

Lydia Phillip
Manager of Training & Communications
Black Business Initiative

Rosemary Polegato
Department of Commerce/RJCBS
Mount Allison University

OMG THAT'S SO #WHITEGIRL: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON BRAND AVERSION

Understanding brand aversion may be as important, or even more important, than understanding brand loyalty. This study examines consumers' self-identity with a dissociative reference group and how that relationship may lead to brand aversion, negative emotions, and brand avoidance behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

Young consumers, especially Millennials (Knittel, Beurer and Berndt, 2016), are exposed to brand-related stimuli produced by the company itself or through external resources. Although products and services may be of high quality and may not have negative product or service attributes, a consumer may form negative emotions toward a brand (Romani, Grappi and Dalli, 2012) based solely on stimuli created by external sources, such as blogs, consumer reviews, and social media (Romani *et al.*, 2012). With information spread widely on social media, trends can quickly become Internet phenomena and create negative perceptions of brands (Knittel *et al.*, 2016), as in the case of the 'white girl' stereotype and the associated brands (Caratas, 2015). A brand stereotype can have negative effects for a company if consumers do not identify with the brand. To protect their image, consumers may actively dissociate themselves from particular brands. Consumers may also develop strong, negative emotions toward a brand leading to brand aversion and brand avoidance behaviours.

There is growing interest in brand aversion and why consumers actively decide to not interact with certain brands. The purpose of this research is to study consumers' self-identity with a dissociative reference group and how that relationship may lead to brand aversion, negative emotions, and brand avoidance behaviours. The context is consumer attachment and aversion to one brand associated with a social media trend that has exploded in recent years: *Starbucks*, a well-known brand, and the 'white girl' stereotype or #WhiteGirl (Caratas, 2015).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Brand Personality

Brands have evolved over the years and appear to have a more complex role in consumer-brand relationships (Romani, Sadeh and Dalli, 2009). Brands are perceived to be tools that communicate a relationship between the brand and the individual, as well as provide information about the individual's social groups (Bannister and Hogg, 2004). Consumers may see brands in an active role of carrying out actions, representing collective ideologies and values. Consumers see the company and the brand as one entity. Brand personality develops when a brand is personified and lent humanlike traits (Mathews, 2015). Consider the question, "Can you believe what *Starbucks* just did?" (Arrgawal, 2004). Romani *et al.* (2009) suggested that brands are 'agents' when they are given personality traits and characteristics that are then passed on to the user. A brand with a strong personality can affect the owner of the brand, as they can be perceived to have the same characteristics of the brand (Fennis and Pruyn, 2007).

Brands and the 'Self'

Consumers are motivated to maintain a positive image. One way that consumers regulate their positive self-evaluations is by avoiding brands that are associated with negative reference groups. By expressing negative opinions of certain brands and products, consumers attempt to protect their self-identity by distancing themselves from specific social groups (White and Dahl, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2009b). If consumers fear that certain brands feature an 'undesired self,' they are driven toward anti-consumption (Lee *et al.*, 2009b). Indeed, instead of pursuing products that will create a positive self-image, consumers more readily avoid brands that are incongruent with their identity (Bannister and Hogg, 2004; White and Dahl, 2007). In other words, consumers are more motivated to avoid brands that are identified with negative reference groups than to pursue brands that would be identified with positive reference groups (Bannister and Hogg, 2004).

Brands and Emotions

Positive emotions toward brands have been well studied, but there is limited research on negative emotions toward brands (Romani *et al.*, 2009; 2012). Consumers express negative emotions toward brands with which they do not identify or which are connected to an undesirable consumer stereotype (Romani *et al.*, 2009; 2012). When consumers experience negative emotions toward a brand, they distance themselves from the brand (Romani *et al.*, 2009). Romani *et al.* (2009; 2012) identified six key negative emotions: anger, dislike, sadness, worry, embarrassment, and discontent. Negative emotions toward brands, such as dislike and anger, are more commonly experienced than other emotions, such as fear, disappointment, and embarrassment (Romani *et al.*, 2009; Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė, 2015).

Negative emotions can have a direct relationship with brand avoidance behaviours (Romani *et al.*, 2009; 2012). Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė (2015) found that dislike and anger were a result of consumers feeling that a brand was not symbolically congruent to them and that the brand's ideologies did not align with their own. The stronger the incongruence and incompatibility, the stronger the emotions of dislike and anger, and the stronger the brand-related stimuli, the stronger the negative emotions toward the brand, that then increased intent to avoid the brand.

Dissociative Reference Groups

Bannister and Hogg (2004) found that avoidance groups motivate consumers to reject certain brands. Englis and Solomon (1995, as cited in White and Dahl, 2007) identified a group that an individual is greatly motivated to be dissociated from, and feels strongly disconnected from, as a dissociative reference group. When consumers reflect on their undesired selves, they have a concrete idea of what that is, whereas consumers often stereotype dissociative reference groups (Lee, Conroy and Motion, 2009a). If a consumer perceives the stereotypical brand user to have undesirable characteristics, they can experience strong negative emotions toward the brand (Romani *et al.*, 2009). Further, Lee *et al.* (2009a) found that brand avoidance due to dissociative reference groups may be caused entirely by the stereotype of the brand's typical consumer. When consumers feel that a brand is symbolic of a dissociative reference group, they experience a weak connection to that brand and more negative emotions (White and Dahl, 2007). Negative emotions toward the brands are not mitigated by high-quality products and service, but stem from the stimuli related to the brand (Romani *et al.*, 2012; White and Dahl, 2007).

