

# **You Are Who You Wear: A Conceptual Study of the Fashion Branding Practices of H&M, Forever 21, and Urban Outfitters**

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## **Abstract**

In the winter of 2008, freshman students in the Design and Merchandising program at Drexel University were given questionnaires. Students were asked about their purchasing behavior, knowledge of supply chain initiatives, information sources, ethically marketed products, and demographic information. The respondents of this questionnaire consisted of fifty-eight females all ranging from eighteen to twenty years old. Questions asked students about aspects related to purchasing decisions. These included style, fit, color, quality, price, fabric, and brand image. The results of this survey suggested that almost half of the students considered brand image the *least* important when purchasing. However, most marketing and fashion research has shown that brand image is the *most* important. This contradiction led this researcher to explore the components and influences of branding in order to understand its importance to consumer behavior. Other results from the questionnaire revealed that the top three retailers for the students were Urban Outfitters, Forever 21, and H&M suggesting that students might actually consider brand image important when shopping. In this paper, I will attempt to investigate these three retailers considering aspects of their perceived brand image. Theories related to branding and storytelling are first discussed to reveal how they impact a retail store's brand. The major goal of this study, will be to conceptually show how branding impacts the purchasing behavior of consumers and influences what they buy at H&M, Forever 21 and Urban Outfitters.

## **Introduction**

In the past few decades, brands have influenced and shaped the way consumers live. Starting at a very young age young shoppers are predisposed to various types of fashion influences. When it comes to branding, one of the most indecisive groups is Generation-Y who were born between 1985 and 2000 (Gronbach). Like most consumers, this group realizes that clothes offer personality, confidence, representation of social standing, as well as a method for expressing individuality through styling. Therefore, in order for brands to attract this type of consumer they must focus on branding.

The undeniable imagery of fashion brands has led to their continuing success as they appeal to their consumers. Brand image primarily consists of ideas and images associated with a brand.

The company's identity is expressed through the brand image and "...is discovered by specifying meaning, intention, aspirations and mission of the (retail) brand" (Van Tongeren 39). The ideas and values behind the company are portrayed through its image so that the customer is able to relate. The value given to the brand by the consumer is the brand's equity. The brand obtains its equity through brand image as it evokes "...imagery and beliefs about the likely performance of the brand and sums up thoughts, associations, feelings, and expectations about the brand itself" (O'Shaughnessy 183). The idea behind the brand image "...is that a whole world opens up when you see, experience or even think of the brand" (Van Tongeren 54). This idea is significant to both the company and the consumer.

The most effective approach for a company to uphold their brand image is to do so through internal branding. A company's image always begins internally with employees (Fog 61). Internal branding is communicated through the store's employees as they emulate and push the brand image. The employees need to fully believe in the company and reflect the brand's image and personality which will also mirror the consumers' identity and lifestyle expectations. The brand and its employees must harmonize, in fact "...some experts today argue that, through the magic of internal branding, the entire [company] should emote in unison the spirit of the brand" (Holt 22). While the most important aspect of creating a brand image for the company is to strengthen its internal branding, the most important aspect of brand image for the consumer is its ability to convey a message. The retail brand's image is important as it creates an identity for the consumers who are fashion conscious. Brands have the ability to not only identify an individual, but also to classify them in society. Accordingly, Mark Tungate, the author of Fashion Brands: Branding Style from Armani to Zara, describes that "clothes and accessories are expressions of how we feel, how we see ourselves—and how we wish to be treated by others" (2). Fashion has the ability to identify someone as who they are, who they aspire to be, or even how they would like others to perceive them. A retail company flourishes when the consumer is able to express a desired message.

