

Rethinking the Origins of Involvement and Brand Commitment: Insights from Postsocialist Central Europe

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Drawing on our work in two postsocialist countries, Hungary and Romania, we contribute to understanding product involvement and brand commitment. We demonstrate that prominent political-cultural discourses, cultural intermediaries, social influences, and life themes and projects collectively prompt product involvement. We introduce the concept of involvement with branded products and examine its origins within a sociohistorical context. We consider the origins of brand commitment and illustrate that consumers with little interest in either the product category or the idea of branded products may be committed to particular brands. Further, we contribute to understanding the relationships among product involvement, brand commitment, and brand experimentation.

Despite the central importance of product involvement and brand commitment to consumer research, relatively little is known about the activation of and relationship between these constructs (Beatty, Kahle, and Homer 1988; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Yao 1997; Kozinets 2001). Our research venue and methodology provide a unique perspective for examining the origins of and relationships between product involvement and brand commitment. Specifically, we investigate the underpinnings of Central European women's involvement with and brand commitment to cosmetics products as these countries make their way from socialism to capitalism. This transformation has affected economics and politics, social infrastructure, and the development and activities of cultural intermediaries, including manufacturers, retailers, advertisers, and media (Batra

1999; Braun 1999; Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998; Verdery 1996). Moreover, these changes affect Central Europeans' views of their world and themselves, including their life goals, lifestyles, and ideologies (Braun 1999; Ger 1997; Ger and Belk 1996; Humphrey 1995). It is intriguing to explore how new cultural beliefs about consumption, molded by Western media and new products and brands, alter the role of consumption in everyday life and may activate product involvement and brand commitment as free market reforms proceed (Shultz, Belk, and Ger 1994).

We focused on cosmetics because they are a ubiquitous element of women's consumer culture and represent a fundamental, yet mundane, way in which women invent and transform themselves (Beausoleil 1994; Bloch and Richins 1992; Etcoff 1999; Peiss 1998). Central European women's involvement with cosmetics and brand commitment are particularly interesting to examine during the immediate post-socialist period. First, many Central European women grew up under the socialist tenet of gender equality. Ironically consistent with Western feminist discourse, cosmetics were depicted as inconsistent with gender equality—a political weapon against women's advancement (Bordo 1993). At the same time, previous research suggests that women were not equal but “expected to bear a triple burden: productive work, children care and housework” (Baban and David 2001, p. 4; Gal and Kligman 2000a). They worked full-time, often in lower-paid, low-status jobs, with little child-care infrastructure to support their needs (Bacon and Pol 1994; Einhorn 1993). Second, looking feminine or sexy was

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discouraged by social norms, a socialist production ideology that stressed basic need satisfaction, and low availability of cosmetics products (Gal and Kligman 2000b). In a discussion of Central European women prior to the 1990s, Drakulic bewails, "Look at us—we don't even look like women" (1993, p. 27). Third, in the 1990s in Central Europe, a sudden and dramatic infusion of cosmetics products and brands from multinationals such as Avon, Unilever, Procter and Gamble, and L'Oréal; much greater exposure to commercial, persuasive media; and many more shopping alternatives occurred simultaneously (Vegh 1997; Woodruff et al. 1998). All at once Central European women experienced the opportunity to become involved with cosmetics and brands (Drakulic 1993, 1996; Kligman 1996; Markowitz 1995). Concurrently, beauty became a subject of wide debate among Central European women and social critics (Drakulic 1993, 1996; Kligman 1996; Markowitz 1995; Nicolaescu 1995a). Socialist gender equality norms, combined with newly available cosmetics products and advertised images of Western women, and a complicated web of cultural ideologies, rooted in varied and competing historical meanings and conventions, are likely to inform Central European women's cosmetics involvement (Beausoleil 1994; Drazin 1994; Peiss 1996; Richins 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

As we have noted, little is known about the origins of product involvement and brand commitment (Beatty et al. 1988; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Yao 1997; Kozinets 2001), and researchers have been perplexed by inconsistent results regarding the relationship between these two constructs (Warrington and Shim 2000). Additionally, recent research has examined consumers' total life experience with a brand and relationships between life themes and consumer-brand relationships but has not clearly distinguished between consumer-product and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998; Fournier and Yao 1997; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). The purpose of this article is to examine the origins of product involvement and brand commitment within the sociohistorical context of Central Europe in transition. We introduce the idea of involvement with branded products (i.e., the extent to which branded products, not specific brands, are personally relevant or important) that emerged from our research, and we also explore its origins. Our research considers the effects of macroenvironmental factors (i.e., cultural ideologies and cultural intermediaries), social networks, and personal life themes and projects on the development of consumers' ideological positions, and, in turn, their effects on product involvement, brand commitment, involvement with branded products, and brand experimentation.

In the next section, we review prior research related to the origins of product involvement and brand commitment. We then provide a synopsis of our research context and activity in Central Europe between 1989 and 2001, focusing on the specific investigations that inform this research. Our findings and discussion of findings are unfolded in two sections: the first outlines consumer cases, and the second in-

tegrates those cases and survey data. We conclude with a discussion of contributions and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Origins of Product Involvement

Conceptualized and measured in a variety of ways, product involvement is generally related to self-relevance, and we define product involvement as the personal relevance or importance of a product category (Higie and Feick 1989). Although product involvement significantly influences consumers' cognitive and behavioral responses—including memory, attention, processing, search, brand commitment, satisfaction, early adoption, and opinion leadership (see Laaksonen 1994 for a review)—we know surprisingly little about its origins. Virtually no research has investigated how product involvement is induced outside a laboratory setting (Beatty et al. 1988).

One of the few studies to address the evolution of product involvement shows that macroenvironmental factors may produce a consumption context conducive to product involvement. For example, skydivers report that their initial trial was motivated by television shows and advertisements that glorified the experience (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Bloch and Richins (1983) argue that certain product classes tend to have significant meanings within a culture and, thus, are likely to be more involving for most consumers, but they do not empirically pursue this point. Although there is some evidence and speculation to support the influence of cultural intermediaries on product involvement, the relationship between macroenvironmental factors and product involvement remains largely unexplored.

The influence of local context and social networks on product involvement has also received some attention. Bloch and Richins (1983) posit that interpersonal influence and a supportive social context might be significant in initiating and sustaining product involvement. Research on recreational activities and related products affirms that involvement in an activity is associated with support from significant others (Ditton, Loomis, and Choi 1992), and with the anticipation of social benefits, for example, the development or reinforcement of friendships or family bonds (Driver, Brown, and Peterson 1992). Celsi et al. (1993) provide additional evidence in the context of high-risk leisure consumption. Over half of their informants link trial to interpersonal influence, and supportive communities influence informants' continued participation in the sport. With the exception of the leisure activity context, there is little empirical evidence concerning whether and how local context and social networks influence product involvement.