Social media creates symbols of brands by linking them to certain groups (White and Dahl, 2007). Social media has made it easier for consumers to communicate negatively about brands to a widespread audience. Negative evaluations of brands are communicated more frequently than positive evaluations (Knittel *et al.*, 2016). Negative brand-focused stimuli can shift consumers' perception of the brand (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel, 2006). For example, social media has created the 'white girl' stereotype through #WhiteGirl. Urban Dictionary defines a 'white girl' as a female who conforms to her surroundings and blindly follows social trends. She often drinks *Starbucks* while wearing *Ugg* boots in August and posts pictures of herself on social media sites every single day ("Basic White Girl", 2013). A 'white girl' is perceived as mainstream, inauthentic, conceited, and not very intelligent. The 'white girl' stereotype is assessed on multiple factors including brand preferences, activity on social media platforms, hashtags, and even phrases that are commonly used (Caratas, 2015). The 'white girl' stereotype has expanded to include people of all genders and ethnicities who consume the stereotypical brands and products.

Brand Aversion and Brand Avoidance

Fournier's (1998) pioneer anthropomorphic view is the conceptual basis for consumer and brand relationships and how it is understood today. Recently, Park, Eisingerich, and Park (2013) validated a scale to measure consumers' Brand Attachment-Aversion, shaping how consumer-brand relationships are measured and understood. Brand avoidance is defined as the "phenomenon whereby consumers deliberately choose to keep away from or to reject a brand" (Lee *et al.*, 2009a, p. 422). Brand avoidance only occurs when a consumer has the financial means to afford a brand's products, but rejects the brand (Lee *et al.*, 2009a; Bannister and Hogg, 2004). Further, brand avoidance occurs when consumers stay away from a brand; and brand aversion is when consumers turn away from a brand (Hogg, Bannister and Stephenson, 2009). It is imperative to understand why consumers avoid certain brands and products; brand avoidance may be even more important than understanding consumers' loyalty to brands (Lee *et al.*, 2009a).

One type of brand avoidance is identity brand avoidance which develops when a brand's image does not align with the consumer's self-identity; if a brand is perceived to have negative attributes or values, consumers will practice brand avoidance behaviours so as not to be associated with the brand's characteristics (Lee *et al.*, 2009b). Identity brand avoidance is relevant to Millennial consumers as they are easily able to identify brands to avoid (Lee *et al.*, 2009b; Knittel *et al.*, 2016). This large cohort can influence the success or failure of some brands (Knittel *et al.*, 2016).

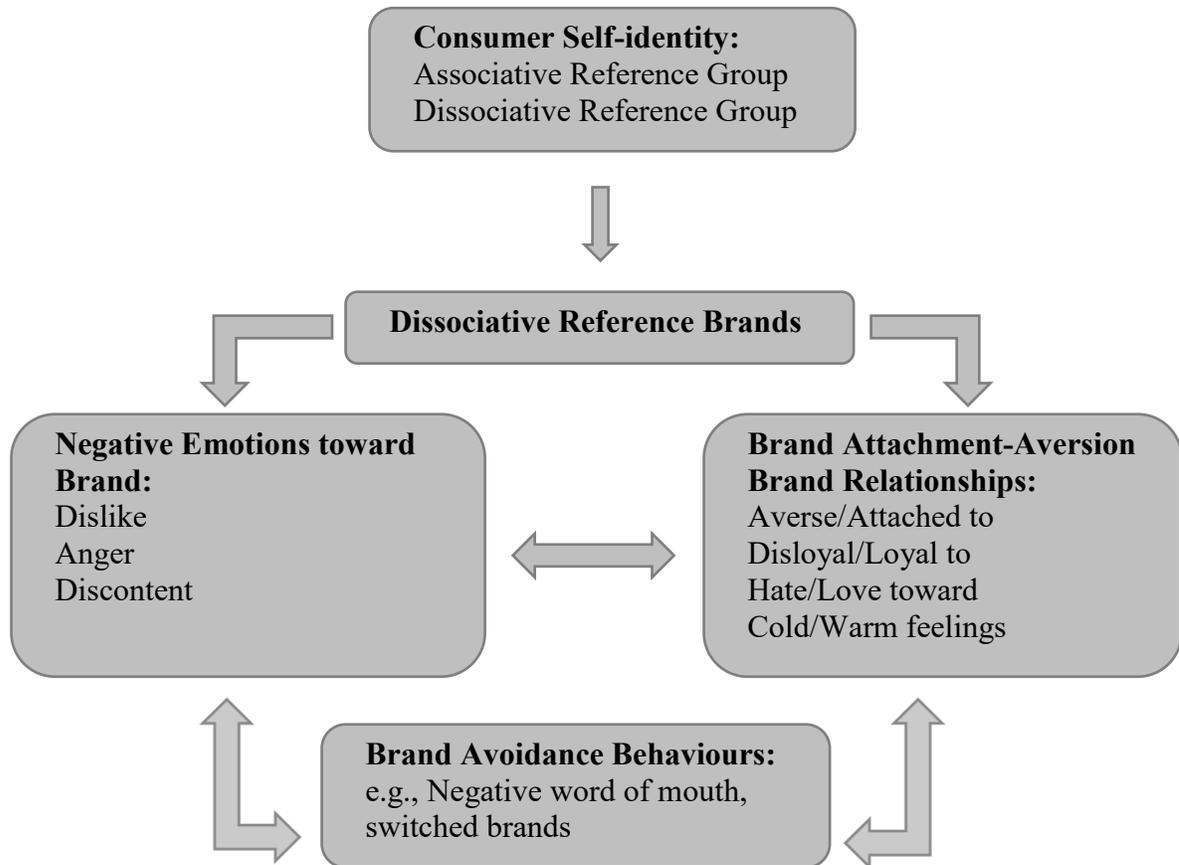
Although brands are widely consumed, consumers strive to feel a sense of individuality. One of the sub-themes of identity brand avoidance is deindividuation (Lee *et al.*, 2009b). Symbolic brand meaning that eradicates consumer individuality is what leads to deindividuation brand avoidance. Deindividuation brand avoidance occurs when consumers avoid mainstream brands to preserve their sense of individuality (Lee *et al.*, 2009b). To protect their identity and sense of individuality, Lee *et al.* (2009b) and Thompson *et al.* (2006) found that many consumers avoid brands that they consider to be mainstream and therefore can be perceived as inauthentic. Inauthenticity and loss of individuality is a theme for the brands implicated in #WhiteGirl. For example, *Starbucks*, one of the brands associated with #WhiteGirl, has become widely consumed by Millennials; this popularity can essentially be detrimental to the brand (Thompson *et al.*, 2006).