### **Emotional Branding**

In order for a brand to be successful, it must appeal to a lifestyle. The success lies in the brand's ability to remain consistent, create an atmosphere reflective of its personality, and create the idea of a lifestyle that's relative to the target consumer. Brands do not work if they do not promote a lifestyle (Klein 23). If the retail brand is able to evoke a memorable image, then the consumer should feel as though it adds to their own identity when wearing the product. Consequently, this idea directly relates to social identities which individuals seek (Power). In fact, "some brands—especially clothing brands—express our membership of cliques, schools of thought, ways of living; they express our attitudes toward authority, our mental age, our tastes and our political leanings" (Anholt 4).

A brand can emanate the consumers' aspirations efficaciously through emotional branding. According O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, "...brand images can evoke emotional bonding with the consumer, creating trust and arousing loyalty" (181). Marc Gobe, one expert on emotional branding and author of *Emotional Branding: The New Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People*, states that this concept "...provides the means and methodology for connecting products to the consumer in an emotionally profound way" (XV). He also points out that "the emotional connector is what differentiates one brand from another..." (Gobe XXVI). Brands should always connect with the consumer on an intimate level (Holt 21). Emotional branding communicates the brand essence by appealing to consumers on an emotional and personal level.

The experiential aspects of emotional branding hold the key to the consumers' hearts. A brand experience is essential in today's competitive market (Fog 20). In actuality, "the emotional aspects of that experience will dominate the image; hence the importance of ensuring that all experiences with a brand are highly positive" (O'Shaughnessy 180). The store's aura should generate a multi-sensory experience through vision, sound, touch, smell, and even taste for a memorable and hopefully lasting, pleasing image. The store's graphics, design, visual merchandising, arrangement, lighting, and music all influence and invigorate the consumers' senses so that they are able to have a positive experience.

Michel Van Tongeran in his study has cited that another researcher, Paco Underhill, suggests that the more time a shopper spends in a store the more likely that that person will make a purchase (79). If the store's atmospherics coincide with the brand image of which the targeted consumer is drawn to, then the experience of the consumer should be pleasant. If not, they will leave.

One of the most important aspects of the shopping experience is the relation of employees with the consumers. Consumers sometimes need information about the products they wish to purchase. Emotional branding strategies "seek to demonstrate emphatic understanding of customers' life circumstances, hopes, and dreams as a means of forging deep and enduring effective and relational bonds" (Thompson). This idea takes internal branding a step further as it suggests that the employees should not only empathize with the same values and outlook on life as the targeted consumer, they should also attempt to relate to the consumer on a personal level throughout their experience.

Branding is fueled by social influences including peers, celebrities, and advertisements. Social aspects have influenced and recognized the ideas of emotional branding to relate to consumers as a means of identifying through peers. Validation can be found through peers, since they are the ones who we have contacts with on a daily basis. Historically, and in today's society, young adults strive for social approval and the way in which they dress plays a major role in social acceptance. Not only do young adults look to one another for influence, but also to those who

they aspire to be. For example, young adults have always looked up to celebrities and yearned to experience their luxurious lifestyle. Consumers seem concerned about what everyone is wearing, so much that some magazines actually list exactly what each celebrity is wearing and who designed it. Luxury retailers have been thriving since “Americans spend billions of dollars on luxury brands because celebrities wear them” (Thomas 120). But now, celebrity fashion originals or knock-offs are attainable, whether the middle-class shopper buys them at designer boutiques or at lower priced yet trendy stores like H&M, Forever 21, or Urban Outfitters.

While the idea of using celebrities to endorse products has been a dominant branding idea during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one designer who made it popular was Giorgio Armani. He “...realized that the best way to reach that middle-American audience was to dress movie stars” (Thomas 115). He sought after celebrities, especially those on the red carpet. This idea of using celebrities as a form of advertisement in the fashion sector changed everything. Simply stated, celebrities sell. Rachel Zoe, a stylist, states that celebrity dressing for events is “a million dollars of free advertising” (Thomas 101). Ironically, fashion houses believed that advertising would cheapen the business decades ago.