Continued or enduring involvement with a product category is likely to depend on whether and how the product relates to the consumer's life more generally (Bloch and Richins 1983). Zaichkowsky (1985) proposed that consumer values, life goals, and life themes affect product involvement. Other research confirms that self-relevance affects

involvement with and processing of marketing communications (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; MacInnis and Jaworski 1989). Celsi et al. (1993) corroborate that sticking with skydiving seems to depend on strong positive links between product use and consumers' self-concepts. However, the way in which a product category becomes personally relevant remains unanswered. In particular, research has not addressed relationships among macroenvironmental factors, local context and social networks, and consumers' own histories, life themes, and life projects as determinants of product involvement.

The Origins of Brand Commitment

Brand commitment is an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand within a product class (Fournier 1998; Lastovicka and Gardner 1978), and this definition is attitudinally rather than behaviorally based (Bloemer and Kasper 1994; Traylor 1981). Past research has typically explained the origins of brand commitment as an outcome of product involvement. Theory suggests that involvement is activated first, and commitment results when involvement is linked to a particular choice alternative. Thus, involvement "will most likely precede or lead to commitment" (Beatty et al. 1988, p. 152; Crosby and Taylor 1983). This assumption is often implicit in research examining brand commitment. Nevertheless, research suggests that involvement may or may not be related to brand commitment (Warrington and Shim 2000). Ratchford (2001) offers a theoretical rationale for these seemingly incongruous results. He suggests that even consumers who are happy with their current brand may continue to search for and try other brands as an investment in future consumption choices. Thus, involved consumers may engage in brand experimentation, that is, switch among brands, to gain knowledge about the product, brands, and brand features (Cushing and Douglas-Tate 1985, p. 248).

In contrast with this research stream, Fournier (1998) downplays the relevance of product involvement to consumers' brand commitment. She argues that brand commitment may originate without product involvement and concludes, "Consumer-relevant relationship themes cut across the artificial boundaries of brands and products to reveal purposive constructs employed in making sense of one's daily life" (Fournier 1998 p. 367). The significance of product class and brands to consumers are not distinguished by Fournier (1998) or by other research that explores brand commitment within the broader context of people's life experiences (Fournier and Yao 1997; McAlexander et al. 2002). Fournier (1998) observes that to understand better whether consumers are primarily involved with the product class or the brand would require research that simultaneously explores product involvement and brand commitment within the broader context of consumers' lives. Implicitly, she questions both the origins of product involvement and brand commitment. In sum, although product involvement is often thought of as an antecedent of brand commitment, we believe that it is appropriate to explore

further the origins of and relationship between these two constructs.

Situating Product Involvement and Brand Commitment

In this subsection, we draw on research and theory from various consumer behavior contexts to offer a new understanding of the origins of product involvement and brand commitment. Specifically we consider macroenvironmental factors, social influence, and consumer life themes and projects. We do not intend to suggest that these are the only or most important origins of product involvement and brand commitment but that these variables are likely to be important and have been neglected in previous research. Figure 1 illustrates the key relationships identified in previous research (black arrows) and discussed in this subsection, as well as relationships identified in our research (dashed arrows) and discussed in subsequent sections.

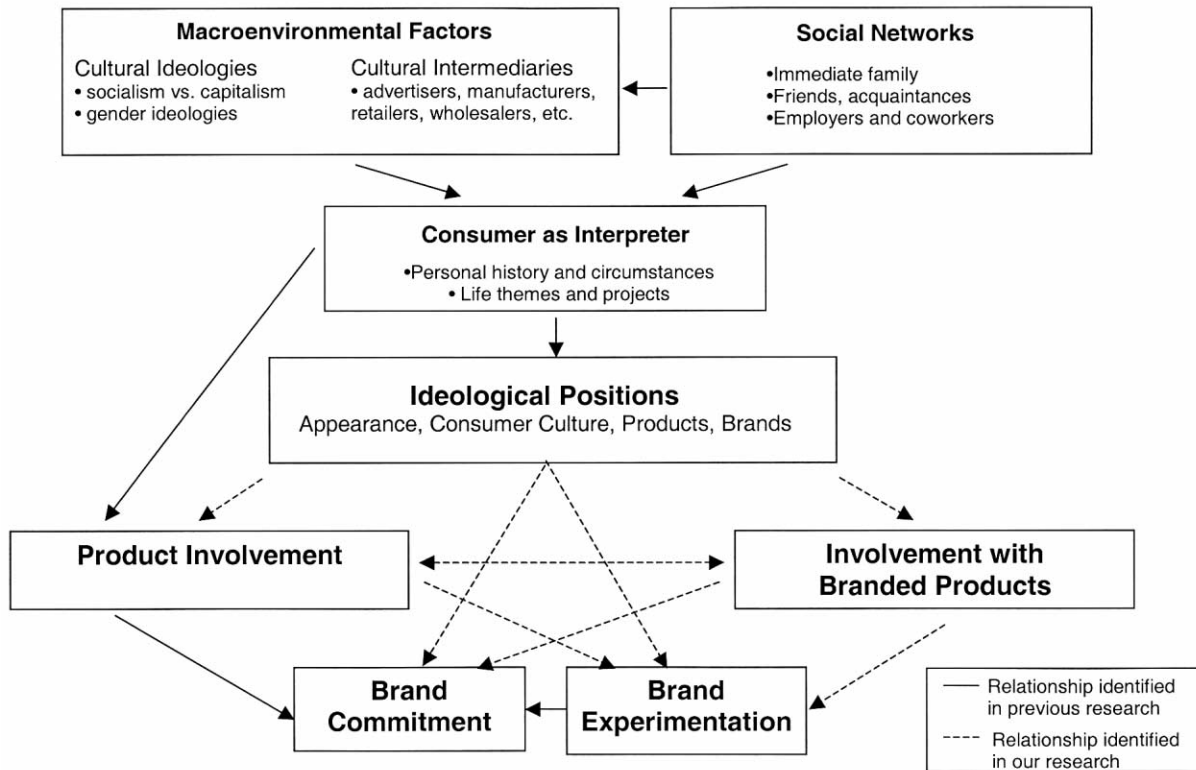
Macroenvironmental Factors. We restrict our attention in this subsection to the connections among cultural ideologies, cultural intermediaries, product involvement, and brand commitment. Figure 1 illustrates our view that consumers, within the context of their personal histories and their life themes and projects, interpret cultural ideologies and the activities of cultural intermediaries. These interpretations give rise to ideological positions that determine product involvement and brand commitment.

Cultural ideologies are culturally shared values and meanings that allow for a collective sense of identity, coordinate social functions, and maintain social order (Hirschman 1988, 1993). Cultural ideologies affect consumption desires, motivations, and the symbolic meanings consumers attach to products, services, and brands (Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Sandikci and Ger 2001; Thompson and Haytko 1997). For example, cultural ideologies may influence the appropriateness of various products and brands for achieving life themes and goals, and this in turn may influence involvement with those products and brands (Doran 1997). Hence, we expect that cultural ideologies indirectly give rise to product involvement (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2000; Huffman, Rameshwar, and Mick 2000). One might speculate that cultural ideologies also indirectly affect brand commitment (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Our research examines whether and how cultural ideologies inform product involvement and brand commitment.