In summary, the review of the literature demonstrates that brand avoidance includes behaviours in which a consumer consciously decides to not consume specific brands and can also include behaviours that attempt to stop others from consuming the brands. Brand avoidance behaviours stem from a consumer's self-identity and rejection of a dissociative reference group. The personification of a brand creates a more complex consumer-brand relationship. A brand's personality can be affected negatively by social media and dissociative reference groups because a brand becomes a symbol of a dissociative reference group. When a consumer views a brand's personality to be incongruent with their own or as representing a dissociative reference group, they form negative emotions and are motivated to avoid that brand.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 1 depicts the Conceptual Model of the Relationship between Dissociative Reference Groups and Brand Avoidance Behaviours. A consumer may self-identity with a reference group – referred to as an *Associative Reference Group* - or not – referred to as a *Dissociative Reference Group*. *Dissociative Reference Brands* are multiple brands that are associated with negative reference groups, or with negative consumer stereotypes. *Brand Attachment-Aversion* is a consumer's relationship with a brand and their aversion or attachment to the *Dissociative Reference Brands* (Park *et al.*, 2013). *Negative emotions* toward brands exist and may be commonly felt by consumers (Romani *et al.*, 2012). *Brand avoidance behaviours* are actions carried out by consumers to actively avoid brands through methods such as brand switching and negative word of mouth. Based on the review of the literature, three hypotheses are proposed.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Relationship between Dissociative Reference Groups and Brand Avoidance Behaviours



Research Hypotheses

The increasing complexity of brands influences consumer-brand relationships. A brand can take on personality traits of consumers that use the brand (Maehle and Shneor, 2010). If brand personality traits, values, or attributes are negative, the result can be a negative relationship with the brand (Fennis and Pruyn, 2007; Romani *et al.*, 2009). Consumers are averse to brands that represent negative reference groups and may attempt to distance themselves from these brands (White and Dahl, 2007). Due to the personification of brands, they have active roles in consumer-brand relationships. A negative brand personality due to *Dissociative Reference Groups* leads to higher aversion to those brands (White and Dahl, 2007). The aversion may be toward individual brands or toward a constellation of brands. Thus,

Hypothesis #1: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to brand aversion.

Romani *et al.* (2009; 2012) and Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė (2015) found that there are specific *negative emotions* evoked by *Dissociative Reference Brands*, for example dislike, anger, and discontent. Incongruent self-identity and brand personality can lead to *negative emotions* toward a brand. If a brand is perceived as representative or symbolic of an undesirable social group or stereotypical consumer, more *negative emotions* are expressed toward the brand (Romani *et al.*, 2009; 2012). It is easier to foster more *negative emotions* toward brands that are interacted with frequently than brands that are non-essential (Romani *et al.*, 2012). Due to a *Dissociative Reference Group*, a consumer may never purchase an associated brand, but may still foster negative feelings toward the brand (Romani *et al.*, 2009; 2012). Thus,

Hypothesis #2: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to negative emotions toward Dissociative Reference Brands.

