the present study, interviewees have mostly reported about tactile and visual sensations they have towards their preferred brands. Since casual wear for most interviewees are the clothes they wear daily, the factor of the physical comfort (Korchia, 1999; Zhang et al., 2002), appearance and colors of the clothes (Faircloth et al., 2001) and pleasant experiences in the store (Cho & Fiore, 2015) appeared to be important in a brand preference formation. As also stated in Cho and Fiore (2015), these associations consumers form mainly due to the direct interactions with the brand. In line with sensory marketing research (Hultén et al., 2011; Jain & Bagdare, 2011; Peck & Childers, 2003), the findings indicate the importance of sensory associations in

the brand image formation and show that this type of association also plays a role in brand preference development. However, it also can be stated, that the analysis shows that the sensory associations seem to be less prominent preference formation in comparison to two other types of associations – cognitive and emotional.

## **4.2 The role of self-congruence in brand preference development**

As it was previously stated, under self-congruence the present study understands the degree of consistency between consumer's self-concept and brand image. While self as a separate concept explains only consumer's self-perceptions, the present chapter aims to examine, which parts of self-concept are involved in brand preference formation. Therefore, this section would give an answer on the following research question: *“How do 20-24-year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands through the self-image congruence with these brands?”*.

### **4.2.1 Actual-individual self-congruence**

The analysis between interviewees' self-concepts and the brand images revealed that all of the participants developed preferences for the brands through congruence with their actual individual self-concepts. Interestingly enough, it is the only type of congruence that has been found among all 13 interviews. In certain cases, interviewees knew their style and preferred the brands, which represent it. Len says about Scotch & Soda: *“The clothes they are offering or producing mostly fit my style”*. In the same Alina says about Uniqlo: *“When I go to Uniqlo, I know exactly that I would find something that I would wear because I have something else in my wardrobe that I'm wearing. So, it's quite similar”*. Therefore, these interviewees directly see the chosen brands as the ones that match their styles. In other cases, interviewees form preferences for the brands, which help them to represent their values. When talking also about Uniqlo, Liza says: *“I think all clothing should be durable and in that way, Uniqlo represents It's really good. Because (...) sometimes my style, it shows that I am a durable person”*.

At the same time, most of the participants do not understand why exactly they prefer one brand to the other. However, when looking at the description of participants' style and them describing the brands altogether, it can be noted, that preferred brands had features of interviewees' self-image representation. For instance, Eva says that would not consider H&M

her favorite: *“I can't call it like: “It's my favorite brand” (...) No. Just a place to go”*. But at the same time, she says about H&M:

I think I'm choosing the items in H&M that still allow me to move freely with my arms. And I can sit down, stand up, stretch and everything will be fine.

Describing her attitude towards clothes, Eva states: *“To me, clothes are comfort. (...) (Comfort) means that clothes are soft. The material is soft, that it is loose enough (...) that it helps me move easily”*. This vision of the brand matched with her major values in clothing: comfort, and therefore, Eva started to prefer H&M over other brands.

Even when interviewed consumers report about neutral characteristics of the brand, and its basicness, it is interesting to view how they perceive own styles, because even in these cases, the images appear to be congruent. For instance, Marta has always thought about H&M as a basic brand: *“It's like pop music among other music genres, just for normal people who don't have any specific requirements. (...) Just basic, I would say”*. These neutral characteristics, however, matched Marta's vision of her style: *“Very basic, very simple. (...) I don't have that many clothes”*. It is interesting to mention that congruence could develop, even when an interviewee does not have a particular style. For instance, Anna S. describes her style as very unstable and flexible:

My style always changes. So today I like one thing, tomorrow I like another. (...) Sometimes I dress like (...) skater boy, just because I feel comfortable like that. Tomorrow (...) I will wear something super girly (...) There is no specific style for me.

While Anna S. felt like her style is very flexible, she found out COS that was flexible in style as well. When looking at Anna S's description of the COS style, the congruence becomes clear:

I really feel like you can create your personal style from all this clothing. So, they (COS) provide, many different styles and you can combine them, and you can choose (...) what you want to be.

This can be also illustrated with the congruence Paria had with Mango. She says about herself: *“I don't have a specific style. (...) I always kind of switch”*. At the same time Paria noted, that Mango is a brand, which always allowed her to choose different clothes for different occasions: *“I think it's sort of this style between casual and chic (...). You know you can combine things a little bit more freely”*. This way, the congruence between Paria's actual self-concept and Mango's brand image, as well as its role in Paria's preference development becomes obvious.