Cultural intermediaries are conduits connecting the world of culturally constituted meanings to consumption meanings (McCracken 1988, 1989). Cultural intermediaries, including manufacturers, advertisers, retailers, news reporters, media producers, and fashion merchandisers, provide a communicative link between cultural ideologies and consumers' interpreted product and brand meanings, which may prompt involvement and brand commitment (Featherstone 1991; McCracken 1986, 1988). For example, advertisers determine what cultural ideologies pertain to their products and brands—what they wish them to say—and then give voice

FIGURE 1

THE ORIGINS OF PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT, INVOLVEMENT WITH BRANDED PRODUCTS, AND BRAND COMMITMENT



to these meanings by portraying objects, persons, and contexts already associated with these ideologies (Kovar 1995; McCracken 1989; Stern 1994). In this way, advertisers offer a constellation of meanings of products and brands that draw from specific cultural ideologies. Previous research suggests that consumers' interpretations of cultural intermediaries' activities and cultural ideologies play a role in activating product involvement, and subsequently in invoking brand commitment (Fournier 1998; Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1997). Our research further explores how the cultural ideologies and activities of cultural intermediaries activate product involvement and brand commitment. Significantly, as represented in figure 1, we explore how consumers' ideological positions (derived from their interpretations of cultural ideologies and cultural intermediaries) are related to product involvement and brand commitment.

Social Networks. Much research in Western cultures has documented the importance of social influence on consumers' product evaluations, as well as on product and brand choices (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Fournier 1998; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002; Price, Feick, and Higie 1987; Ward and Reingen 1990). Research shows that people tend to define their social context locally rather than globally; they look to local sources of support for social rewards, feedback, and identity. Family, friends, and coworkers supply influ-

ential feedback on personal consumption and provide a key basis for social comparison (Richins 1995). Product involvement may stimulate participation in brand or product communities, but reciprocal links between social context and product and brand involvement may also be important (Coulter, Feick, and Price 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1996). Kozinets (2001, p. 85) encourages consumer researchers to study culturally and socially situated consumer product involvement and brand commitment. As represented in figure 1, past research indicates that consumers interpret information from social networks within the context of their personal history, life themes, and life projects.

Life Themes and Life Projects. Life themes are "existential concerns that individuals address in everyday life" (e.g., being educated, being cosmopolitan, or showing good taste), and life projects are "the construction and maintenance of key life roles and identities (e.g., being a responsible mother, a loyal employee, a successful teacher)" (Huffman et al. 2000, pp. 15, 18). Life themes and projects are modified and shaped by cultural ideologies and cultural intermediaries but are more distinctly rooted in personal history and social networks (Huffman et al. 2000; Mick and Buhl 1992). Huffman et al. (2000) conceptually link life projects (via current concerns) with product consumption

and brand preferences. Cultural intermediaries and social networks influence whether a particular product (e.g., cosmetics) is appropriate for achieving a particular goal (e.g., attractiveness) and, in this sense, provide a link between a goal and a tactic. In turn, the importance placed on a goal (e.g., attractiveness) is likely to be linked to cultural ideologies, social networks, life themes, and life projects. Consistent with previous research, figure 1 illustrates that consumers' ideological positions are grounded in their interpretations of cultural ideologies, cultural intermediaries, and social influence in the context of their own life themes and life projects (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Our research further examines the effects of consumers' life themes and projects, as well as consumer ideologies, on product involvement and brand commitment.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD

Research Context

Competing cultural and political ideologies frame activities in postsocialist Central Europe. Central Europeans often characterize aspects of daily life by drawing contrasts between socialism and consumerism (Dunn 1999). Consumerism is associated with youth, modernity, flexibility, individualism, colorfulness, and satisfaction of wants, whereas socialism is associated with backwardness, age, drabness, inadaptability, collectivism, and deprivation. Perceptions of people reflect these dichotomies—some seen as young, modern, and dynamic, others as old, passive, and incapable of adapting to new circumstances (Dunn 1999, p. 129; Martin 1992). Predictably, this dialectic affects and is affected by changing consumer desires (Ger, Belk, and Lasco 1993).

The competing cultural ideologies of socialism and consumerism in Central Europe are associated with appearance discourses (Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Kligman 1996). Many argue that Central European women will not make an instant translation to another way of life (Drakulic 1993). Nevertheless, during the 1990s in Central Europe, the cultural intermediaries associated with the cosmetics market changed dramatically. Compared with a near absence of a cosmetics market in the early 1990s, by 1998 the cosmetics markets in Hungary and Romania, respectively, reached US\$238.7 million and US\$2.3 million (Euromonitor International 2002; Vegh 1997). Cosmetics products were vigorously marketed and available in open-air markets, drug stores, discount stores, multilevel direct marketing firms, and specialty boutiques (Euromonitor International 2000; Vegh 1997; Woodruff et al. 1998). Indeed, "consumers are now confronted with thousands of products—anywhere from relatively inexpensive no-name nail polishes to designer fragrances" (Vegh 1997, p. 3). Women's magazines that promote the importance of body image, beauty, and fashion have become ubiquitous, and because of the privatization of television and radio markets, Central European women have access to international media. In discussing print advertisements in Romanian women's magazines, Nicolaescu states that they "almost exclusively disseminate images of Western women . . . in an attempt to

create new constructions of femininity that carry greater legitimacy" (1995b, p. 1). Similarly, television and print advertising in Hungary "portray a Western lifestyle and imply that cosmetics are integral to that lifestyle" (Vegh 1997, p. 3).

Several researchers have noted that younger Central European women are more likely than older women to attend to their appearance (Gal and Kligman 2000a; Nicolaescu 1995a). Because younger women have grown up in a post-socialist economy (without the norm of androgyny) in a time when cultural intermediaries are promoting Western models of grooming, they have been more likely to accept the importance of appearance as a public symbol. However, even though they may concur that appearance has become more important, only those women with discretionary income are able to purchase cosmetic and beauty products, which are still widely categorized as luxuries (Euromonitor International 2000; Vegh 1997).

Research Activity

We engaged in a research program in Central Europe, primarily concentrated in Hungary, but also in Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic, between fall 1989 and fall 2001. Hungary was and is at the forefront of much of Central Europe in developing a consumer culture; other countries are progressing at varying rates (Braun 1999). We have visited, worked, lived in the region, and engaged in intensive periods of data collection, including participant observation, focus groups, structured personal interviews, and depth interviews. In this article, we draw on our experiences and participant observation from the past 12 years but focus on two specific investigations: (1) depth interviews and participant observation with Hungarian and Romanian women in the summers of 1998 and 2001, respectively, and (2) a survey of 340 women in Budapest in fall 1998.