Advertising is an appeal to branding through the principles of marketing. Magazines push high-priced, high fashion like those of Dior, Gucci, and Chanel to influence its readers’ aspirations. These opulent advertisements make the reader want to indulge herself and live like those who can afford such luxurious items. Those who aspire to dress affluently but cannot afford to do so may buy one or two designer pieces and style them with other lower priced goods in order to obtain their desired self-image.

### **Branding and Self-Image**

A perceived self-image plays a large role when purchasing products because it can visually display social standing, taste, and attitude. The youth market is motivated to express personality through fashion. Consumers prefer to buy brands that best reflect their personality because brand image ultimately reflects self-image. Emotional branding communicates who the person is, who they aspire to be, or even how they wish to be perceived. Fashion is able to encourage its wearer to be more capable and confident, as well as comfortable as they display their identity through clothes.

Other than feeling comfortable in the identity of a brand, consumers also want to feel that the brand has qualities they can aspire to, perhaps the kind of lifestyle they would like to lead. The “...demand is shifting toward products that provide us with unique experiences: products that appeal to our dreams and emotions, and add meaning to our pursuit of ‘the good life’” (Fog 19). Now, brands not only sell an identity to the consumer but tap into their aspirations and actually sell them their dreams. Diana Vreeland, former editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, wrote in her memoir,

“Very few people had ever breathed the pantry air of a house of a woman who wore the kind of dress *Vogue* used to show when I was young” (Thomas 7).

In comparison, most of the dresses shown in *Vogue* today are there not only to be envied but to be bought by the fashion forward consumer. Luxury brands are now democratizing its fashion pieces to seek the new target of middle class. Their most enticing message to the consumer is, “Buy our brand and you, too, will live a luxury life” (Thomas 9). Tom Ford, a fashion designer, believes in building “...a fantasy world for the clothes and accessories—create the life that your customers aspire to” (Thomas 87). Luxury brands know that consumers will buy into the lavish lifestyle if the image of the brand is presented in a desirable manner. Margareta van den Bosch, design director of H&M, states that “there has been a big change in the market in that people mix high and low [brand fashion]” and notes that this was never seen before (Murphy). But what is *truly* important is for a retailer to be able to communicate with consumers through storytelling.

## **Storytelling**

One aspect of storytelling and branding is the narration about how consumers use the products they purchase. Consequently, one of the most important means of communicating a brand’s story is through the consumer. The consumer of the product not only represents the brand image but also acts as a character in the story. It is also very important that “employees embody the value and culture of the brand’s story” (Fog 99). The story should be drawn out by the employees as they, too, are characters within the narration. Storytelling is also a communication tool through advertising and the media. If the story behind the brand is distinct, then it should be easily communicated.

The story should express the company’s values since it acts as the company’s foundation. A brand’s story, like any other narration, should consist of a plot, characters and a message. The message of the story becomes the emotional connector between the consumer and the brand. The story must define a clear message or else the consumer will not want to buy into the lifestyle. In fact, brands “...must tell a story that beats a path to the heart of the consumer” (Fog 38). The key component of a narrative is the point of view. A point of view communicates deeper meaning that gives the story “emotional color” (Vincent 58). The point of view of the story creates an emotional bond for both the consumers and employees. In order to activate the theme of a personal narrative, displaying or simply wearing apparel confidently is imperative. A brand “...enables us to live our narrative identity” (Vincent 88) while clothing from a distinct brand “...brings the character to life through the imagery it conveys, and the way it makes the consumer feel” (Vincent 90). The narrative experience is based on feelings and the emotional attachment conjured by relating personal identity to that of the narration of the brand. A brand’s narrative should connect with consumer’s personal narrative for the strongest connection.

Storytelling becomes crucial in marketing since it conjures emotions and feelings. In order to connect with those emotions, consumers must buy into the narrative and play a role. As a character in the story, the consumers are able to reach their aspirations. The story behind the brand defines the consumer. Realistically, “the brand story gradually becomes synonymous with how we define ourselves as individuals, and products become the symbols that we use to tell the story of ourselves” (Fog 20). Consumers will buy if they can identify and believe in the story. Storytelling is a strategic brand concept that taps into the psyche of the consumer giving them confidence and a personality that reflect the brand image.