To sum up, in line with the previous academic research (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2015), the findings illustrate, that interviewees give preference to brands, which match with their self-perceptions. This finding also partly supports the work by Hosany and Martin (2012), who claimed, that symbolic consumption displays the lifestyle and other personal characteristics of consumers. Namely, interviewees start to prefer some brands over others, when they feel like these brands share their values, fit their style or help them to be themselves. In this case, interviewees are motivated by a willingness to have a consistency between their self-perceptions and experiences (Astakhova et al., 2017). Moreover, the findings are in line with the work of Anand and Kaur (2018), who claimed that actual self-concept can be expressed through a person's choices for clothes in their leisure time. In the present case, the findings also can be explained by the product category. In other words, when it comes to brand preference for everyday clothes, the process of preference formation includes interviewees' experience with a brand, as with the one that shares their vision of themselves.

#### **4.2.2 Actual-social self-congruence**

The analysis has shown, that the overwhelming majority of respondents' form preferences to the clothing brands following actual-social self-congruence. For instance, Leonard believes, that his friends see his style as basic and neutral: *“My friends, (...) they knew I have a pretty basic style. (...) I wear one black hoodie and the next day I wear like a gray hoodie. Even if it's a new hoodie, many don't even notice maybe because it's just like pretty similar style”*. The perceived image of his preferred sneaker brand Adidas, at the same time, is also neutral:

I'm actually like really wearing them every single day. So that's why it just feels like, um, really natural. (...). It's just like really like a normal thing, like an everyday thing.

It can be seen that through the congruence between the way the interviewee believes others see him and the way he sees Adidas, Leonard forms his preference for the brand. However, even though all of the interviewees value the opinion of significant others in one way or another, some seem to value the way they are perceived by others more, and therefore, translate it to the brands. For instance, Romano values social opinion a lot, and admits, that he tries to dress the way his peers do: *“I tried to match my style with the styles of others who are part of my sub-group in society”*. His preferred brand, Scotch & Soda, when being congruent with his actual-social representation, allows him to dress just like other members of his social circle: *“I can buy something like this, which makes me feel included in my social surroundings, which is comfortable in that sense”*. In addition, Anna S. states that when other people approve of her style, she feels better:

It gives me again much more confidence. So, it's just one part of your life that can tell you that you're doing something cool, you know? (...) Like I'm not wearing clothing to impress somebody. (...) But when somebody also can approve it, I feel even better, you know?

At the same time, she says that is not unusual for her to receive compliments, especially when she is wearing COS. COS is helping Anna S. to stay interesting in the eyes of others, and this differentiates the brand among other brands:

For example, when I'm at some company of unknown people. (...) People will be more likely to ask my name. Just to come to me and say: “Hey! (...) Let's be friends”.

It is also interesting to see, how interviewees translate the opinion of significant others on their style to their own perceptions about clothing. For instance, as Heidi notes, her friend recently commented on her outfit:

My friend said: “You look like you just stepped out of *a milk commercial*”. And I know this doesn't sound like a compliment, but I was wearing all beige and white.

This comment is not a typical compliment, but it seems like Heidi enjoyed receiving it. Consequently, she translates this saying to her brand choice, as says about the outfit purchased from Cotton On: *“I feel good about myself, because I think personally I look nice.*

(...) (*It matched my style) like a cup of milk*". The parallel between "milk commercial" compliment and Heidi's clothes' goes through the whole interview, as she also states that the colors she usually chooses are beige, white or black, and characterizes them as "*mostly muted tones and they look like a cup of coffee*". This cup of milk/ cup of coffee comparison first mentioned by her friend proves that brand preference is tightly connected with Heidi's actual-social self-concept and her peers' opinion about her clothes. Therefore, this clearly illustrates how Heidi's preference for Cotton On develops through her actual-social self-congruence with a brand. In Antonia's preference for Cotton On, the influence comes from Antonia's mother, who is generally not satisfied with the colors her daughter chooses: "*My mom says that I should dress in more different colors, more bold colors*". The brand Cotton On, hence, allowed Antonia to satisfy her mom's needs, therefore proved itself to be congruent with the view of Antonia's significant other on her style. She tells about her mom's reaction to one of the purchases at Cotton On: "*She was happy that I bought different colors in the store*". Moreover, this fact also had an influence on Antonia's self-feeling in the outfit: "*And it was a different color that I had an experience with and I really liked the color. Yeah, I felt especially cute in that moment*". At the same time, Len claims, that he is wearing different clothes, when meeting friends:

When I'm at home, I would just wear normal jeans, a t-shirt, and a sweater (...). But as soon as I'm meeting, for example, friends (...) I want to look at least like... What my typical basic style would be and pants, but usually not jeans.