Depth Interviews and Participant Observation. We interviewed 28 women who represent varying socioeconomic conditions and ages (ranging from 22 to 40) and differing levels of cosmetics involvement. Interviews were conducted in two cities in Hungary and two cities in Romania. Hungarian interviews were conducted in Budapest and Miskolc. Miskolc is a city of 100,000 in eastern Hungary and, compared with Budapest, has changed more slowly, has higher levels of unemployment, fewer economic opportunities, and smaller numbers and variety of imported products and retailing options (Timár 2001). The Romanian interviews were conducted in Cluj and Timisoara, cities of about 300,000 located in western Romania.

We structured interviews around a general set of predetermined questions. The flow of the interview, however, emerged in relation to characteristics of informants' consumption ideologies, experiences, and meanings (Thompson 1997). Interviews in Hungary (summer 1998) lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. We then went shopping with our informants for cosmetics for two to six hours in various locations, following our informants' typical shopping patterns and

TABLE 1

INFORMANTS INVOLVED WITH COSMETICS

	Éva	Adriana	Ester
Cosmetics use and involvement	1.1: I didn't get cosmetics in Hungary in 1990 . . . my colleagues and friends brought me some cosmetics from Sweden, from Western countries. To learn about cosmetics I read the magazines, the newspapers, and from a friend who is a cosmetician. I have only men colleagues. My friend, girlfriend, uses cosmetics like me. Not too much painting, but the cosmetics for the face that everybody uses, I think in this time.	1.8: I started using mascara as a teenager, but my parents didn't agree. It was different from now. After getting married, I used a lot "of makeup" because I escaped from my father . . . it was an old mentality. Especially at my age, I have to arrange myself. I take eye concealer from my daughter sometimes when I work late. . . . You have to take care to look good.	1.15: I love pinks. They are soft and clean. I don't like strong colors. I like calm colors. More natural. When I started to work, that is when I really started. Of course, I felt better. Even when I am in a hurry to go somewhere, I put on mascara and lipstick. I always have that. I look better than without. Every time I am at home I put on some . . . every two or three hours I check my makeup. Because I think my face is prettier with these. It is important.
Consumer as interpreter	1.2: If I were younger maybe I would use more cosmetics, to be younger. I like the natural. Maybe my mother likes natural, to be natural, and I bring it forward.	1.9: I dedicate myself to my family. You can see that in the education of my kids. I take care of my husband. This is how a woman should be. You must, must, must have time for yourself; you have to take care not to neglect yourself.	1.16: It is different than when I was 16 or 17, we didn't have too many things going on in Budapest. Like now, you can find a place where they teach you to use makeup, and there are so many brands that you can choose from. Cosmetic brands everywhere that you want. Good quality.
Cultural ideologies and intermediaries	1.3: The American people are the most beautiful people . . . not for you, this is my opinion. [In 1998] what I read in the magazines, I can buy it in Hungary, in this country, I can buy everything in one month. . . . The articles in <i>Walla</i> are very good articles and talk about what an older woman like me wants to know, not only a 20-year-old woman. It's for all the women who would like to know more information.	1.10: Even before the revolution we had a satellite antenna, even though it was very risky. But we wanted to see new things, America, Italy, Germany. We took chances. I like risks. Romanian women look better because they take care of themselves. They have access to new and good products. They saw other influences, from an American or Italian woman on television. We copy them. . . . Even if you don't have so much money, . . . you have products for everyday and for special occasions.	1.17: Clinique has this gift thing. I like that a lot. . . . I am really looking forward to the next gift-giving time. . . . There is always something that you need . . . they have product samples, and you can try. If there is something that I find that is good for me, then I will probably buy that. So, next time I will spend more money. Clinique lipstick has nice colors. . . . It is not really red or something. You can really use that. When some companies give gifts, they use what's left . . . bad coloring that women my age would not use.
Local context and social networks	1.4: I buy cosmetics for my mother. . . . She is 70, and she never used cosmetics. I ask her to use this, although I think my mother is very, very nice without cosmetics. And I told her now's the time you have to use cosmetics because you have to stay young, to care, and you have to look young. I buy L'Oréal cosmetics for her every time. My husband's mother buys Ponds. My husband's mother is a very nice old woman, and maybe Ponds is very good for her.	1.11: My husband of 22 years buys me a useful gift—a perfume, deodorants, shampoo, nail polish, a lipstick. He checks on the label, the number, and the brand. Yes, he likes me to be arranged. My husband doesn't question my daughters' [cosmetics use]. You have to look arranged for jobs. We have foreign guests coming and visiting the factory for contracts, so we have to look good. German, Italian, American. Our boss likes us to look good.	1.18: They started to issue <i>Cosmo</i> here. So I read that. When I travel, I buy <i>Cosmo</i> I mostly choose my perfume from the magazine. I don't have many friends that use makeup, and my mom doesn't use makeup. So I had to learn everything for myself. An office friend she just uses everything so perfect. But everything looks perfect on her. . . . Of course I ask and she shows me how to do things.
Ideological positions	1.5: But in this time I think if the government, in this parliament will bring much money, the people will buy. . . . And I think everybody wants to live better, and for this better life I have to use my head, and after I can buy more expensive products.	1.12: Other colleagues, because they didn't take care of themselves, the husband got divorced, got another woman, younger and more attractive. You shouldn't neglect yourself under any circumstances.	1.19: So you are meeting a lot of customers and the traveling public. Everybody has a little bit of makeup, but it is unusual to have a lot of makeup. Makeup is supposed to be understated, not obvious. There are a lot of beautiful girls here.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Éva	Adriana	Ester
Involvement with branded products	1.6: I told you that when my child was born I couldn't buy baby cream, and now I have to choose, because this [brand] is very nice, and this [brand] is very nice too. I think this country will change like other countries. . . . We will have much money, and I think we will change everything.	1.13: If a product is more expensive, it is better. The advertising says this. If I had money, I would buy more expensive products, for instance an epilating cream. A Romanian epilating cream is good, but takes more time and doesn't clean completely. My daughter came with an Oriflame epilating cream—less time and better quality. If I had money, I would buy it.	1.20: I would buy this [brand], but not this or this. . . . These are new things. I have never tried them. . . . I used to use this a long time ago. . . . It is German. This is the first thing in this category to come in. . . . These are new within a year. . . . I used to buy those in the [United] States. I brought the shampoo for my grandma [from the States]. Usually when someone travels, I find out what I like and tell them what to bring for me. I like big brands. Price doesn't matter. I had Geo, Roma. They are not even sold here.
Brand commitment and brand experimentation	1.7: I use L'Oréal face cream every time. Sometimes I try others, and I come back to L'Oréal. I'm not loyal; I feel this is the best. I use Clinique, only the lipstick and mascara. I like Clinique very much. Did you see? Natural, nice. I tried this new perfume. . . . I use Pantene Pro-V for my hair; I tried Organics when it came out, but it is not as good.	1.14: During Ceaușescu we had only Romanian products, . . . after the revolution we got a lot of foreign products. I use Nivea now, creams, deodorant, and lotion, not shampoo, because it is expensive.	1.21: I always have one or two things from Clinique. . . . It is a L'Oréal lipstick that I like. Not many stores sell it here in Hungary. In the Drogerie Markt, when they opened they had that brand. . . . There is Herberia. I like a Cover Girl product. I can't find it here in Hungary. You can find it in different parts of Europe, in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, but not here.

preferences. The Hungarian women spoke English well enough for us to avoid translation. The Romanian interviews (summer 2001) were conducted in Romanian and lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. We then observed the Romanian women's collections of cosmetics and had them demonstrate how they used various cosmetics. Interviews, shopping trips, and field notes were transcribed and scrutinized by hand and with the aid of a computer-based text analysis package, NUD*IST. Analysis of our data involved the identification of ideological positions related to consumerism and appearance, as well as of their relationships to involvement with cosmetics, involvement with branded products, brand commitment, and brand experimentation (McCracken 1988). Through our analyses we sought to uncover patterns of intertheme consistency, contradiction, and surprise (McCracken 1988; Price and Arnould 1998).