Storytelling can also exemplify the personality of a brand. For example, one brand story is Urban Outfitters’ focus on a young artist Pamela Love, who designs jewelry and lives in New York City. She reflects a fantasy customer that Urban Outfitters is telling their consumers to emulate. Love is a young, ambitious woman who graduated from the Tisch School of Arts at New York University. Other than designing jewelry, she is also experienced in styling for fashion shoots, music videos, and films. In her spare time, she likes to paint, play the drums, travel, and search for vintage clothing. As stated on the Urban Outfitters’ blog, her essential book is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, a book that the brand proudly displays in each store location. Pamela Love’s philosophy of fashion matches that of Urban Outfitters being that she believes “fashion is the quest for perfection and style is the acceptance of one’s flaws” (“About A Girl”). Throughout Pamela Love’s personal narrative the highlighted themes include an emphasis on individualism and the pursuit of happiness through creation, not materialism. However, the consumer should remember that materialism *is* what is being sold in an altruistic manner.

Finally, another example of storytelling can be found in the H&M magalog. A magalog is a hybrid of a magazine and catalog. Within this seasonal magalog, H&M’s personality is exemplified through its lifestyle that is displayed on artful pages. The story behind H&M comes alive for the consumer as they flip through the pages and become inspired by new beauty tips, travel ideas, and, of course, the latest fashion trends. Ultimately, the personality of the storytelling behind H&M lures the consumer to buy into a lifestyle.

## **H&M**

H&M has a distinctive environment. The atmosphere is inviting and inspiring, but rather than relaxing it is fast-paced to coincide with the low-priced, high-fashion merchandise. The upbeat music plays to hasten customers along as they browse through the products in a sleek and modernized surrounding. The atmospherics of H&M is best told by Lynn Yaeger, a fashion reporter for *The Village Voice*, as she describes the big difference between the atmospheres of low-priced clothing of H&M with that of Kmart:

The Kmart on Astor Place may offer decent flannel shirts and camisoles and dollar lipsticks, but the atmosphere makes you feel

poor and pathetic: the long lines for sullen cashiers who look like they either want to slap you or burst into tears, the hideous displays, the absolute lack of anyone on the sales floor who can answer a simple question. At H&M, there are flat-screen TVs showing pulsating videos, and cheery folks with name tags willing to fuss over you, and club chairs outside the fitting rooms, and two-story-high advertising placards featuring Chloe Sevigny. (Yaeger)

After the previous statement, it is quite obvious that the experience of the store plays a crucial role in consumer behavior. The atmospherics of H&M reflect the objective of the company which is to offer fashion and quality at the best price.

Consumers buy at H&M because this brand focuses on the fashion conscious shopper. Stefan Persson, chairman of H&M, says that the retail brand must “treat fashion as if it were a perishable produce: keep it fresh, and keep it moving. That means spotting the trends even before the others do, turning ideas into fashionable clothes, and making apparel fly off the racks” (Van Tongeren 100). This particular brand is considered to be fast fashion, meaning that each store receives new inventory everyday. The inspiration behind H&M comes from street culture, movies, international travel, different cultures, and the media.

Those who aspire to the styles of H&M most likely refer to magazines such as *Vogue* and *W*; these publications actually contain H&M ads that remarkably reflect ads of high fashion. The advertisements involve established models and even celebrities; the only difference is that the price of the garment is listed to emphasize the idea that fashion does not have to be costly. In order for H&M to compete with luxury fashion they have obtained the aid of top designers as guest designers for the brand. Successfully, H&M offered lines from Karl Lagerfeld, Stella McCartney, Viktor & Rolf, and Roberto Cavalli. From the point of view of Karl Lagerfeld, H&M decides what’s in fashion as much as Chanel (Thomas 317).

