“On Transit” – Changes of Role Identity and Consumer-Brand Relationships during Transition from Student to Professional Life

By Andrea Hemetsberger, Martina Bauer, Sylvia von Wallpach, and Katrin Broger

1. Introduction

Due to role transitions, consumers are faced with major changes in life. During the so-called liminal phase, that is, the “time in between” when an old role has not been abandoned yet, and a new one not fully adopted (Noble/Walker 1997; Turner 1967), individuals separate from a familiar role and take on a new one. Liminality is commonly characterized by role ambiguities and a re-orientation of identity, which is often accompanied by disposition of old and acquisition of new possessions (Noble/Walker 1997; Schouten 1991). Consumers not only reconstruct their identities, but also change consumption patterns and brand preferences (Andreasen 1984; Gröppel-Klein/Steinhauser 2011; Hemetsberger et al. 2009). Possessions and brands support consumers in constructing their new self in transition (Belk 1988; Schouten 1991) and in consolidating a disordered self (Mathur et al. 2008; Noble/Walker 1997).

Consumer behaviour literature investigating liminality is scarce. Most existing studies analyse transitions retrospectively, that is, when consumers have incorporated new role identities already into the new self-concept, and adopted...
new consumption patterns (Cody/Lawlor 2011). This study focuses on how individuals change their brand consumption during the so-called liminal phase. It aims to understand whether and how consumers change, abandon, or re-interpret brand relationships during liminality to cope with role changes and ambiguities. The interpretive study focuses on the transition from student to professional life, constituting one of the most impactful transitions, accompanied by major changes in role definition and lifestyle of consumers (Banister/Piacentini 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Transition situations and self changes in liminality

Individuals pass a series of life events throughout their lives. These events involve transitions between different social roles or places. Transitions are perceived as a break in an individual’s life path, leading to role changes and alterations of the individual’s self (Mathur et al. 2003; Schouten 1991; Van Gennep 1960).

Various theoretical perspectives aim to shed light on the transition process. For instance, Van Gennep (1960) describes three phases that individuals pass sequentially in transition situations: the separation from the old role, the liminal phase, and the incorporation of the new role (Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1960). In a similar manner, Bridges (2002, 35) defines the liminal phase as “a nowhere between two somewheres”. Several researchers have applied and advanced these three phases (Davies et al. 2010; Houston 1999; Thomsen/Sørensen 2006). Nonetheless, researchers also criticize the sequential view on transitions proposed by van Gennep (1960). Kralik et al. (2006) and Locke (1999) argue that the three phases are not clearly separable from each other. The phases could also be cyclical with forward and backward movements and no concrete beginning and ending. Individuals could also move back and forth to separation and incorporation, while experiencing a liminal phase of extreme ambiguity. Some researchers apply an ontologically different perspective and posit that consumers aim to construct coherent life narratives (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Rojas Gaviria/Bluemelhuber 2010). In order to achieve a coherent self narrative, consumers tend to use different strategies, ranging from negotiation strategies, such as “compromising” or “demarcating” selves (Ahuvia 2005) to re-interpretation of past experiences (Josselson 2009). These narratives contain information regarding both consumers’ past and future selves (Rojas Gaviria/Bluemelhuber 2010). Rojas Gaviria/Bluemelhuber’s (2010) view implies that consumers do not separate from old roles, since they construct their identities considering their past and present selves. According to this view, the distinction between three stages becomes irrelevant.

Liminality is commonly characterized by an ambiguous self that faces instabilities and insecurities of an unknown future (Banister/Piacentini 2008; Cody 2012). Identity theory posits that the self consists of multiple role identities (e.g., husband, father, professional) (Burke 2004; Stets 2006). Each role is linked to specific meanings and expectations from society and the individual (Burke/Stets 2009; Manzi et al. 2010). People act to fulfill these role expectations (Allen/van de Vliert 1984; Burke/Stets 2009). Since major changes in life circumstances usually involve changes regarding the role identities individuals assume, they might experience a disordered self-concept. Taking on new perceptions about themselves and their environment (Hopkins et al. 2006) and re-evaluating their lives (Kralik et al. 2006; Turner 1969), individuals are more likely to change their lifestyle (Andreasen 1984) and consequently, their behaviour (Allen/van de Vliert 1984). Liminality is thus typically accompanied by psychological discomfort, role uncertainty, a higher degree of discrepancy between actual and ideal self, confusion, and frustration (Cody 2012; Noble/Walker 1997).