Survey. The Hungarian office of an international market research firm conducted structured personal interviews with 340 adult women in Budapest in October 1998. The questionnaire focused on the cosmetics product category, including questions about cosmetics involvement, involvement with branded cosmetics, brand commitment, brand experimentation, and the importance of a groomed appearance. (See table A1 for items, means, and scale reliabilities.) Standard questionnaire development, multistage sampling, and contact and interview procedures were implemented (Dillman 1999). The cooperation rate was 69%, and the data

reflect 1998 Hungarian population characteristics on age and education.

CONSUMER CASES

In the three subsections that follow, we draw on our depth interviews to situate cosmetics involvement, involvement with branded products, brand commitment, and brand experimentation within the broader context of our informants' everyday lives. We concentrate on interviews with seven women, including three Hungarian women who live in Budapest, one who lives in Miskolc, and four Romanian women who live in Cluj. We include younger and older, wealthier and poorer informants in a variety of occupations. These women represent the range of ideological positions, product involvement, involvement with branded products, brand commitment, and brand experimentation evident among our 28 informants. Following our report of the consumer cases, we integrate our findings from the case studies of these seven women and our survey results.

We organize our reporting of consumer cases around our interpretation of informants' levels of cosmetics involvement and use these seven women's stories as the basis for relationships presented in figure 1. Table 1 (Éva, Adriana, Ester), table 2 (Judit, Mona), and table 3 (Alexandra, Laura) include verbatim excerpts from each informant as related to aspects of figure 1. Each informant excerpt is numbered to

TABLE 2
INFORMANTS UNINVOLVED WITH COSMETICS

	Judit	Mona
Cosmetics use and involvement	2.1: I don't usually use lipsticks or eye shadow. I think my daughter uses more of them than me. I don't like cosmetics too much. I think there are those for whom it is very important, who spend a lot of money, but I have more important things.	2.8: For my job, I put on an eyeliner, a lipstick that matches my clothes color, I don't yet use foundation, or I don't use foundation anymore, lack of time, I don't know. That's it for everyday.
Consumer as interpreter	2.2: I don't like asking information about these things . . . I think women over 40 must have some experience about different cosmetics to feel comfortable, and I don't have too much . . .	2.9: My marriage and the birth of my kids completely changed my life, my priorities, everything. I am loyal and dedicated completely to my family. My husband is more religious and says he prefers natural women. He has a very bad opinion of those who use makeup, strong, excessive makeup. Some women who spend on cosmetics just use it as a revenge on the partner.
Cultural ideologies and intermediaries	2.3: <i>New Elixir</i> , a Hungarian women's fashion magazine, is about your life, about your mind, about your health. So, it's quite an interesting magazine.	2.10: The personal connections are the major thing, and this brings bureaucracy, corruption. It is not difficult to change the quality of the bread, or the number of television channels that we see. The most difficult thing to accomplish would be to change the mentality of the people.
Local context and social networks	2.4: I met somebody, and she looked at me and she stared at me, "What about you? You should use eye shadow or something similar." Of course, it might be good. But I don't like it very much. I think most women use more or less cosmetics . . . after 30 mainly. They have to! Young teenagers are crazy about cosmetics, they dye their hair at age 13 or 14.	2.11: It is a true cult for appearance. The colleagues are young. One of the most important preoccupations outside the job is to buy clothes and jewelry. They are very preoccupied with appearance. I would feel bad if I didn't wear makeup to the office. Someone would tell me about it, and that would be a proof of friendship, and I would do the same.
Ideological positions	2.5: So, it is very important for me to keep fit, to keep my health, of course, and to try to teach children at school. [Health] is a very important topic in my job and in my life actually. So, it became more important than some years ago. I didn't deal with these things. I think over 40, you must change your mind or else.	2.12: You could get a better job, more attention in society, the attitude of others depends upon your appearance . . . one of the evaluation criteria is the appearance of the employee. Those who have money take care of themselves, their clothes, hairstyle, nail care. Everything, all is conditioned by money.
Involvement with branded products	2.6: But forget about California Fitness. It isn't that important. . . . I use their things more often than the [other cosmetics manufacturers].	2.13: For instance, there are Avon representatives. They come regularly and bring catalogues. I don't use these products. I buy products I know are good and according to my finances.
Brand commitment and brand experimentation	2.7: Since I am a member of this network, the California Fitness, I've been changing . . . I think. For example, I dropped smoking forever. So [before] I was afraid of water. . . . Now, I go swimming [at a club]. I like their products very much. I buy body milk, and they have a new cream. They have two creams and tonic and some wrinkle cream, and they are really very good. They sell not only cosmetics, but different vitamins and other things to keep you fit . . . And you can buy a lot of kinds of cosmetics, its philosophy is to be healthy.	2.14: I have discussions with my sister and friends; when they were happy with one product, I bought it, and if I was happy, I bought it again.

facilitate referencing in the text: table 1, entries 1.1–1.21; table 2, entries 2.1–2.14; and table 3, entries 3.1–3.14.

Informants Involved with Cosmetics

Éva. Éva, age 37, is not currently employed but has worked in the media. She is married to an architect, and they have one grade-school-age child. They live in Budapest. Éva is the wealthiest among these seven informants; she and her family travel annually to Western Europe and have visited the United States. They own their home and recently purchased a new car. Éva was wearing mascara and

lipstick when we met and reports that she wears makeup daily. She optimistically endorses consumer culture (1.3). Éva is involved with cosmetics, fashion, and the idea of branded products because they are new and part of the changing consumer world around her. In the early 1990s, her friends who traveled to the West brought her Western brands of cosmetics (1.1). For Éva, wearing cosmetics is connected not only with the new economy and being cosmopolitan but also with the distant past. While shopping, she moves seamlessly between discussing choices in cosmetics and discussing political and economic transitions (1.5). Éva takes us to an apothecary built in 1784. She comments on the beautiful architecture and talks about the