Jorgen Andersson, marketing director of H&M, emphatically states that before, a fashion conscious consumer could immediately tell if apparel was cheap or not, but... “Today, it’s nearly impossible to see the difference, and that’s what we are trying to prove. We can never be as luxurious as Chanel, but luxury is more in your perception than what it says in the label. We see ourselves as competitors with everyone—Gap, Zara, but also Chanel. Why shop at Chanel if you can shop at H&M?” (Thomas 319). Collaborations with the guest designers have strengthened H&M as an international fashion house as its collections “elevate the retailer’s image among trendier clients” (Murphy). Retail brands that offer trendy garments at a low cost like H&M have been often accused of copying runway trends but Margareta van den Bosch “...bristled at the

suggestion that H&M tries to rip off the runway” (Murphy). Instead of copying designer garments, H&M emulates high fashion in their own creative way.

### **Forever 21**

Forever 21, another preferred retailer from the students’ survey that is also considered a fast fashion brand, flat out copies designers. Geren Ford, Catherine Holstein, Diane von Furstenberg, and Anna Sui are among the top designers that have been robbed of their creations by this fast fashion company. Marya Lenn Yee, a lawyer who represents Anna Sui, believes that “...Forever 21’s business model is to copy the designs of other well known designers” (Casabona). The fast fashion brand never seems to comment on any of the lawsuits filed against them by designers. In fact, it seems that Forever 21 knows exactly what they are doing because “sources familiar with the cases say the retailer’s actions and its responses to litigation seem indicative of a systematic approach to copying designers” (Casabona). Though Forever 21 is widely known for its copied creations, it still remains a favorite among teens and young adults who seek fun clothing on a budget.

Most consumers of Forever 21 primarily shop at this brand because of the very low price point, not to pick up the latest Anna Sui replica. The consumer of this brand seeks cheap but yet chic fashion. Styles of Forever 21 mostly consist of fads that the brand is able to keep up with because of its quick-turn inventory. Larry Meyer, the Vice President of the retail brand, states, “We want the customer to feel there’s always going to be something new and exciting here” (Feroohar). Also, opposite of H&M, the consumers of Forever 21 would most likely be more interested in *People*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Seventeen* magazines where the clothes of this brand can be found within the publications as ‘hot deals’.

### **Urban Outfitters**

Urban Outfitters, the most popular of the top three retailers shopped by those who took the questionnaire, possibly connects with the consumer on a personal level through the atmospherics of the store. Pompei A.D., an architecture and experiential branding firm, state that they “wanted to give young consumers the transformational experience of freedom to explore who they are, to experiment with different styles, and to feel comfortable as they define themselves,” as they designed the stores for Urban Outfitters (“Case Study: Urban”). At this eclectic store, the consumers get a sense of individuality. “The Experience” is the satisfying feeling a consumer gets at an Urban brand (McCutcheon). The employees of Urban Outfitters play a major role in the experience as they embody the values of the company through their appearance, personality, and lifestyle. They are intellectual, creative, artistic, interested in fashion and graphic arts, and, of course, they are friendly and helpful to the customer but do not push merchandise as do most sales associates in other stores.

Urban Outfitters has “...successfully catered to the demands of the most finicky customer base defined as the 18-30 year old men and women—and has remained a leading brand among this powerful and discriminating customer” (“Case Study: Urban Outfitters”). In order to stay on top of trends, a cool shopper is necessary. A cool shopper is a brand’s personal shopper that searches for “cutting-edge lifestyle” (Klein 72). Dick Hayne, the founder of Urban Outfitters, has been so successful at staying on top of whimsical tastes that appeal to the target consumer because he spends \$4 million a year on 75 hip young fashion spies who report to SoHo and East Village in New York, Laguna in California, Covent Garden in London, and Le Marais in Paris to see what’s hot and what’s not (La Franco). Another reason why Urban Outfitters’ brand image is so distinctive is because Hayne never changed the philosophy of the brand to suit the aging consumer. Instead, he took on another project, Anthropologie, which caters to those who have outgrown the styles of Urban Outfitters. This brand expansion allows the consumer to maintain its emotional bond with the kind of lifestyle that Urban Outfitters offers but in a more sophisticated, mature way.