On the other hand, liminality involves evolution of creativity, renewal, and growth, resulting in a redefinition and reorientation of self (Bridges 2002; Turner 1969). Individuals in liminality are more likely to experiment with their identity, try out several possible selves, change their appearances (Schouten 1991), and engage in ritualistic behaviour and consumption changes (Cody/Lawlor 2011). Ibarra/Petriglieri (2010) refer to these experimentation strategies as identity play. They define identity play as the exploration of selves that makes the line between fantasy and reality blur. In contrast to its counterpart identity work, identity play does not involve external signalling of role-related behaviour and striving for identity coherence. In line with Cody (2012), liminality can be seen as a tightrope walk between two different selves. The study presented here intends to investigate how brand relationships are reflexive of consumers’ shifting identities during liminality.

2.2. Consumers in transition

Since products and brands allow signalling social roles and role-related meanings (Burke/Stets 2009; Solomon 1983), individuals tend to connect to brands that reflect their actual or intended identity (Gröppel-Klein/Steinhauser 2011). Product and brand consumption might help consumers “on transit” to explore and adapt to a new role (Hemetsberger et al. 2009; Mathur et al. 2008). Consumers’ motivations to change their brands are manifold. First, individuals’ new identity and the identity of formerly valued brands eventually mismatch, leading to brand detachment and adoption of new brands (Price et al. 2000). Second, particular parts of the former self might be rejected, leading to disposition of possessions that remind of these parts of the self and to the acquisition of new ones (Schouten 1991). Third, new consumption practices might ease the process of liminality (Houston 1999), reduce role uncertainty, and support consumers in dealing with the new upcoming role (Thomsen/Sørensen 2006). The more uncertain people feel about...
enacting a role, the more likely they use stereotypical products that represent that specific role. Stereotypical products hold symbolic meaning, providing security and supporting the enactment of a new role (Kleine III et al. 1993; Sevin/Ladwein 2008; Solomon 1983). Adoption of new consumption patterns serves the achievement of an ideal self, which might even culminate in body transformations, as for instance plastic surgery (Schouten 1991). Furthermore, consumption changes depend on the progress of the transition and consumers’ perception of this progress. Cody (2012) distinguishes between a “dark and passive” side and a “fruitful active” side of the transition from child to teenager (‘tweens’). During the dark and passive side, individuals feel insecure and invisible in society. During the fruitful phase, tweens change their consumption and behaviour actively so as to find their position in society.

In summary, consumption supports individuals in various ways to cope with and establish a redefined identity. Brands help reducing role discrepancies and offer ways to demarcate different selves, find a compromise, or eventually come to synthesize different identity demands (Ahuvia 2005). Current research widely agrees on the influence of transition phases on consumer-brand relationships and related consumption changes. However, empirical findings are contradictory as to whether individuals are in liminality, consume for future, past, or present identities (Kleine et al. 1995; Mathur et al. 2003; Noble/Walker 1997; Sevin/Ladwein 2008). Existing studies investigated transitions from school to college (Noble/Walker 1997), motherhood (e.g., Fischer/Gainer 1993), ‘empty nest’ (Curasi et al. 2004), and end-of-life dispositions of possessions (Price et al. 2000). This study analyses the transition from student to professional life, according identity changes, and consequences for consumer-brand relationships. Contrary to most existing research, this study does not analyse transitions retrospectively (Cody/Lawlor 2011), but conducts an exploratory analysis focusing on brand relationship changes during liminality; thus, accounting for the interplay between consumers’ past, present, and future identities.

3. Methodology

In order to explore experiences of students in transition to professional life, this study applies a qualitative research approach relying on projective techniques, accompanied by narrative interviews (Schütze 1987). Photo-elicitation was used to gain insights into respondents’ experiences during the transition and the role identity changes they were going through. Participants were asked to bring two to three pictures representing their student life, the liminal phase, and their envisioned work life. Pictures support people in talking about their current feelings and related behaviours (Bryman/Bell 2007). Respondents had to describe the pictures, their elements, and how they relate to experiences during the role transition. In a second step participants created a tripartite collage concerning their brand relationships, including brands that represent their student life, the liminal phase, and (anticipated) work life (Koll et al. 2010). Various magazines with diverse foci (sports, lifestyle, fashion, advertisements, groceries, cosmetics, etc.) were used as stimulus material. A fourth section of the collage allowed to describe eventual unchanged brand relationships. An interview followed to get an in-depth understanding of the specific brand relationships displayed in the collage (Heisley/Levy 1991).