TABLE 3
INFORMANTS AMBIVALENT ABOUT COSMETICS

	Alexandra	Laura
Cosmetics use and involvement	3.1: Normally I wash my hair twice a week. But . . . I knew we would meet, so I washed it yesterday. It depends on my mood. I use corrector and cream powder in winter when I am not so brown, but in the summer. . . . It is disgusting. If I go to the theater then I always use makeup, but if I go to a movie I don't. So, I always say, "Okay, you have to have a nice look, but you don't have to prepare for the next beauty contest every morning."	3.8: Only if something bad happened, a disaster, and then I wouldn't think about appearance. Mascara, this is something that I always use, and powder everyday for my face. I like it. . . . Mascara, I can put that on myself. But I can't put on makeup. I can give advice, but I don't know how to do it for myself. Maybe I am too stressed, I won't get the effect that I want. I feel better without makeup.
Consumer as interpreter	3.2: When I'll be the grandparent then it will be okay for the parent, because I've changed my way of thinking. I will give it to my children.	3.9: I buy things that I don't really need. I know that I don't need it, but I buy it, and then I am sorry. . . . Those things can wait.
Cultural ideologies and intermediaries	3.3: I mean during the socialist communist regime there wasn't a choice. People weren't conscious about cosmetics. The only thing that was important was to have a workplace and to meet the requirement of the socialist men and women.	3.10: Romanian women are more attractive than five years ago because they have the chance to find out new things from TV and magazines—how to put on makeup and how to dress. For instance, my mother doesn't take care of herself. . . . You know we didn't learn how to use cosmetics from her. We watched TV, read books. My mother didn't tell me anything.
Local context and social networks	3.4: There is <i>Cosmopolitan</i> in Hungarian, but it is not as good as in English. It is thinner, and there are only advertisements in it and about sex and that is all. I am lucky because we have an English teacher at the university, and they subscribe to this magazine, and I can read it. And there are fashion models, as well and cooking advice and so on. So, it is much nicer.	3.11: They judge you according to appearance. Even in the job, women discuss . . . and then you also have to buy it, because you want to be at the same level. I saw this, and after they buy the products, they show off. Look what I have. Those who cannot buy suffer, even if they don't admit it. It is painful. . . . After the Revolution, I guess this is when it started—with jeans.
Ideological positions	3.5: We have to forget about communism, and we have to change our way of thinking, but it is very, very hard to change the thinking of the whole country.	3.12: If you look good, you get a good guy, a good job, even though you are not very smart. But many have problems because of this . . . it is risky to look good. Everyone wants to look better than the other. They think that if you are dressed according to the latest fashion, everyone will think that you have money and have a good life.
Involvement with branded products	3.6: If I have money I get cosmetics at a pharmacy, if I don't have much money I go to a drugstore. Usually [pharmacists] have creams that they do themselves. They are good ones because they know what to put in them, but they don't have names. And they are cheaper. . . . The name isn't important to me, what is important is quality. If I find an unknown product, but it is good for me, I buy it. . . . And I don't trust these [products] . . . it would be cheaper to buy them, but I haven't heard about them. I don't trust them.	3.13: I saw many women that want to use branded products, not because they know it is good, but because they saw a commercial, or they want to show off. They don't think it is possible that the products don't fit you. Branded products might not fit you. At some point, we had Pantene shampoos. All the commercial breaks had ads with Pantene. I didn't want to buy. I got it as a gift and used it, and I wasn't happy with it. I didn't like. It might be a good brand, but it didn't fit me, so brand is not enough.
Brand commitment and brand experimentation	3.7: This is my favorite. I just found it. . . . It is brand new. I tried Wash & Go. It was advertised very frequently, and everybody ran to the shops and bought it. But I said, "OK, it's very popular, but it is not good for me [it tangled my hair]."	3.14: I prefer L'Oréal, and Avon and Oriflame have good body lotion. I still like to try other things. I like to try only things that I have heard of.

flood of opportunities and brands facing her and her country. A later discussion reveals more about the intertwining of cosmetics use with economic transition and elements of her past (1.6). Éva links cosmetics use to being and looking young (1.4) but does not talk about using cosmetics to enhance attractiveness, to please her husband, or to please anyone else. She prefers brands that she associates with a natural look (e.g., Clinique, Nivea) and her mother (1.2). To her, using natural shades of cosmetics brings forward

something of her beautiful mother and an aesthetic from the past.

Éva uses information from many sources to experiment with and develop attachments to brands (1.3, 1.1). She is committed to purchasing high-quality consumer goods and is interested in new brands. Although she is committed to specific brands, she is still looking, experimenting with new brands, and weighing information from friends, magazine articles, and trusted retailers. Strolling through a shopping

center, visiting a Clinique counter, and browsing in an apothecary, she shares her opinions about quality. She is selective about what products she buys and where she shops. Some cosmetics are purchased only at an apothecary, others at a specialty counter, but she “never buys important products in the supermarket.” Éva discusses several brand preferences but denies being “loyal.” She reports trying several brands and rejecting them because she views some other brands as better (1.7).

Adriana. Adriana, age 40, works full-time as a factory worker. She and her husband (also a factory worker) live in Cluj with their three children (one in high school; two in their 20s who are currently employed). The family has little discretionary income and has not traveled out of Romania. Adriana is involved with cosmetics, and she engages in daily and weekly grooming rituals (1.8). Adriana views economic and political changes of the past decade in Romania in a predominantly positive light and as consistent with her self-image; she defines herself as part of a new generation that takes risks and learns about foreign places (1.10). Adriana’s interest in attractiveness, however, transcends politics (1.12). Using cosmetics is consistent with Adriana’s life themes and projects—being a good wife, mother, and employee. She feels that she has a partnership with her husband and daughters to look attractive, and she acknowledges that youth and attractiveness are now more important in the workplace (1.9, 1.11). Adriana links Romanian women’s enhanced attractiveness to better products and Western influences (1.10). Although she has never traveled internationally, Adriana is interested in the world outside Romania. She is drawn to foreign influences both at home (satellite television) and work (European and U.S. visitors). This orientation is linked to experimenting with and developing loyalty to Western brands. Although Adriana is attentive to Western brands and believes advertising messages (1.13, 1.14), she can make do without the expensive brands. For example, she gives detailed instructions for making a facial mask, admonishing us “even if you are busy you can find time, I find time.”

Ester. Ester is 26 years of age and works full-time for Delta Airlines. She and her husband (who is self-employed) have one preschool child; they live with parents in Budapest. Ester travels in Western Europe for her job but has little discretionary income. When we met Ester she was wearing a very light shade of eye shadow, mascara, and a natural “brownish” (her characterization) shade of lipstick. Ester wants to appear natural. Ester’s father’s girlfriend taught her how to use makeup when she was 16 or 17 years old, but she dates her involvement with makeup to when she began working for Delta about five years ago (1.15). Ester considers it essential to be well groomed and attractive (and believes that cosmetics are important in looking attractive) because of its importance to her work (1.19). Although Ester has little discretionary income, she is involved with cosmetics, reads magazines, observes and seeks advice from coworkers, and experiments with different brands (1.18).