When taking a closer look at this description, it can be noted, that the main thing, that changes, when Len dresses for friends, is jeans substituted for pants. Interestingly enough, the thing he was buying the most from his preferred brand Scotch & Soda is also pants: "*So I went in there, just to buy one pair of pants, but then ended up buying three because they had different, cool colors*". Moreover, Len receives more compliments about his appearance, when he is in pants from Scotch & Soda: "*That's more often when I'm wearing pants from Scotch & Soda. Because my only chinos, I have my only like real pants apart from jeans. (...) I think that's when I get more compliments for my clothes*". Therefore, pants, that Len buys in Scotch & Soda, have a direct association the social circle and approval from the family and friends for him, which leads to the preference formation towards the brand.

To conclude, in line with the previous research (Javornik et al., 2021; McNeill, 2018; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004), the analysis shows that the opinion of others affects consumers'

choices. The present findings add to the literature by illustrating that the congruence between participant's actual-social self-concepts and their vision of the brands plays an important role in interviewees' brand preference formation. As also stated by Piacentini and Mailer (2004), the opinion of significant others translates to the way interviewees see themselves, and accordingly, they start to search for the clothes that would match with this vision. This way interviewees express their need for acceptance of significant others (Anand & Kaur, 2018; Legere & Kang, 2020) and desire to fit in within their social circles (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; McNeill, 2018; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). The preferred brands are mostly fulfilling the expectations significant others hold towards interviewees' styles. It boosts participants' confidence or makes them feel better, as a result of achieved approval.

#### **4.2.3 Ideal self-congruence, with possibility to stay in a “Comfort Zone”**

The analysis of the present study has shown that preferred brands do not fully match with interviewees' ideal self-concepts, both individual and social. However, it cannot be claimed, that interviewees' ideal self-congruence does not occur in a process of brand preference formation. The results show that the potentially preferred brands occupy a rather niche position: let interviewees do small steps towards their ideal selves, but at the same time allow them to stay in their “Comfort Zone”. For instance, Marta feels uncomfortable, if she tries something unusual: *“When I'm dressed in something very fancy, I feel a bit cautious about myself. (...) Wearing clothes that are not basic, kind of distracts me”*. Moreover, later in the dialog with her, it becomes clear, that actually she would like to receive more compliments: *“I want my style to be being appreciated, but it isn't usually”*. At first it seems, that Marta developed her preference for the H&M brand only through the brand's offer of a good choice of basics that match her present style. However, talking about her previous purchases at H&M, Marta mentions buying dresses, that was out of her usual style:

They are all quite short, so it's definitely something different, than what I wear, in other months, than summer. And also, I know that people look at me differently, because I look different than in my jeans and leggings (...) More girly, more elegant maybe.

H&M let Marta feel different and fulfilled her ideal self-concept, but at the same time, did not provide her with any extreme choices of clothes, about which she would probably feel uncomfortable. A similar pattern is seen in the case of Eva. She notes, that has concerns about



her appearance: *“I think I have a certain body type (...) I had several times that I would wear something tight and people would give me inappropriate comments”*. At the same time Eva realizes, that it influences her general preference for clothes, and is willing to change it:

(My current behavior) comes not from the fact that I don't like this type of clothing, but because I'm afraid of being judged or being looked at in a different way. So now I'm trying to teach myself to wear more clothing like this.

While Eva was still concerned about other people's comments and opinions, and therefore, tried not to attract any extra-attention to herself, her preferred brand H&M was helping her to try new things and experiment a little with her style. Eva describes her most memorable purchase at H&M as follows:

I bought high-heeled shoes from there, and I was very surprised (...) And I didn't even want to try it on because I was so convinced that it's not going to work for me. But eventually, I tried them on and they were pretty comfortable.

Sometimes, a brand can match with the interviewee's ideal self-concept not directly through clothes, but also through the generally communicated brand image. For instance, Romano stated, that he would love to dress more formally, but is afraid that it would not be accepted by others:

If social circumstances would allow it, (I would) go for a more formal two-piece suit, combining different shirts or ties on different days. (...) (If I wear that now) It would pop out and not per se in a good way.

Romano's social status is important for him, and it does not allow him to fully follow his ideal self. However, the brand image of the Scotch & Soda brand fulfilled his desire for classiness in the way the brand styles its stores. Romano says about the Scotch & Soda store:

That's more of a classical touch or something (...) So, the cash register, it was like an old-fashioned one, you know, with made out of bronze and then it gave more of a classical vintage touch, which I quite admired.



Another example of such a case is an interview of Anna N, who claims, that she wants to add more colors in her daily style: *“I'm starting to like a lot more and a lot more colors”*. While she is a bit conscious about these experiments, the brand Only gives a good opportunity to try:

(I felt) happy and a little nervous, because this was so bright. (...) And when I saw it, I was like: “Well, I can always try”. (...) (I feel confident), because I know it looks good on me. I know it's very special, but I'm just not worried that people will think anything of it.