The sample consisted of 14 respondents (aged between 23 and 28) in transition from student to professional life. Tab. 1 summarizes the sample characteristics.

As views on the duration of liminality in literature are incongruent, the sample includes respondents in presumably early and late stages of transition: students in the final semester of their studies; students who have recently graduated and are looking for a job; young professionals, who have just started to work (up to six months). The sample only includes participants who have not been working full-time (including internships) before or during their studies, to ensure that respondents are in transition. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analysed, and interpreted according to hermeneutics and constant comparative method (Charmaz 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Transitional Stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celine</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Employed since 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Two weeks before job start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Employed since 6 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marco</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Temporary job since two months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>In a 6 months contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Employed since 6 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Employed since 6 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abgy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valery</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisette</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis; part-time employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Currently writing her Master’s thesis</td>
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Table 1: Sample characteristics
4. Findings

Respondents report major changes in their lives and related re-definitions of their selves during transition from student to professional life. While student life is depicted as flexible, with little responsibility but also limited budgets and dependency, professional life is associated with quite oppositional, stereotypical presumptions and first experiences of organizational structuring, scheduling, and time constraints, but also more income and independence. Visual representations of respondents’ role perceptions demonstrate the sharp delineation of the “two social worlds”.

Celine’s collage (Fig. 1) expresses the vulnerability of individuals in transition from close social contacts and exciting student life towards dominance of structures and professional distance, representing role ambiguity. Peter’s visuals add to that by contrasting independence and autonomy with computers and a desk – strong symbols of long and hard work days spent in isolated places. These findings support the assumption that transition is accompanied by feelings of great insecurity. However, individual narratives also differ regarding intensity and valence. Most individuals perceive transition as rather challenging, while others experience it as more positive and exciting. Respondents, in general, also realize how much their self-concept changes throughout this phase in life. None of our respondents had fully incorporated his/her new role, nor remained in the old student role, according to respondents’ narratives. Individuals reported a feeling of “in-between-ness”, a bit of everything and nothing, an emotional state that calls for a plan.

“Currently I don’t really feel like a student [...] At the moment I feel... like... NOTHING AT ALL (laughs). You know... neither student, nor employed person... it is...just... something...SOMETHING IN BETWEEN.” (Sophy, 24)

Transition is a phase of extended length and intensified tensions between social compliance and individuality needs. The new role is accompanied by new social demands and expected role pressures, whereas the abandonment of the old role leaves new room for the definition of a renewed individuality. During transition from student to professional life individuals support their role identity change through changes of their relationships with brands. Corroborating Noble/Walker’s (1997) study, respondents end or alter some brand relationships, but also maintain particular brand relationships that provide stability in this time of insecurity. Individuals in liminality consume both, brands that symbolize the past and brands that represent the new role.

Identification with the new versus the old role seems to be strongly related to brand relationship changes. Respondents use diverse strategies to deal with the ambiguous self and role identity in transition. Some experience the transition as exciting and thrilling. They change brand relationships accordingly by radically separating from existing brand relationships symbolizing student identity, and acquiring new brands for their new role. Others cope with ambiguity through acquisition of liminal brands and familiar brands as helpers and stabilizers. Tab. 2 summarizes the main findings of the study.

The subsequent sections describe the main tension between social compliance and individuality seeking, and outline individuals’ coping strategies during liminality, in detail.

4.1. Social compliance vs. individuality seeking

Transitions from student to young professional are characterized by strong symbolism and demonstrative consumption practices. During transition, enhanced self-construction activities are eminent and actively pursued through diverse consumption strategies, including the separation from and the adoption of new brands. Although liminality commonly encourages experimentation (Rojas Gaviria/Bluemelhuber 2010), respondents feel strong pressures to adopt socio-cultural understandings of their new role identities as young professionals. Social compliance is characterized by the urge to respond to role expectations in a desired way (Cialdini/Goldstein 2004). As the new role has not been adopted yet and new role expectations are only imagined, conformity is a blurry concept and commonly leads to compromise rather than emancipated consumption decisions.