Ester is involved with branded cosmetics; she was our only informant who immediately launched into a discussion of cosmetics brands, and she displays an impressive array of brand knowledge (1.20). She is sensitive to and savvy about marketing tactics and tries newly advertised brands and brands on promotion (1.17). Ester is involved with shopping and consumer culture more generally. She frequently remarks about the wide array of high-quality brands for all types of cosmetics (1.16). Ester finds the explosive array of and information about cosmetic products interesting and enjoyable. She has developed a variety of heuristics to help her negotiate the complexities of the marketplace. Ester is happy to share advice and shop for others. She actively seeks out Western brands at home and abroad and likes staying at the cutting edge of what is new and not yet available in Budapest (1.21).

Summary. Our involved informants ranged in age from 26 to 40 years old. All use cosmetics on a daily basis. Adriana has been involved with appearance and cosmetics since her youth, whereas Éva and Ester have become involved within the past five to seven years. Each connects her involvement with cosmetics to her life themes and projects, and each actively seeks information related to cosmetics products, brands, and product use. Additionally, they actively seek out and engage support with regard to cosmetics use from their social networks. All endorse the benefits of consumer culture and are involved with branded cosmetics. Éva and Ester have experimented with many Western brands and are committed to particular brands.

Informants Uninvolved with Cosmetics

Judit. Judit, age 40, works full-time as a middle-school teacher, as well as part-time as a tutor and as an administrative assistant. She, her husband, and their two high-school-age children live in eastern Budapest. Although Judit owns a computer, she has little discretionary income and is not well traveled. When we met Judit she was wearing a little bit of lipstick but confessed that she almost never wears cosmetics (2.1). Judit’s children and friends pressure her to use cosmetics and change her socialist attitudes, but she expresses discomfort with buying, using, and even talking about cosmetics (2.2, 2.4). Appearance is more important to Judit now than it was just five years ago. She notes throughout the interview that she “must change” her appearance, attitude, health, reading habits, and politics to keep her job and support her children (2.5). But she is ambivalent about consumerist ideologies. Judit believes the political system “had to change” and works hard to make money to buy more things (explicitly endorsing consumerist ideologies), yet she reports more disadvantages than advantages of the new system. There are “nicer shops and wider assortments, but the people don’t have much money.” Describing the public transportation that she relies on, “It got worse in the past two or three years, much worse.” She also states, “You couldn’t see homeless people, for example, 10 or 12 years ago.” Now “it’s a luxury to buy books.” She

bemoans the lack of funding for education and educators and is trying to “get more money . . . to buy different things for the children or for me . . . I hope my children will live better and easier, I hope.” Despite an avowed disinterest in cosmetics, shopping, and brands, Judit is committed to a Western cosmetics brand—California Fitness—and believes that it has changed her life (2.6–2.7). She links her brand commitment to an ideological position that reflects her life themes and projects—staying healthy to help her children and her students have a better future (2.5, 2.3).

Mona. Mona, age 38, has a university degree and works full-time as an information technology engineer. She is married to an IT engineer; they have two preschool-age children and live in Cluj. Mona and her husband own an efficiency apartment, have little discretionary income, and are not well traveled. As a teenager Mona was involved with cosmetics but now is not involved with her appearance or cosmetics. Mona wears cosmetics to work only because “it is a necessity” and feels pressured by a “cult for appearance” to use makeup and pay attention to appearance (2.8, 2.11). Wearing cosmetics to work is consistent with her work role and makes her feel better but clashes with how she defines her roles as wife and mother (2.9). Caught between employer, coworkers, and husband, Mona carves out a compromise—“moderate use of cosmetics”—so that her husband “isn’t bothered.” Attractiveness, wearing cosmetics, consumerist ideology, and money are now linked for Mona. In the new economy, money buys attractiveness, and attractiveness brings job success (2.12). Mona is disdainful of Romanians’ preoccupation with appearance and consumerist ideologies but says “the personal connections are the major thing, and this brings bureaucracy, corruption” (2.10). Mona is skeptical about Romanians’ consumerist mentality, observing, “the market economy is not just a logo.” She reflects a general disdain for Western brands and skirts any attempts to talk about brands (2.13). Mona cannot identify a simple link between cosmetics brands and her life themes and projects. Although Mona engages in repeat purchase behavior, brand commitment does not make sense to her, and she avoids Western brands (2.14).

Summary. Judit and Mona are among our older informants, ages 40 and 38, respectively. Although self-described as not involved with cosmetics, both Judit and Mona feel significant pressure from cultural intermediaries and social networks to purchase and use cosmetics. Compared with our more involved consumers, Judit is, at best, ambivalent about consumerist ideologies, and Mona seems to prefer life under socialism. Both are conflicted about how to link consumerist and appearance discourses to their own life themes and projects. Although neither woman is involved with branded cosmetics or engages in brand experimentation, Judit is adamantly loyal to California Fitness, a Western brand.

Informants Ambivalent about Cosmetics

Alexandra. Alexandra, age 24, lives with her fiancée in Miskolc. She teaches English in a secondary school, tutors

part-time, and is a part-time graduate student. She has little discretionary income but travels elsewhere in Central Europe and to the Mediterranean. Alexandra was wearing lipstick and brightly colored nail polish when we met her at the train station in Miskolc. She tells us that she wears makeup according to her mood, the season, and her finances, and she seems at ease with or without it (3.1). She associates the explosion of fashion and cosmetics with freedom from communism and believes that a woman’s appearance is more important now than it was four or five years ago (3.3). However, Alexandra has clear life goals and themes that are not strongly linked to appearance. She prefers discussion about politics, philosophy, or movies, all of which seem more closely tied to her goals and interests than are appearance and cosmetics. Alexandra believes education, not appearance, is the key to success in the new economy and is enthusiastic about improving her English, traveling, and learning about the West. She is optimistic about leaving socialism behind and embraces consumerist ideology (3.2, 3.5). Alexandra has a playful, exploratory approach to appearance and cosmetic brands, is familiar with many Western brands, and is attentive to advertising, packaging, and other product information (3.4).

Although Alexandra conjectures that brand name does not matter, her shopping behavior affirms her preference for what is new, well advertised, and imported—but finances dictate whether her preferences become purchases (3.6). Alexandra is a bargain shopper across product categories and is happy to negotiate prices. Like Ester, Alexandra is sensitive to and savvy about marketing techniques, describing to us what makes a good sale or promotion. Although Alexandra is not particularly involved with cosmetics, she is involved with cosmetics brands, is aware of new brands, and actively experiments with advertised Western brands, even though some popular brands have disappointed her (3.7). She is familiar with television advertising and vividly described several cosmetics brands’ television commercials as we browsed the cosmetics aisles at Rossman in Miskolc.