Anna N. has taken a bit more risk with a purchase than other interviewees, as she went directly for her ideal self-concept, while brand matched with her ambitions at a time. The participation of brand Only in her movement towards ideal self, resulted in the situation, when Anna started to prefer the brand over others.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study only partly support the results of previous academic research. In oppose to the academic literature showing the relations between ideal self-congruence and some consumer behavioral concepts (Astakhova et al, 2017; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kim, 2015; Rhee, 2012), the present analysis shows, that concerning brand preference, consumers do not prefer brands which are fully congruent with their ideal self-concepts. Instead, they develop preferences for the brands which match their ideal self-concepts just slightly, allowing them to stay in the “Comfort Zone”. With regard to the product category, brands interviewees form their preferences for casual wear brands, when the brands are comforting and familiar. The preferred brands might give interviewed consumers some room for experiments, but not as much as it would scare them away. Being in line with the study of Anand and Kaur (2018), the analysis shows that in comparison to the role of actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence is much less prominent in preference development for clothes, which participants choose for their daily time spending.

#### **4.2.4 Ideal self-congruence in the past**

Another interesting finding refers to the experience with a brand, that interviewees had in the past. The analysis has shown, that the majority of the participants had a valuable purchase from the brand, that matched with their ideal self-concept by that time. In other words, preferred brands already have helped interviewees to achieve their ideal self in the

past, which might be the reason for a strong attachment to this brand. For instance, Liza describes her first purchase at Uniqlo:

I was not really a fashion person when I was 15 years old, but for me, the self-expression was through T-shirts and prints. (...) And also, I felt better than everyone else, because I knew that it was art.

For Liza, the first purchase at Uniqlo was memorable and important for her as a teenager. She wanted to be distinguished among her peers, to look creative, and Uniqlo helped her to fulfill these aspirations. By now she might have changed her style, but this moment, that Uniqlo gave her, resulted in her present preference for the brand. A similar example is seen in the story told by Heidi. She remembers her first purchase at Cotton On vividly:

I remember this so clearly. (...) Because I remember I was being so proud. I was like: “Oh, I'm going to look like the girls on Tumblr” (...) So, that's what made me feel like: “Oh, I'm not a kid anymore”, in a sense.

Cotton On helped Heidi to look like other girls from Tumblr, and it was her aspiration by that moment. However, most importantly, Heidi notes, that this moment made her feel like she is not a child anymore, that she has moved to the new and exciting part of her life. This pattern is seen in several interviews. Romano describes his first Scotch & Soda purchase as follows: *“Felt like an upgrade. It is also kind of wear that my friends have. To have a bit more money to spend on wear. Like social mobility”*. Then Romano explains in more details, why Scotch & Soda made him feel this way:

I grew up in a lower-class, middle-class family. And when I went to college and university, I was suddenly in an environment in which a lot of people have rich parents or from an elite. (...) But I now have some more financial capabilities to also by myself into that identity, through specific brands. Scotch & Soda, for example.

It clearly illustrates the congruence between the consumer's ideal self-concept and the brand's image in the interviewee's past. Just as in the case of Heidi and Cotton On, Romano's valuable purchase coincided with an important moment of his life transition. When Romano

went from one social stratum to another, he felt like Scotch & Soda's image matched the new image he wanted to achieve, helping him with social mobility. For Leonard, Adidas was there at the moment, when he was finishing school:

When I started wearing it more in a casual context, not for sports, probably five years ago or so. (...) Remember, what I was telling you about the style or the changing during high school? In general, I would say that just the whole fashion landscape got a bit more casual.

Leonard was a customer of Adidas for many years, as he purchased it long before graduating from school. However, the most valuable experience with a brand has happened in the moment of transition for him: Leonard started a change to simpler style at the moment when Adidas started to represent itself not only as a sportswear brand but also as a casual wear brand. Another example is the case of Len, for whom a moment of going for ideal self-concept was attached to moving to a bigger city:

I started caring more about what I'm wearing. And that's because I kind of graduated from high school. (...) So, I went basically into a different kind of group of people. And in cities, there are more interesting people with interesting styles.

When talking about the process of his preference formation, Len even makes this parallel himself: *"I would say my style has changed a lot since I finished high school. And that's also when I started buying stuff from Scotch & Soda"*. Seeing new people, being in the new environment indicated a time of change in the style for Len, which coincided with the moment when he discovered Scotch & Soda.