“Yes as I said, it is somehow the pressure, to CONFORM with your environment, but at the same time you want to be unique and want to own something that others don’t have... and I think that is somehow a BALANCING act between... yes between the two of them.” (Valery, 25)
Valery’s quote demonstrates the conformity-individuality dilemma respondents are confronted with. Particularly in times of identity formation and transition, consumers are keen to act in a congruent manner to achieve a positive self-worth and approach their ideal self (Sirgy 1982). Individuals steadily define themselves according to their own self-definition and their social roles, which often creates tensions (Mittal 2006). Liminality intensifies the tension as new role pressures come up whereas old ones that have so far provided structure and security in people’s lives are given up.

„Look at that bag here; I really ONLY bought it because everyone else in Munich owns one... NEVER IN A THOUSAND YEARS have I thought that I would buy such an ugly bag.” (Kelly, 23)

Kelly especially feels the need to adopt new brands in liminality. She feels the pressure to behave differently in work life in order to fulfill the standards of the new role. Adopting new consumption patterns that are symbolic for the new role is viewed as entry ticket to a new, professional life.

In this phase of insecurity, individuals particularly seek new structure in life, which leads to new role conformity. In absence of other, role-defining behaviour, respondents seek to demonstrate new role adoption through over-conformity and social status consumption (Kleine/Schultz Kleine 2000) even at the expense of one’s own aesthetic taste. The gaze of the others is of critical importance for individuals (Burke/Stets 2009). On the other hand, respondents feel the need to underscore their individuality. They want to be unique and show that uniqueness with brands. Respondents stop buying typical student clothes, which stand for mass consumption, and switch to more role adequate or unique designer labels.

“When you finally enter work life, you want to somehow... EXPRESS your OWN personality ....yes... you want to somehow... develop your own DIRECTION... In student life you were more like GOING WITH THE FLOW (laughs).” (Amie, 24)

### 4.2. Coping strategies

Brands are powerful repositories of meaning purposively employed in the creation and (re)production of concepts of self (Fournier 1998). They help individuals to cope with insecurities and ambiguities. Individual’s life contexts systematically influence the strength of relationship drives, the types of relationships desired, styles of interacting within relationships, the ease with which relationships are initiated and terminated, and the degree to which enduring commitments are sought (Fournier 1998). The findings of this study strongly support the interwoven nature of consumers’ self-concept and the brand relationships individuals are entertaining. They further support the deep meaning of brands for individuals’ everyday lives and ritualistic everyday behaviours. As daily rituals change, brand use and relationships also change, as reported by the respondents. Abby (23), for instance, thinks that her morning ritual will change dramatically from a casual, unstructured towards a planned, stressful ritual. Katy (25), who drank her daily energy drink when she was learning for her exam, thinks that she might drink it in stressful job situations as well.
Overall, findings show that brand relationships change during transition alongside the dimensions: price, quality, essentiality versus hedonism, group pressure versus social role expectations, and creativity of style. Brand relationship changes do not, however, reflect a public-private distinction, as described by Richins (1994). Respondents change public, as well as private brands in anticipation of their future lives, which might reflect the critical tension between social compliance and individuality. Thus, changes might be necessary on both ends. As brands cohere into systems of brand relationships that give meaning to life (Fournier 1998), individuals in transition rearrange their brand portfolio so as to “rearrange” their lives. The following sections present respondents’ rearrangements alongside narratives of separation, maintaining, and establishing new brand relationships.

4.2.1. Separation from existing brands – Ending a role identity

Respondents report on the need to abandon the student role identity, or the ambiguous liminal identity, particularly when their wish to identify with the new role is strong. Yet, separation strategies are different. Some are radical; some reflect a gradual separation from old brands/old life. Reasons for radical separation are either brand relationships that run counter new role adoption, or are reminiscent of negative experiences in student life or in the liminal phase. Marco has always used a private label laundry detergent in his student life. However, since he has graduated in February, he started to use a branded product and wants to use it in the future. Marco admits that he has changed a lot since graduation, and supports his new role aspirations with radical separations from old student brands, and adoption of more future role appropriate brands.

“Of course there are reasons. On the one hand, as stated earlier, the increased income, but also the attitude change, because you have a graduate degree, I don’t want to sound arrogant, but you just feel... like...something BETTER, when you have a graduate degree, then you also have to somehow fulfill the cliché, that as business student you will buy branded products instead of still using DM [private label] laundry detergent.” (Marco, 23)

Respondents seek to cast off their student characteristics, and as a result separate from “student brands” and student rituals, even in their private domain. Some radical brand separations are even close to being therapeutic in that they free the respondents from old role burdens. Jade associates her current life with an IKEA desk, which symbolizes studying, learning, and writing her master thesis.