Consumers practice *brand avoidance behaviours* when brands are associated with negative attributes and negative reference groups (Bannister and Hogg, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2009b). *Dissociative Reference Groups* are one of the main contributors to *brand avoidance behaviours*. *Dissociative Reference Brands*, due to the quick uptake of the brand's products, can be seen as mainstream and inauthentic. Consumers practice *brand avoidance behaviours* to protect their sense of individuality (Lee *et al.*, 2009b). Popularity and inauthenticity is a theme for *Dissociative Reference Brands*, which leads to brand avoidance behaviours (Thompson *et al.*, 2006). *Dissociative Reference Brands*, as symbols of negative 'out-groups', inauthenticity, and incongruent consumer self-identity, lead to *brand avoidance behaviours* (Lee *et al.*, 2009b; Hogg and Bannister, 2004; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). Thus,

Hypothesis #3: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to brand avoidance behaviours.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Instruments

After research ethics approval, quantitative data were collected with a pretested *Survey Monkey* questionnaire used for a larger study of brand aversion. The sample was 800 students of all genders, programs of study, and years of study selected randomly at a small university. Participants had the option to submit their e-mail addresses for a draw for \$50. Qualitative information was obtained through in-depth interviews with two female, Caucasian participants who received a \$10 gift card. Two questions were asked after the *lifestyle description* (described in the next section) was read: (1) "Have you heard of #WhiteGirl?", (1a) "If no, how does the above description make you feel?", (1b) "If yes, please describe your thoughts and feelings about it." and (2) "Of the mentioned brands, what are your thoughts and feelings toward these brands?"

Five constructs in the conceptual model (Figure 1) were operationalized:

1. Dissociative/Associative Reference Groups/Brands. To determine whether participants identified brand consumption constellations as *Dissociative Reference Brands*, they first responded to the following question: "Please indicate which description is most like you. (1) 'I have purchased a brand because it was associated with something I liked', (2) 'I have avoided or

not purchased a brand because it was associated with something I did not like,' and (3) 'Both statements are true for me.'" Participants then read a narrative, referred to as a *lifestyle description*, that included a brand consumption constellation associated with the 'white girl' stereotype, but which did not explicitly name the stereotype:

Their favourite study spot or hangout is the local *Starbucks*. They are drinking *Frappuccinos* – since it's no longer Fall and *PSL* season. They browse through *Instagram* and *snapchat* with the latest *iPhone*. (Of course, they only buy *Apple* products.) They are wearing *Lululemon* leggings or *PINK* yoga pants. Depending on the weather, they wear *Canada Goose* or a *North Face* jacket with *Uggs* or *Hunters*.

Then, participants responded to eight questions. First was an open-ended question: "What words come to mind when you read the above *lifestyle description*?" Self-identity to the 'white girl' stereotype *lifestyle description* was measured with seven questions on a scale that ranged from (1) = "Not at all" to (11) = "Completely": (1) "To what extent does the lifestyle description express who you are as a person?" and (2) "To what extent does the lifestyle description represent who you want to be?" (from Park *et al.*, 2013). Five items were added: (3) "To what extent does the lifestyle description represent a social group that you want to be part of?", (4) "To what extent does the above lifestyle description represent a social group that you are part of?", (5) "To what extent do you identify with the lifestyle description?", (6) "To what extent do you feel that the lifestyle description represents your personality and values?," and (7) "To what extent do you feel positively about the lifestyle description?" The purpose of the seven questions was to measure a participant's self-identity with the *lifestyle description* to determine whether #WhiteGirl was a *Dissociative Reference Group* for that individual. If a participant evaluated #WhiteGirl as a *Dissociative Reference Group*, the associated brands were considered *Dissociative Reference Brands*. (*Starbucks* is potentially a *Dissociative Reference Brands* in this study.)

2. Brand Attachment-Aversion (to *Dissociative Reference Brands*). *Brand Attachment-Aversion* has two dimensions: brand-self distance and brand prominence (Park *et al.*, 2013). Brand-self distance was measured on an 11-point scale: (1) = "*Starbucks* is far away from me and who I am" to (11) = "*Starbucks* is very close to me and who I am" and (1) = "I am personally disconnected from *Starbucks*" to (11) = "I am personally connected to *Starbucks*." Brand prominence was measured with an 11-point scale, (1) = "Not at all" to (11) = "Completely": "To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward *Starbucks* often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?" and (2) "To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward *Starbucks* come to mind so naturally and instantly that you don't have much control over them?"

3. Brand Relationships. To determine how consumers interacted with the *Dissociative Reference Brands*, participants were presented with the four most pertinent of twelve brand relationship measures (Park *et al.*, 2013). Participants were presented with the *Starbucks* brand and asked to evaluate their relationship to the brand on a scale of -4 (most negative relationship) to (0) (indifference) to 4 (most positive relationship: Averse/Attached to; Disloyal/Loyal to; Hate/Love toward; and Cold/Warm feelings).

4. Negative Emotions (toward *Dissociative Reference Brands*). Participants evaluated whether three of six negative emotions (Romani *et al.*, 2012) were evoked towards *Starbucks* using a 7-point scale ranging from (1) = “Not at all” to (7) = “Very much”: anger, dislike, and discontent.