To sum up, interviewees had their special moments with preferred brands in the past, when they felt like the brand was helping them to come closer to their ideal self-concepts, which has affected their further preference establishment for these brands. This partly supports the literature on the role of memorable experience on brand image formation (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Halinen et al., 2012; Rindell & Iglesias, 2014; Wiedmann et al., 2011), as well as the findings of Stach (2017), who asserted that memorable experiences have a significant influence on consumer preference. Moreover, the analysis showed, that the congruence between interviewees' past self-concepts and these brand images occurred in specific moments in their lives. Namely, most of the interviewees were in the process of

transition from one life stage to another: becoming a teenager; finishing school; moving to another city, or having a vertical mobility movement. This finding is in line with the academic literature that claims that when consumers are at the point of changing their life role, they are particularly sensitive towards the symbolic meanings of the brands (Belk, 1988; Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Mathur et al., 2003; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). As well as in the study by Matthews et al. (2021), the present findings show, that when a brand helps an interviewee to achieve the image that was not previously available for the participant, it results in a further preference development for this brand. Interestingly enough, this ideal self-congruence did not necessarily indicate the beginning of interviewees' relationship with the brand, as some might have purchased from the brand long before this moment. However, it can be assumed, that this congruence is attached to the beginning of the preference formation process towards this brand up to the present time.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main goal of the present study was to examine how young consumers develop brand preferences for fashion brands in the casual wear category. As previously explained, there are a lot of quantitative studies on brand preference (Ayanwale et al., 2005; Jalilvand et al., 2016; Truong et al., 2010), however, there is still a distinct gap in qualitative research on the topic (Alamro & Rowley, 2011; Heilman et al., 2000; Singh et al., 2005). For this reason, this study aimed at examining *how* preference is formed.

While the development of preference seems hard to measure due to its volatile nature (Mathur et al., 2003; Schultz et al., 2014), there is a need for a focus on certain concepts for its examination. In the present study, brand preference formation was investigated through the concept of brand image, and through the degree of consistency between brand image and consumer's self-concept, i.e. self-congruence, as these were proven to affect consumer brand preference (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2015). The focus on young people as consumer demographics and clothing brands, as product category was explained by the findings of previous research, that indicated that brand image and self-congruity play an important role in this market (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Therefore, by using a qualitative approach and, for instance, the method of in-depth interviews, the research paper aimed at answering the following research question: *How do 20-24-year-old consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands?*

The most relevant outcomes from the previously analyzed findings are discussed in the following chapter together with the theoretical implications. Subsequently, the possible limitations of the study are observed. Lastly, suggestions for future research are proposed.

### 5.1 Significant findings and theoretical implications

The findings of the present analysis show, that all three types of associations constituting consumers' perceived brand image are involved in the brand preference development. As in the process of value co-creation, described by Vargo and Lusch (2008) and Kowalkowski (2011), it was found that interviewees co-create brand images together with the brands through the processes of purchasing the clothes, wearing them in the social environment and having experience with customer service. As proposed by Cho and Fiore (2015), it includes both direct and indirect communication with the brands, however, mostly refers to direct consumer-brand interactions. In line with the numerous studies showing the

role of different types of associations in perceived image formation (Faircloth et al., 2001; Low & Lamb, 2000; Park & Rabolt, 2009), the present findings display that interviewees perceive the brands through the mix of different associations. However, the role of the various types of attributes in brand preference development differs. Namely, interviewees, while describing their experiences with the brands, seem to perceive their preferred brands mostly with regard to the cognitive associations and the least with regard to sensory associations.

Concerning cognitive associations, it was found that interviewees developed their preferences for the universal, versatile, simple brands, which also seem to them as the most reasonable choice. As interviewees reported, they prefer brands that are easy to style, practical in use, and suit them in terms of both fit and price of the items. The preferences, in this case, are formed through experiences consumers have with the brands when brands prove their match with consumer's needs.

Moreover, while both quality and price of the brands appeared to be important in preference development, it was found that participants often have to choose between the sufficient quality and moderate price, and consider this choice when forming the preference. This finding can be explained by the crucial role of financial factor, as interviewees are mostly students, and therefore do not have yet a stable income. While it seems logical, it is connected to another important finding: the majority of interviewees reported that they would likely switch to better-quality and more expensive brands, as soon as they would have more money.

Interestingly enough, while the research on favorable brand images shows, that consumers have only positive associations with their *favorite* brands (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Roberts, 2005), the present study indicates that interviewees *give preference* to brands, despite knowing about possible brands' disadvantages. In other words, it was found that interviewees develop preferences for the brands that they perceive as the ones away from being perfect. Even though these disadvantages do not make consumers change their preference towards the brand in the current moment, they might be crucial for the interviewee's preference in the nearest future. Both of these findings correlate with each other, as well as align with previous studies, which found that life events can lead to changes in consumers' preferences (Andreasen, 1984; Mathur et al., 2003). Particularly, the possible financial improvement of interviewees in the future can relate to the category "anticipation of life events", described by Mathur et al. (2003, p. 132). Overall, in line with the brand image research (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Park & Rabolt, 2009; Roberts, 2005), these findings indicate the particular importance of cognitive associations in brand image

formation, as well as an important role of brand image in further brand preference development (Alamro & Rowley, 2011; Govers & Schoormans, 2005; O’Cass & Lim, 2002; Sääksjärvi & Samiee, 2011). At the same time, the findings of the present study add to the existing literature by explaining the process of brand preference development, and the role of brand image in this regard.