The environment of Urban Outfitters’ is not sleek and streamlined; rather it casts an unfinished, handcrafted appearance in the store’s setting. The wall décor coincides with the tone of the seasonal catalog. Ironically, the walls also contain framed posters of classic American books, such as *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Consumers are able to relax and enjoy their time as they listen to their favorite alternative bands being played in the store. Urban Outfitters’ perceived focus is not to sell but rather give the impression that consumers should enjoy the experiential aspects of the store. Urban Outfitters’ emphasis on their experience is what differentiates this brand from any other. However, like many other retailers they are creating their particular strategy and context to gain consumer dollar.

As an alternative brand, Urban Outfitters is highly relatable to the identity of the indie subculture. Although an alternative mindset, especially indie, would never buy into a capitalist machine, they do in the case of Urban Outfitters because the brand caters to these creative individuals (Klein 83). As previously mentioned, the cool hunters realized that “...‘indie’ was the pitch on Cool Street” (Klein 77). The word ‘indie’ actually refers to any kind of independent art. The idea of DIY, do it yourself, is encouraged throughout this subculture. This alternative style attracts hip and young demographic who seek original and offbeat characteristics of arts and its products.

Urban Renewal, a line of Urban Outfitters, consists of recycled, redone, and vintage pieces to offer a one of a kind product. Marc Gobe has stated that “...Urban Outfitters allows its customers to tailor a unique and hip wardrobe without hopping from store to store” (13). Guest designers’ lines of Urban Outfitters include Play by C. Ronson and HAWK by Geren Ford, among others. These lines are designed by artists who the consumer can aspire to. Throughout

the experience at an Urban Outfitters store, it becomes apparent that the consumer is the individual, artistic type who stylizes clothes. The objective is for everyone to look different; complete outfits are not a focal point. Other than styling clothes creatively, the 'alternatives' are also intensely involved with film, music, and other popular culture (Holt 87). Urban Outfitters also has a partnership with *Nylon*, a magazine that is widely read by this alternative subculture, in order to appeal to the target consumer on multiple levels.

Urban Outfitters supports the indie music scene and actually "uses music as a vehicle to reach its customers" (Harding). This retail brand supports and funds an independent radio station called Free Yr Radio and also hosts local bands in stores, sponsored by the radio station. Urban Outfitters hosts in-store events because "one of the easiest ways to promote the development of a brand culture is to stage events and activities that allow your culture to congregate and feel a part of the brand narrative" (Vincent 207). This highly successful retail brand also involves its customers on a personal level online with its blog and interactive website. The blog contains topics such as art, music, film, fashion, books, and photography and also allows a search for events according to locations and current events occurring in popular culture. It also brings attention to other designers (not even offered by the retail brand), as well as stylists and fashion photographers to give the consumer fashion inspirations. Not only does the website contain a blog, but playlists, projects, shopping, and contests so that the consumer may experience all aspects of the lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to show how a retailer's brand image methods as related to various types of fashion marketing could entice the consumer to not only believe in a product, but also the fantasy or retailer's identity for the product through merchandising. In conjunction with brand image, emotional branding and storytelling are imperative to create a bond with the consumer while also providing a narrative context that creates a perceived lifestyle. These merchandising tools greatly impact the success of a brand as retailers lure customers into their stores. Future studies might include a further examination of consumers' aspirational ideals surrounding shopping behavior and a deeper investigation of the retailers H&M, Forever 21, and Urban Outfitters. However, it is quite clear to see that branding *does* impact a consumer's decision to buy, whether or not the Generation Y shopper wants to admit it or not.

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