5. Brand Avoidance Behaviours. Participants reported the extent to which they carried out eight brand avoidance behaviours (adapted from Bougie, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2003) using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) = “Strongly disagree” to (7) = “Strongly agree, for example, “I switched from *Starbucks* to a competing brand.”

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Of the 800 students contacted, 102 participants (12.8%) provided usable responses. The majority of participants (75.5%) were between the ages of 19 and 22; 16.7% were 17 or 18 years old. Overall, the distribution in each year of study reflected the student body. The majority were completing a BA (51%) or BSc (34.3 %) degree; there was underrepresentation of students in professional programs. Female participants were overrepresented: 67.6% vs. 57% in the student body. A large majority (82.4%) of participants identified as Caucasian, white, or as a non-visible minority. Only three (2.9%) participants identified themselves as a member of a visible minority. Finally, a large majority (71.8%) reported that they both purchased products because they liked what the brand was associated with and avoided products because they did not like something that the brand was associated with. Only four (3.9%) participants reported that they have avoided and have not purchased a brand because it was associated with something they did not like.

The words that most frequently came to mind when participants read the ‘#WhiteGirl’ *lifestyle description* were synonymous with ‘wealth’ (rich, wealthy, privilege, entitled, and social class) at 39 times (38.2% of participants) (Table 1). ‘White girl(s)’ was mentioned by 31 participants (30.4%). A fifth (21.6%) of participants used synonyms for ‘girl’ (woman, female) without mentioning the race of the person in the *lifestyle description* and nine participants (8.8%) mentioned the race as either ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian.’ About a quarter of participants used negative adjectives, such as ‘dumb’, ‘annoying’, and ‘superficial’ (27.5%), as well as ‘basic’ (23.5%), a noteworthy adjective, as it is a degrading term, considered an insult commonly used by Millennials that usually refers to the #WhiteGirl stereotype. About one-fifth mentioned ‘unoriginal/conform(ing)/trendy/cliche’ (18.6%) and ‘young/teenager’ (18.6%). Also, mentioned were ‘typical’ or ‘stereotypical’ (14.7%), and words that drew attention to the brands mentioned in the *lifestyle description* or to the notion of ‘brands’ and ‘branding’ (10.8%). Thus, based on the words mentioned, we can conclude that the ‘white girl’ stereotype is well known and widely understood among Millennials and is a *Dissociative Reference Group* for some consumers.

The #WhiteGirl stereotype is well recognized and prominent within the Millennial cohort. Indeed, participants in the in-depth interviews insinuated larger social issues with gender and race implicated in #WhiteGirl:

There’s no equivalent of a man’s stereotype, it demotes women’s interests. If I happen to like Starbucks coffee, I don’t want to be labeled as a ‘white girl.’ – (Interviewee 1).

I've heard of the concept, but not the hashtag. The 'white girl' stereotype is just attacking our affinity for weird fashion trends and specialty coffee, whereas most stereotypes about other ethnicities are negative. For example, some stereotypes of other races are that they are criminals or unintelligent. But for 'white girls', it's Pumpkin Spice Lattes and Uggs. It's privileged that even "bad" stereotypes still allow you to have jobs and succeed in life. (Interviewee 2).

Table 1: Words used for the “White Girl” Lifestyle description (n=102)

Words	Frequency*	Percent (%)
Rich/Wealthy/Privilege/ Expensive/Entitled/Social class	39	38.2
White girl(s)	31	30.4
Girl/ Female/ Woman	22	21.6
White/Caucasian	9	8.8
Negative adjectives	28	27.5
Basic	24	23.5
Unoriginal/Conform(ing)/ Trendy/Cliché	19	18.6
Young/Teenager	19	18.6
Typical/Stereotypical	15	14.7
Brand(s)	11	10.8

Frequency is based on the number of participants who mentioned specific words. Therefore, the percentage adds up to more than 100%.

This insight suggests moral brand avoidance alongside identity brand avoidance. Based on the brands in the ‘white girl’ *lifestyle description*, participants were able to determine a variety of different factors about the individual in the description based on the perceived stereotype – socioeconomic status, intelligence, ethnicity, and age. Congruent with Bannister and Hogg’s (2004) research, the brands acted as symbols and provided participants with ideas about the individual. These findings demonstrate the ability of brands to act as agents that fit a consumer into a stereotyped category based on behavioural traits and attitudes (Romani *et al.*, 2009). The words that came to mind when participants read the *lifestyle description* were remarkably consistent and appear to hold little social desirability. For some participants, the consumer in the *lifestyle description* represents a *Dissociative Reference Group*. Congruent with White and Dahl’s (2007) findings, the high quality and the popularity of *Starbucks* did not mitigate the association with a negative reference group. Thus, for the purpose of this study, *Starbucks* is justifiably considered a *Dissociative Reference Brand* for some consumers.

Hypothesis #1: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to brand aversion.