Emotional associations that lead to brand preferences for interviewees were mostly developed through the situations when brands proved to consumers to be trustworthy and reliable. Other patterns in preference formation through emotional associations attached to the brands’ satisfaction of interviewees’ needs, and brands making interviewees feel more confident about their appearance. At the same time, sensory associations were mostly formed through experiences with the physical comfort of the clothes, the look of the clothes, and pleasant sensory experiences in the stores.

Concerning self-image congruence, the findings, agreeing with the existing literature (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2015), indicate that consumers develop their preference for casual wear brands through the establishment of the match between brands’ image and their actual self. All of the respondents rather had direct experiences with their now-preferred brands, when they felt like a brand has a match with their style; or they separately described their vision of a brand as similar to the way they would describe themselves, and therefore unconsciously develop actual self-congruence with this brand. This applies both to interviewees’ perception of themselves with reference to clothing, as well as to the way they are seen by their significant others. The findings indicate that the overwhelming majority of interviewees also had experiences with a brand being congruent with the perceptions their social circle has about their appearance. This aligns with previous research on the role of social opinion on consumer choices and purchase behavior (Javornik et al., 2021; McNeill, 2018; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). By giving the preference to the brands with established actual social self-congruence, interviewees might express their need for acceptance of significant others and desire to fit in within their social circles (Anand & Kaur, 2018; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Legere & Kang, 2020).

However, while previous studies assumed that consumers are giving their preference to the brands, which assist them in creating their desired image, and search for the identification between their ideal selves and brand images of their preferred brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Shujaat et al., 2018), the results of the present study show, that most of the interviewees prefer brands that do not push them towards their ideal selves, but instead give them slight opportunities to try new things and experiment with their style. At the same time,

preferred brands are taking an interesting niche position when they let interviewees feel like they partly represent their perfect self-images, but at the same time let them stay in their “Comfort Zones”. While doing these small steps towards their ideal selves, interviewees still can feel comfortable with the brand. This finding might be tightly attached to the examined product category, as it can be assumed, that interviewees do not pay a lot of attention to this consistency specifically when it comes to casual wear. Therefore, the tendency might differ in another product category.

One of the most significant findings was discovered concerning self-congruence between the images of the preferred brands and ideal self-concepts of consumers in the past. It was found, that the majority of interviewees had a moment, when the brand’s image has fully matched with their ideal self-concept, helping them to come closer to their ideal image. Moreover, sometimes these moments coincided with the transition stages in interviewees’ lives, when they were changing a life role and/or an environment they are in. As it was discussed in existing literature, when consumers are at the point of changing their life role, they are particularly sensitive towards the symbolic meanings of the brands (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Mathur et al., 2003; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). These findings are also in line with the previous studies that indicate the role of memorable experiences in brand image formation (Halinen et al., 2012; Rindell & Iglesias, 2014; Wiedmann et al., 2011), as well as in consumer brand preference development (Stach, 2017). The present study supports the existing literature, and extends it with the new evidence, by showing the distinct pattern of interviewees having experiences with the preferred brands, when the brands fulfilled their aspirations in the past, which, therefore, led to the development of interviewees’ further preferences. Finally, it can be assumed, that this moment might have indicated the beginning of interviewees’ preference formation towards these brands.

In conclusion, interviewed consumers develop preferences for casual wear fashion brands through cognitive, emotional, and sensory associations they hold towards these brands and actual-individual, actual-social, and ideal self-congruence with these brands. They form their perceived brand images through direct and indirect experiences with the brands, co-creating meanings together with the brands themselves. With regard to a preference towards casual wear brands, interviewees mostly take into consideration the experiences, when brands prove them to be universal, practical, as well as appear to be the most reasonable choice among other available clothing brands. Moreover, interviewees also rely their preference on the positive emotional experiences with the brands, when the brands prove to be trustworthy, reliable and generally make interviewees feel relaxed and satisfied. In addition, when it comes



to casual wear, interviewees do not go for their “desired” brands, or always do not even prefer “favorite” brands, giving their preference to the most familiar and comforting options instead. Therefore, it also seems important for the participants, that brands correspond with their personal view of their style, as well as with the view that their significant others hold towards them. When it comes to the match between interviewees’ ideal self and brand images, participants prefer casual wear brands, that do not fully correspond with their aspirations, but rather let them stay in their “Comfort Zone”. However, the analysis has shown, that interviewees also had certain moments in the past experiences with the preferred brands when the brands fully matched with their ideal image by this moment. As it was previously explained, it might be attached to the stage of life transition, when participants were particularly vulnerable towards the influence of brands’ symbolic meanings, and therefore this situation might have started the process of preference formation.