“[...] I ALWAYS see it (the desk) and because I am currently writing my Master thesis I find the desk awful; because it is so stressful [...] it just has to go AWAY, I don’t WANT the desk to stay there, when I am done with it!”

“[...] but I still like IKEA, it’s just that I won’t buy a DESK at IKEA any more (laughs).” (Jade, 26)

Jade’s verbatim corroborates Schouten’s (1991) findings that when a role identity is changing, particular parts of the self might be rejected. Possessions that remind us of these parts of the self are therefore disposed.

Besides radical, abrupt separation from brands, many examples point towards a gradual detachment from brands that are deeply associated with the old role/old life (Fajer/Schouten 1995). In liminality, respondents, who report a gradual separation from their old student life, also slowly separate from brands that are symbolic of a typical student life by using them less frequently, while simultaneously acquiring new brands. Patrick (28), for instance loves the brand Red Bull. He used to consume it permanently and in huge amounts in student life. Now he is self-employed and is under constant stress. First Patrick states that his Red Bull consumption remained the same. During the interview he finds out that he has already decreased his consumption of Red Bull. Examples for gradual reduction of brand consumption also concern alcohol, casual clothes, and shoe brands that are prototypical for a student lifestyle.

4.2.2. Establishing new brand relationships – Anticipation of future role identity

Several respondents start identifying early with the anticipated professional identity and want to acquire new brands with a ‘professional touch’ in order to anticipate their future role. In between student and professional life, respondents specifically want to acquire stereotypical brands that represent the professional role exaggeratedly. In absence of genuine role experience, role anticipation is limited to the consumption of signalling brands. Individuals use stereotypical brands to deal with their ambiguous self and to try out possible future selves. Amie does not feel comfortable in liminality, it was a terrible time in the beginning. Before she was offered a job, she could not relax so she started to acquire different, new brands, which stand as a symbolic, reified role model for what she aspired to become.

“[...] during the time between the Bachelor thesis and... work life... I bought a BAG from MARC PICARD (laughs loud)... but it doesn’t FIT ME AT ALL. [...] it even looks a bit ASSIDUOUS.” (Amie, 24)

Other respondents, such as Celine, acquire new brands that signal a different, more sustainable and responsible lifestyle associated with the new professional role identity.

“I am now buying organic food directly from the farmer; that is really totally new and I just wanted to have it... I think it is good to pay attention to that and I like organic things so much... I want to be sustainable and I have also become a vegetarian, now towards the end of my student time... it is an attitude to life.” (Celine, 24)

The actual adoption of the new role identity entails the establishment of new brand relationships in novel product categories, which satisfy the role requirements asso-
associated with the professional role but do not seem to fit the consumer’s self. One example is Amie’s new branded diary that allows her to manage the many appointments that are part of her new professional reality. Still, her relationship with this new brand does not seem to be in line with her current self, which is strongly influenced by the former student self.

“Yes... that is like...you live for the day but AFTER you have so many plans and appointments and so forth... I never had a Filofax ... I bought a Filofax last week ... a calendar, because I need to note down all my appointments; that was weird even for me. I thought oh my god what a Babbitt am I now, but I have to, to start doing it... (laughs).” (Amie, 24)

4.2.3. Establishing new brand relationships – Dealing with liminal identity

Liminal brands are brands that have liminal characteristics, such as eau de toilettes instead of perfume. They guide individuals in liminality from old to new roles. This coping strategy of consuming liminal products involves brands and behaviours that fit liminality and its characteristics such as insecurity, ambiguity, and trying out possible selves. Liminal brands are only important during this time and hold characteristics of both roles. While gradually moving from one role to the other, respondents use liminal brands as a compromise that helps them coping with role ambiguity.

“Bench is perfect at the moment, because... well you can wear it in your leisure time as well as in the office. And that is super... what they produce is really beautiful and the quality is also a lot better, simply better than H&M, and thus, I buy that recently.” (Jade, 26)

Jade uses new brands that meet her different aspirations in the private and public domain and can be used in leisure time as well as in professional life. Two years ago, she would not have bought a brand like that, which represents this state of “in-betweenness”. Liminal brands are prototypical for Ahuvia’s (2005) compromising strategy, when two different selves are in conflict. Stephanie has different demands for her liminal brands. They should come with no obligations.