Using Park *et al.*'s (2013) Attachment-Aversion scale, means were calculated to get a total average 'Brand Aversion-Attachment Score' for *Starbucks* as a *Dissociative Reference Brand*, as well as for the separate dimensions of brand-self distance and brand prominence (Table 2). Overall, there was fairly strong *brand aversion* towards *Starbucks* ($M = 3.7, SD = 3.0$). With respect to brand-self distance, participants felt personally disconnected from the *Starbucks* brand and far from who they were. With respect to brand prominence, thoughts of the brand did not come to mind spontaneously nor did thoughts and feelings about the brand come to mind naturally and instantly. Further, over the four *Brand Relationships* for *Starbucks* as a *Dissociative Reference Brand*, the total average means ($M < .1, SD = 2.0$) show clear indifference toward the brand which is reflected in the means for the four *Brand Relationships* measured (Table 3). In summary, there is high brand aversion towards *Starbucks* as a *Dissociative Reference Brand* and an indifference towards the brand. Thus, Hypothesis #1 is partially supported.

Table 2: Brand Attachment-Aversion to Dissociative Reference Brand

Brand Attachment-aversion	Dissociative Reference Brand: Starbucks (Means & Standard Deviations; n=102)
Brand-self distance	
Who I am	M = 4.0; SD = 2.8
Connection to brand	M = 3.4; SD = 2.8
Brand prominence	
Spontaneity	M = 3.8; SD = 2.9
Naturally and instantly	M = 3.5; SD = 3.1
Total	M = 3.7; SD = 3.0

Scales: Brand-self distance: (1) = "This brand is far away from (1)/very close to (11) me and who I am" and "I am personally disconnected (1)/connected (11) to this brand." Brand prominence: "To what extent are your thoughts and feelings towards this brand often spontaneous, coming to mind seemingly on their own?/come to mind so naturally and instantly that you don't have much control over them?" (1) = Not at all to (11) Completely.

High *Brand Aversion* towards *Starbucks* is characteristic of a *Dissociative Reference Group* (Bannister and Hogg, 2004). Congruent with White and Dahl's (2007) findings, the symbolism of a *Dissociative Reference Group*, the 'white girl' stereotype, resulted in a weak connection with *Starbucks*. Consumers believe that they acquire the traits and personality that brands symbolize (Maehle and Schneor, 2010). Overall, *Starbucks* as a brand associated with the 'white girl' stereotype is recognized as symbolic of a group with which they do not identify. *Starbucks*, a *Dissociative Reference Brand* in this study, may be perceived as having little social value and may be less likely to be consumed (Maehle and Shneor, 2010).

Unexpectedly given high brand aversion toward *Starbucks*, there was an indifferent relationship towards the brand. This result may be due to a social desirability bias with respect to the 'white

girl' *lifestyle description* and self-identity. If the societal consensus of #WhiteGirl is perceived to be negative, the orientation towards the *Brand Attachment-Aversion* questions could have been held with prejudice in order for the participant to be viewed more favourably. The concurrence of brand aversion and indifference needs further study.

Table 3: Relationships with Dissociative Reference Brand

Brand relationships	Dissociative Reference Brand: Starbucks (Means & Standard Deviations)
Averse/Attached to (n = 101)	M = .1; SD = 2.1
Disloyal/Loyal to (n = 102)	M = .2; SD = 2.0
Hate/Love toward (n = 99)	M = -.6; SD = 2.2
Cold/Warm feelings (n = 101)	M = .4; SD = 1.8
Total	M < .1; SD = 2.0

Scale: (-4) most negative relationship to (0) Indifference to (+4) most positive relationship.

Hypothesis #2: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to negative emotions toward Dissociative Reference Brands.

To test Hypothesis #2, the responses to the seven questions about self-identity and association/dissociation with the #WhiteGirl *lifestyle description* were first added to determine a total 'self-identification score.' The scores could range from (7) = "Not at all self-identified with #WhiteGirl" to (77) = "Completely self-identified with #WhiteGirl." The actual scores ranged from 7 to 63, with a mean of 20.0. Participants were divided into two groups for comparison. Scores less than or equal to 20 were categorised as identifying less with the *lifestyle description* and are referred to as the *Dissociative Reference Group* (DRG) and scores above 20 were categorised as identifying more with the *lifestyle description* and referred to as the *Associative Reference Group* (ARG), with respect to #WhiteGirl.

Independent sample t-tests (Table 4) were conducted to examine whether members of the DRG compared to the ARG differed in *negative emotions* towards Starbucks as a *Dissociative Reference Brand*. Overall, the means for the *negative emotions* – anger, dislike, and discontent – are low. However, DRGs felt significantly greater dislike for, ($M = 2.7, SD = 1.7$), $t(80.0) = 2.8, p = .01$, and greater discontent with, ($M = 2.8, SD = 1.8$), $t(76) = 3.0, p = .00$, Starbucks than ARGs. Thus, Hypothesis #2 is supported.