Regarding practical implications of the discussed results, these findings can be used by marketing managers of casual wear fashion brands, when targeting young consumers. For instance, brands can focus more on the actual self-image congruence with consumers by establishing images that are representing consumer’s current vision of themselves. What is more, according to the findings, casual wear brands should find the right balance between quality and price, as well as between other important practical characteristics of their product to create positive cognitive associations among consumers. To steer young target audiences towards them, fashion brands need to communicate “comfortable” images, as well as provide consumers with choices, that would satisfy their needs.

## **5.2 Limitations**

Although the choice for the method, as well as the process of its implication has been clearly explained, thus guaranteeing reliability, this research presents some limitations. Firstly, even though it was attempted to achieve international diversity in the sample, the final sample mostly consists of consumers from The Netherlands, Germany, and Russia. Moreover, unintentionally, all of the interviewed consumers appeared to be graduates or in the process of getting higher education, thus, these consumer characteristics in the sample may limit the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, the possibility of the researcher being subjective in his/ her conclusions should be never underestimated in a qualitative study. The qualitative approach can give room for the interpretation of the results, and thus may lead to biased findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As for another limitation, while coding it is also possible to overlook essential, but rare

pieces of data, that could be outside expected categories. To avoid this, it was important not only to label codes based on the theoretical concepts, but also to leave space for open codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, these limitations were also minimized with the detailed description of the chosen method, an operationalization of the questionnaire for an interview, as well as a thorough coding process of the transcripts. The decision to conduct interviews via Zoom due to the CoVid 19 pandemic (Burki, 2020) can also be considered a limitation, as it might have limited the opportunities to read participants' body language, as well as to establish rapport between participant and researcher.

Finally, as it was previously stated, brand preference is a complex concept, that is hard to measure, as it might change several times during a consumer's lifetime. However, for the present research, it was possible to examine brand preference only at a particular moment, as the time for the project was constraint by the university program deadlines. This limitation leads to the possibilities for future research – to see brand preference formation and change in different periods of consumer's lives.

### **5.3 Future research**

The findings of the present study open numerous possibilities for future research and further brand preference investigation. Firstly, as it was previously mentioned, the current research allowed to observe consumer's preference only in the present moment, with a possibility to investigate a bit of a past consumer's experience. One of the findings has shown that interviewees were influenced by perceived brand images of their now-preferred brands sometime in the past, while they were in the process of transition from one life status to another. Therefore, it could be interesting to further investigate the development of brand preference in the moment of transition, as well as to examine the influence that self-image congruence in the past had on consumer's future brand preference in detail.

Secondly, the present research has a specific focus on young consumers and fashion brands as a product category. Therefore, there is a possibility to examine the brand preference development among other type of consumers, or among this category of consumers in other product categories. For instance, to study the difference in preferences of young consumers in the casual wear product category and formal wear product category, as well as the difference of consumer self-image congruence within these two categories of clothing brands. Or, as an alternative, to investigate how consumers develop their preferences in the luxury clothing category, and if in this case, consumers' ideal self-concepts play a more prominent role.

Thirdly, as interviewees in the present study claimed, that their preferred brands have distinct flaws, it is possible to examine which disadvantages of the brands affect the brand preference formation the most. Finally, it could be interesting to further investigate the role of significant others for consumers in brand preference development. While the present study has shown that preferred brands' images match consumers' actual social self-concepts, it could be interesting to study the role of significant others in consumer brand preference development in more detail.

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# Appendix A. Operationalization of the in-depth interviews

**Table A1. Interview guide**

<p><b>Introduction</b></p>	<p>Hello. My name is Daria, and I'm a Media &amp; Business student at Erasmus University. For my master thesis, I am examining how consumers develop brand preferences for casual wear fashion brands. Casual wear mainly refers to leisure attire with a relaxed fit and includes items such as jeans, jackets, sweatshirts and sneakers, mostly made of comfortable materials. First of all, I want to thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this interview. The interview will take approximately one hour thirty minutes. During this time, you may take a break or stop the interview, if you wish to do so. Just let me know if you would like to have a break.</p> <p>You need to know that you are not obliged to answer all of the questions. For my research, I won't need a lot of personal information, however, I would like to mention your name, gender and occupation.</p> <p>Would it be alright to use your real name in my research paper or should I use an alias?</p> <p>Also, you should understand that there are no wrong answers for the questions I would ask. I want to understand your personal opinions and perceptions.</p> <p>Finally, I would like to ask if you are fine with me recording this interview?</p> <p>Before we start: do you have any questions?</p> <p>Good, then the interview starts now.</p>
<p><b>Self-concept</b></p>	<p>First, I would like to ask some questions about you.</p>