“...(j) now my contract [for her cell phone] expires ...but yes... I don’t want a new contract now...because then I am bound by contract and at the moment I don’t know at all how my life will go on, whether I will be going abroad or so... I wouldn’t want a fixed contract at the moment... because... well, I want to be free of bonds at the moment.” (Stephanie, 25)

Liminal brands and liminal behaviour also exhibit avoidance behaviour. Clearly, liminal brands serve dual roles and are often abandoned when the new role is completely taken over, unless liminal brands succeed to stay ‘best friends’.

4.2.4. Maintaining brand relationships – Stability seeking self

Respondents also maintain brand relationships in seeking stability. Brand relationships either remain the same, or take on new meaning. There are different reasons for keeping particular brand relationships unchanged: home-like and childhood memories; representing a unique and personal lifestyle; uniqueness of the brand; escaping everyday, mundane life, and helping to hold on to student life.

Katy (24) believes that she did not change a lot. Interestingly, Katy also did not change many brands in liminality. She sticks with her Barilla pasta, Nutella, Santa Lucia Mozzarella, Red Bull, Milka chocolate, and most of her clothes brands. Her wish to hold on to student life provides security in this instable phase, and reduces her fears about the future. Her deliberate demarcation of student and professional life exemplifies conservative coping strategies to reduce insecurity. Here, lack of role identification with future professional life hinders acquisition of new brands and adoption of new consumption patterns.

Kelly (23) is very different. She thinks she has changed a lot and consequently many of her brands, particularly public, social status brands like clothes, handbags or sunglasses. Identification with her future role induces the adoption of an imagined future lifestyle. However, she does not abandon ‘her’ brand Nutella that evokes feelings of nostalgia (Schindler/Holbrook 2003) and reminds her of her childhood, thus representing an integral part of herself.

“(...) I love Nutella, I use it every day, that is, included in my everyday ritual... maybe it has to do with childhood memories... a kind of WELLbeing... it allows you to still be a child.” (Kelly, 23).

Here, the brand relationship with Nutella is not associated with student identity, but relates to important other facets of self. Respondents particularly maintain strong brand relationships and love brands (Fournier 1998) over time because they provide stability and support – brands, “solid as a rock”.

4.2.5. Self-gifts

Although consumption in times of transition is to a considerable extent determined by the search for a new and consolidated self-identity, some consumption changes simply reflect self-gifting behaviour for respondents’ accomplishments. According to Mick/DeMoss’ (1990) study on self-gifts, personal accomplishments, disappointments/depression, and holidays were prevalent circumstances under which consumers acquired self-gifts. Relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event, having extra money to indulge oneself, and just doing something nice for oneself were reported in addition. Transitions offer multiple reasons for self-gifts, including personal accomplishments, indulgence, and having extra money.
Life before graduation and professional life is viewed as stressful and hard work. Respondents therefore reward themselves with brands they aspired to own for a long time.

"It is a REWARD for working 40 hours a week... I buy SPECIFIC things... I don’t buy anything, but exactly those things that I always wanted to have and couldn’t buy before." (Celine, 24)

Liminality is therefore also characterized by catching up with postponed consumption, and typically also over-consumption until all materialist wishes that developed during a lifetime are fulfilled, or have lost meaning. Rewards are partly consequential of anticipated income, as reported by respondents. Consumption and spending is adjusted to the new (expected) income level and must be learned. Respondents frequently report that they are looking forward and are willing to spend money but only for a limited time until their desires are satisfied. In many ways, respondents’ verbal accounts are reminiscent of research on desire, where “the fire of desire” is extinguished as soon as all wishes come true (Belk et al. 2003).

Rewards also represent a common coping strategy and provide support in times of insecurity, similar to what Banister/Piacentini (2008) report about alcohol consumption in liminality, and what Fournier/Alvarez (2012) describe as soothing, comforting mechanism in times of transition.