Consistent with Romani *et al.*'s (2009; 2012) findings and the words used to describe the 'white girl' *lifestyle description* (Table 1), those who identify less with the *lifestyle description*, that is the DRGs, experienced greater *negative emotions*. When brands profile a consumer with undesirable traits and when the stereotypical brand user has negative characteristics, consumers can experience *negative emotions* toward the brands (Romani *et al.*, 2009). Similar to White and Dahl's (2007)

study, one brand (*Starbucks*) that was symbolic of the ‘white girl’ stereotype evoked *negative emotions*. Consistent with Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė’s (2015) findings, the more incompatible and incongruent the reference group is with a consumer’s ‘ideal self,’ the stronger the *negative emotions*.

Table 4: Comparison of Negative Emotions Toward Starbucks between the Dissociative Reference Group (DRG) and Associative Reference Group (ARG)

Negative emotions	Mean	SD	t-statistic	df	p-value
Anger					
DRG (n= 58)	2.3	1.8			
ARG (n= 32)	2.0	1.6	.8	88	.42
Dislike					
DRG (n= 58)	2.7	1.7			
ARG (n= 32)	1.8	1.3	2.8	80	.01
Discontent					
DRG (n= 58)	2.8	1.8			
ARG (n= 32)	1.8	1.5	3.0	76	.00

Participants indicated the extent to which they felt each emotion toward the brand from (1) = Not at all to (7) = Very much. DRGs identified less, and ARGs identified more, with the #WhiteGirl lifestyle description.

Participants experienced moderate levels of *negative emotions* toward *Starbucks*, an everyday brand (Romani *et al.*, 2012). Romani *et al.* (2009) and Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė (2015) found that dislike and anger were the most common *negative emotions* directed toward brands; this study found dislike and discontent to be the *negative emotions* that distinguished between DRGs and ARGs, perhaps due to age and cultural differences in the sample.

Hypothesis #3: Dissociative Reference Groups lead to brand avoidance behaviours.

Independent t-tests (Table 5) showed that DRGs were more likely to agree than ARGs that they carried out four brand avoidance behaviours towards *Starbucks*: negative word of mouth ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.0$), $t(83) = 2.5$, $p = .01$; discouraging friends and family from buying *Starbucks* ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.0$), $t(78) = 3.8$, $p = .00$; recommending people not to buy *Starbucks* ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.9$), $t(81) = 2.2$, $p = .03$; and discontinuing buying *Starbucks* products ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.2$), $t(67) = 2.0$, $p = .05$. There was also a statistically significant difference between DRGs ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.0$) and ARGs ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 2.2$) in continuing to own and to purchase *Starbucks* products, $t(75) = -3.8$, $p = .00$. In summary, DRGs differed significantly from ARGs in most brand avoidance behaviours for *Starbucks*. Overall, Hypothesis #3 is supported.

The means for the brand avoidance behaviours engaged in by DRGs were consistently higher than they were for ARGs. Lee *et al.* (2009b) found that consumers avoid brands to protect their self-image and avoid brands that cause them a loss of individuality. Participants who described the ‘white girl’ *lifestyle description* as negative appear to practice more brand avoidance behaviours – which is congruent with Lee *et al.*’s (2009b) findings. This is also similar to Bannister and Hogg’s (2004) finding that avoidance groups are motivation for consumers to avoid certain brands. White and Dahl (2007) found that negative word of mouth is a way for consumers to distance themselves from certain groups of people, a finding replicated in this study as DRGs had significantly higher negative word of mouth than ARGs. DRGs have lower self-identification scores than ARGs, which suggests that brand avoidance behaviours are a way in which DRGs attempt to protect their self

Table 5: Comparison of Brand Avoidance Behaviours between Dissociative Reference Group (DRG) and Associative Reference Group (ARG)*

Brand Avoidance Behaviours	Mean	SD	t-statistic	df	p-value
I have said negative things about.					
DRG (n= 55)	3.9	2.0			
ARG (n= 30)	2.8	1.9	2.5	83	.01
I discourage friends and family from buying.					
DRG (n= 53)	2.8	2.0			
ARG (n= 30)	1.6	.9	3.8	78	.00
I recommend not to buy.					
DRG (n= 53)	3.0	1.9			
ARG (n= 30)	2.1	1.7	2.2	81	.03
I buy less frequently.					
DRG (n= 38)	4.2	2.3			
ARG (n= 29)	3.9	2.3	.6	65	.54
I switched brands.					
DRG (n= 32)	3.1	2.4			
ARG (n= 28)	3.0	2.1	.1	58	.92
I stopped buying.					
DRG (n= 40)	2.9	2.2			
ARG (n= 29)	2.0	1.7	2.0	67	.05
I owned or purchased but will not in the future.					
DRG (n= 41)	2.7	2.0			
ARG (n= 31)	2.4	1.8	.7	70	.46
I own or purchase and will continue to do so.					
DRG (n= 46)	2.9	2.0			
ARG (n= 31)	4.7	2.2	-3.8	75	.00

Scale: (1) = Strongly Disagree to (7) = Strongly Agree. DRGs identified less, and ARGs identified more, with the #WhiteGirl *lifestyle description*.

identity. However, the means for the DRGs are also mid-range (or moderate) at best, indicating that their brand avoidance is not overwhelming (though the effect on market share may be significant). This seeming ambiguity may be explained by the fact that a large majority (71.8%) of participants reported that they both purchased products because they liked what the brand was associated with and avoided products because they did not like something that the brand was associated with. Brand loyalty and brand aversion may co-exist for the same brand, in this case, *Starbucks*.