<p>Individual Self (Actual + Ideal)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please, tell a little bit about yourself <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupation</li> <li>• Lifestyle</li> <li>• Hobbies</li> <li>• Goals/ dreams/ aspirations</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Please, tell me, what do you usually wear? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What style?</li> <li>• For which occasions?</li> <li>• How do you choose what to wear (daily)?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. What do you value in clothing and why?</li> <li>4. What role do clothes play in your life?</li> <li>5. Do you have a style icon? Describe his/her style.</li> <li>6. If you could dress differently than now, how would you dress?</li> </ol>
<p>Social Self (Actual + Ideal)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. What do your family and friends say about the way you dress? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever been judged by your family and friends for your clothing? Can you please give me an example?</li> <li>• Have you ever been given complements by them for your clothing? Can you please give me an example?</li> </ul> </li> <li>8. What kind of complements about your clothes you would like to receive from them?</li> <li>9. How important is their opinion to you?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Brand preference</b></p>	<p>Now, we would move to the questions about fashion brands in particular.</p>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. T-shirts/ jeans/ jackets of which brands do you usually buy?</li> <li>11. T-shirts/ jeans/ jackets of which brands do you have in your wardrobe at the moment?</li> </ol>

	<p>12. Which of these brands you prefer over others, when it comes to casual clothes?</p>
<b>Brand Image</b>	<p>Now I would like to focus on a “Brand A” (here and further: one of the preferred brands),</p>
The experience with a brand in relation to three types of associations	<p>13. For how long are you a customer of a the “Brand A” ?</p> <p>14. Why did you start buying from “Brand A”?</p> <p>15. Can you, please, describe your first ever purchase of the “Brand A”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you thought about the purchase?</li> <li>• How have you felt about the purchase?</li> <li>• What do you remember about colors/smells or tactile sensations of your purchase?</li> </ul> <p>16. Can you, please, describe your last purchase of the “Brand A”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you thought about the purchase?</li> <li>• How have you felt about the purchase?</li> <li>• What do you remember about colors/smells or tactile sensations of your purchase?</li> </ul> <p>17. Can you, please, describe the most memorable purchase you had of a “Brand A”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you thought about the purchase?</li> <li>• How have you felt about the purchase?</li> <li>• What do you remember about colors/smells or tactile sensations of your purchase?</li> </ul> <p>18. Have you ever changed your opinion about the “Brand A”? Why? In what way?</p>
Cognitive associations	<p>19. What do you think about the “Brand A”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you like about the brand?</li> <li>• What you do not like about the brand?</li> </ul> <p>20. How would you describe the “Brand’s A” clothes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Style</li> <li>• Fit</li> <li>• Durability/ Quality</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Price</li> </ul>
Emotional associations	<p>21. Imagine making a new purchase from the “Brand A”. How would you feel?</p> <p>22. Have you ever attended any events organized by the “Brand A”? Can you please give me an example?</p> <p>23. What can you say about the customer service of the “Brand A”?</p>
Sensory associations	<p>24. What do you think about the colors of “Brand A” clothes?</p> <p>25. What do you think about fabrics of the “Brand A” clothes?</p> <p>26. What do you think about comfort of the “Brand A” clothes?</p> <p>27. What do you think about the “Brand A” stores?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smells</li> <li>• Design</li> <li>• Music</li> </ul> <p>28. What do you think about the packaging of “Brand A” clothes?</p>
<b>Self-congruity</b>	
Brand image in relation to consumer’s individual self-concept	<p>29. How do you feel when you are wearing “Brand A”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look</li> <li>• Emotions</li> <li>• Comfort</li> </ul>

<p>Brand image in relation to consumer's social self-concept</p>	<p>30. What do you think your family / friends might say when you are wearing "Brand A"?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Would you family/ friends be happy with these clothes, if you wear them? Why?</li><li>• Would you family/ friends be judgmental about these clothes, if you wear them? Why?</li></ul> <p>31. How would you feel, if your family or friends, would comment on you wearing items from a "Brand A"?</p>
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## **Appendix B. Consent form**

### **FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:**

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4 C 3063BV Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
panchenko210198@mail.ru  
06 48725667

### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a master thesis research about brand preference. The purpose of the study is to understand how consumers develop brand preference for casual wear fashion brands. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions of the interview will be related to your perceptions about yourself regarding fashion and your perceptions of one of the fashion brands. Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a video and audio 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 your name) not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by using a pseudonym or more general identification, only mentioning age and gender, etc. 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 approximately one hour.

### **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; 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.