5. Discussion

Literature characterizes liminality mainly as time of role ambiguity and insecurity (Bridges 2002; Cody/Lawlor 2011; Turner 1967). This study supports this assumption, revealing that individuals in liminality between student and professional lives find themselves caught in the tension between social compliance and individuality seeking. From a social identity perspective, Chan/Berger/Van Boven (2012) find that consumers’ choices can be simultaneously attributed to assimilation and differentiation motives. The findings of the present study confirm the results of Chan et al. (2012) on the individual level. Experience of ambiguity regarding two different selves makes consumers simultaneously aspire to fulfil social role standards and seek individuality respectively. Furthermore, the findings corroborate previous findings on young consumers using retro brands to release the tension between being socially accepted and being non-conform (Hemetsberger et al. 2011). During this time individuals increasingly feel the need to conform to others, which accords with Cialdini’s work (2001) that in times of uncertainty, individuals look for and try to fulfil social norms.

Because of these tensions, individuals are more open to change brand relationships while being on transit, supporting previous consumer research on symbolic consumption in times of transition (Cody/Lawlor 2011; Thomsen/Sørensen 2006). People acquire new brands, separate from formerly used brands and change meanings of brand relationships. Still, individuals also hold on to formerly valued brands. Respondents describe several coping strategies that help them finding their path towards professional life. The extent of identification with the new and old role influences whether and how consumer-brand relationships change.

When students abandon their old desks, they mainly separate from the many hurdles that accompanied their student life. While previous literature mainly states that consumers detach from brands in a gradual process that involves multiple separation stages (Fajer/Schouten 1995), students in liminality also mentioned radical brand detachment. Radical brand separation serves liberating themselves from primarily private possessions that are symbolic for hardship and failures. Gradual disposition rather serves to attenuate the drastic changes that go along with entering work life, moving to another city, separating from good friends, and the like. Separation is always liminal and therefore often experienced as demanding, negative, even unwanted, as some respondents illustrate, who refuse to change their role and live as a student and consequently, their brands and possessions. Hence, maintaining brand relationships is partly due to strong identification with the old student role, and/or the refusal to adopt the new role. These results support Davies et al.’s (2010) argument that people, who are not ready to incorporate a new role, have difficulty to consume for the new role. However, brand relationships that last also have other important functions in times of transition. Most of them are love brands and close companions that provide structure and stability in turbulent times (Fournier 1998). Those brands are mostly private (Richins 1994) and serve to support important facets of consumers’ selves throughout their lives.

Individuals, who change their roles from student to professional, change their identity and lifestyles considerably by acquiring new brands that are considered stereotypical for the new role. Graduates in transition often exaggerate new role-conform consumption for mainly two reasons. First, and corroborating previous findings (Burke/Sets 2009; Schouten 1991; Solomon 1983), new brands are acquired in an attempt to diminish social risk and personal insecurity. Second, some individuals experience this time as very positive and exciting and buy new brands in anticipation of their first salary and their new role. The meaning of these new brand relationships differs, though. Graduates, who are excited about their life changes, buy brands they aspire to own, whereas insecurity leads to purchases even at the expense of one’s aesthetic taste. In both cases, newly acquired brands are mostly public brands to show conformity with the anticipated future role.

Whereas most researchers agree that individuals consume brands that fit their current or desired identity (Fournier 1998; Gröppel-Klein/Steinhauser 2011), this study shows that consumers also like ambivalent brands.
in times of transition. Corroborating Ahuvia’s (2005) study, students consume liminal brands in liminal times to solve self-conflicts through compromise or synthesis. Liminal brands are ambivalent and thus able to fulfill dual roles. They are neither-nor; in between; and both; a perfectly transient concept that frees individuals from role ambiguity.

The marketing implications of this study are manifold. Mathur et al. (2003) maintained that transition situations can serve as valuable basis of market segmentation and positioning. Students and graduates in their liminal phase to professional life are specifically looking for brands that hold ‘professional’ characteristics or carry meanings, which are associated with professional life. Marketers may use this to attract new customers, by targeting the group of graduates and positioning the brand clearly as a brand for young professionals. The empirical study also indicates that consumers are less likely to change brands they love and feel acquainted with. Thus, managers can successfully position their brands as providing stability in life, which is even more valued in times of transition. Individuals in liminality also like to use brands with ambiguous characteristics like themselves, relating to dual roles. Depending on the brand’s core characteristics it might be positioned accordingly and provide consumers with a ‘one size fits all’ solution. Overall, brands serve as helpers and supporters when consumers are ‘on transit’; it is the marketers’ responsibility to deliver these values.

References


Hemetsberger/Bauer/von Wallpach/Broger, Changes of Role Identity and Consumer-Brand Relationships