I definitely avoid certain behaviours and some of the brands on the list. There's [sic] definitely things that I avoid so that I won't be labeled a 'white girl.' (Interviewee 1).

Further Discussion

The data support the claim that members dissociated from reference groups practice brand avoidance behaviours towards the associated brands. Overall, the results support the Conceptual Model (Figure 1). Consumer self-identity was the determinant of #WhiteGirl being a *Dissociative Reference Group* or not. As expected, *Dissociative Reference Groups* and the implicated brands were found to lead to *negative emotions*. *Dissociative Reference Groups* led to brand aversion and indifference in brand relationships. Consumers who identified with the 'white girl' stereotype did not perceive the reference group to be a dissociative one; therefore, they were more likely to continue brand ownership and purchase behaviours.

Brand aversion to *Starbucks* led to moderately strong engagement in brand avoidance behaviours; for example, DRGs still buy the brand, just less so than ARGs, which could be due to the brand being a well-established brand. Consumers could also be practicing brand avoidance behaviours due to the accessibility of substitute brands in markets where *Starbucks* is not available. Still some brand avoidance behaviours seem to be due to high (negative) association with #WhiteGirl.

In summary, the results indicate the importance of understanding the role of consumers' self-identity in consumer-brand relationships. Previous research on brand avoidance also demonstrates the importance of the relationships among a consumer's identity, a brand's identity, and a dissociative reference group. Park *et al.*'s (2013) Attachment-Aversion scale was able to capture self-identity with a brand. In congruence with previous research, it was found that participants' self-evaluation of their connection and identification with the brand was the best predictor of brand avoidance behaviours. The research methodology allowed for the study and analysis of identity brand avoidance which is most relevant to the #WhiteGirl stereotype.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to study consumers' self-identity with a *Dissociative Reference Group* and how that relationship may lead to brand aversion, negative emotions, and brand avoidance behaviours. The hypotheses testing revealed that consumers who identify less with a reference group, compared to those who identify more strongly with the reference group, will experience *negative emotions* toward a *Dissociative Reference Brand* and will engage, at least

moderately, in brand avoidance behaviours. Identification with Dissociative Reference Groups – through the dynamics of *brand aversion* and *negative emotions* towards the brand – ultimately lead to brand avoidance behaviours. *Brand relationships*, however, were found to be indifferent and the brand avoidance behaviours were not as strong as expected. Nevertheless, this study reflects the importance of consumer self-identity in consumer-brand relationships and reinforces self-identity as the determinate of whether a group is a *Dissociative Reference Group* or not.

There are societal and cultural influences on consumer brand aversion. Social media has been at the forefront of the creation of the #WhiteGirl stereotype. For some consumers, there is negative affect toward a brand associated with this stereotype. *Dissociative Reference Brands*, such as *Starbucks*, act as agents and symbols for the ‘white girl’ stereotype. The widespread knowledge of this stereotype has changed perceptions of the implicated brand’s personality, attitude, and traits. Consumers who do not perceive congruence between their self-identity and the ‘white girl’ stereotype practice identity brand avoidance behaviours that are detrimental to the brand.

One limitation of this study is that the sample was not representative of the diversity of Canadian Millennials. Also, the study did not determine qualitative motivations for brand aversion and brand avoidance behaviours. Motivation for brand avoidance was assumed to be identity brand avoidance. Finally, only one brand from the *lifestyle description* of #WhiteGirl was examined.

Directions for future research

Research on brand aversion should be continued. Aversion to the #WhiteGirl *Dissociative Reference Brands* amongst minority groups needs to be examined. There is also an aspect of moral brand avoidance, as well as identity brand avoidance, that could be researched further. Motivations behind brand avoidance behaviours amongst different generational cohorts, that is, Generation Z, Millennials, Baby Boomers, and Generation X consumers, also needs to be studied.

Implications for society and managers

Brands have an impact on consumers and the people around them. *Dissociative Reference Brands* help to perpetrate undesirable stereotypes, as they categorize individuals into a group based on brands with which they associate. The ‘white girl’ *Dissociative Reference Brands* can give information about consumers’ personalities, traits, and values – all of which are inherently negative. More specifically, the #WhiteGirl stereotype can lead to racial micro-aggressions or insensitive remarks and have negative societal impact; the stereotype works against valuing the culture and diversity prominent in Canada and across the world.

Brand managers who have a broad understanding of societal and cultural norms, and how they determine who the Dissociative Reference Groups are, can mitigate the negative effects on brand image and market share. To better position a brand, marketers may benefit from a rival brand’s connection to a negative reference group. For example, an advertisement that shows an “out group” interacting with a competing brand and features an “in group” using their brand, may make their brand more appealing to specific consumers by fostering brand aversion to other brands. Understanding consumers’ brand aversion, as opposed to consumers’ brand loyalty, may be more

integral to marketing strategies, especially when targeting Millennial consumers due to the importance of social media in communicating loyalty and aversion to brands.

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