Laura. Laura, age 25, is single and lives with her parents in Cluj. She had a privileged childhood and graduated from an arts high school but was not accepted into an undergraduate university. Laura is a full-time office worker at a cosmetics firm. She has some discretionary income but is not well traveled. Laura has strong but ambivalent feelings about consumerist ideologies, appearance, cosmetics, and brands. By contrast with Alexandra, Laura is consumed with her appearance (3.8). She was on vacation when we interviewed her and remarked about how she did not like being home because she had more time to look in the mirror and feel bad. Laura is cynical about consumer culture and associated fashion discourses; she talks about the competition among her coworkers to keep up with one another’s purchases, and about how consumer desires are problematic because of little discretionary income (3.11). However, like Mona, Laura feels pressure to conform and feels that Romanian women are more attractive now because of greater access to cosmetics and more information about how to use

them (3.10). She cannot find a comfortable link between her personal circumstances and her ideological beliefs about appearance and consumer culture. She links attractiveness to money and believes that attractiveness is the key to finding a boyfriend with money (3.12). Laura battles to resist consumerist ideologies, involvement with cosmetics, and involvement with branded products, and yet she feels seduced by their temptations (3.9).

Laura's purchase of cosmetics also reflects ambivalence. On the one hand, she would like to buy cosmetics in stores where she can try the products and get advice from salespeople. On the other hand, she is concerned about trying on cosmetics in public and anticipates that salespeople will be aloof and mechanical. If you try an expensive product and then do not buy it, "you can see dissatisfaction on their face—they become cold." Given Laura's very conflicted views about cosmetics, fashion, and appearance and her general dissatisfaction with herself, it is not surprising that brands, too, evoke ambivalent feelings (3.13–3.14).

Summary. Alexandra and Laura, both in their mid-20s, have mixed feelings about the role of cosmetics in their lives. Both agree that appearance and cosmetics are more important to them and to Central European women than they were 5–10 years earlier; Alexandra is much more of an advocate of consumerism, however. As with our informants who are not involved with cosmetics (Judit and Mona), there is not a clear relationship between Alexandra's and Laura's involvement with cosmetics and their purchase and use. Laura feels pressured to wear makeup whenever she leaves the house, and yet she feels uncomfortable wearing it; Alexandra's use is determined by her mood, the situation, and finances. Both women have some preferred brands; they are more passive acquirers of cosmetics information than our involved informants, yet more active than our uninvolved informants. Alexandra and Laura experiment with brands popularized by the media and recommended by others.

INTEGRATION OF CONSUMER CASES AND SURVEY FINDINGS

These seven women help us to understand product involvement, brand commitment, and brand experimentation. Their stories provide evidence of the concept that we term "involvement with branded products," which has not been previously addressed in the consumer research literature. In the following subsections, we elaborate on our findings from our depth interviews, supplementing these findings with survey data.

The Origins of Product Involvement

As per figure 1, product involvement is prompted by macroenvironmental factors, social influence, consumers' own histories, life themes, and life projects, and by their personal ideological positions about appearance, consumer culture, products, and brands. In particular, the changing cultural ideologies and messages from cultural intermediaries in Central

Europe have altered the perceived importance of appearance and cosmetics for women. A close look at our informants' stories suggests the complexities of consumers' relationships to brands and products and their development.

First, and not evident from prior research, ideological positions are important determinants of product involvement (see fig. 1). Our context, transforming Central Europe, makes evident the connection of ideological positions and product involvement, and two types of connections emerge. Cosmetics involvement for our informants is linked to a consumerist ideology, a deposing of socialism and embracing of consumerism. For Éva, Adriana, and Ester (who are highly involved with cosmetics), cosmetics represent freedom of expression and access to the rest of the world. These women report few mixed emotions regarding political and economic changes of the past decade and, indeed, have embraced the changes. We also found, however, that some women (e.g., Alexandra) can generally support a consumerist ideology and the West but can also be ambivalent about or not involved with cosmetics.

Cosmetics involvement is also linked to a belief that a woman's feminine appearance in postsocialist Central Europe is increasingly important. All of our informants, regardless of their stated (or our inferred) level of involvement with cosmetics, indicated that appearance has become more important to them and Central European women since the early 1990s. For example, Judit, Mona, Laura, and Ester discuss the increased importance of their appearance to retaining their employment. Approximately 90% of survey respondents indicated that having a well-groomed appearance was as important or more important than it was five years ago. These results also indicate that the importance of appearance has increased more for younger than for older women ($r = .44, p \leq .001$), and being employed and higher incomes are associated with greater importance of appearance ($r = .32, p \leq .001, r = .25, p \leq .001$, respectively). However, our consumer cases argue that a general endorsement of consumerist ideology may be more important than age as a precondition for cosmetics involvement. Of course, future research may establish links between age and ideological positions, some of which are hinted at in our informants' reports (1.2, 2.4, 2.11).

Second, our findings support the idea that product involvement is affected by the extent to which and how consumers link the product category to key life themes and life projects. Prior research suggests that self-relevant products prompt product involvement, and we observe this in the cases of Ester, Adriana, and Éva, for whom cosmetics are closely tied to their life themes and projects. Our research, however, underscores that the process of defining a product as self-relevant can be difficult for consumers, perhaps especially in the context of shifting ideological bases. In the cases of Mona and Laura, we witness women who are struggling to figure out whether and how to relate cosmetics to their lives. Our data also highlight the creative role of consumers in making linkages between their life themes and projects and cosmetics. Pressured to pay attention to ap-

pearance and cosmetics but uncomfortable with related discourses and behaviors, Judit finds a way around—she focuses on health and a range of products (including cosmetics) to maintain her health and youth as she works to accomplish her goals.

Third, our findings indicate that cultural intermediaries have played important roles in Central Europe by disseminating images of Western women, introducing new cosmetics products and brands, and informing Central European women about cosmetics use. It is, however, unclear, based on our interviews, the extent to which cultural intermediaries prompt cosmetics involvement. Consistent with prior research, our survey findings indicate that women who are more involved with cosmetics are more likely to seek information from advertising, magazine articles, and brochures ($r = .41, p \leq .001$). Although all of our high-involvement informants are actively seeking and giving information in the product category, the uninvolved and the ambivalent informants feel bombarded by cultural intermediaries with messages to conform (2.4, 2.11, 3.11). Our findings suggest the value of understanding how uninvolved consumers interpret messages rather than just investing in increased advertising exposure in order to prompt product involvement.

Finally, social networks play an important role in facilitating product involvement. Our survey findings suggest a strong relationship between product involvement and the use of friends and family as information sources ($r = .36, p \leq .001$). However, whether and how social influence prompts product involvement requires additional inquiry. Adriana has had a long involvement with cosmetics, and her involvement is well supported by her social network. It is easy to speculate that if Mona's husband were more supportive of her wearing cosmetics, it would be easier for her to link cosmetics to her life themes and projects. Judit's friends and daughter advocate that she be more involved with cosmetics, and yet she resists. Prior research might lead us to posit that social influence turns on the importance of conforming to social norms (as in the Theory of Reasoned Action), but that is misleading. All of our informants value the opinions voiced in their social networks, but whether and how these opinions are related to cosmetics use and involvement vary. Adriana and Judit both talk with pride about their daughters' appearances and other attributes. Adriana exchanges information about cosmetics with her teenage daughters and uses their cosmetics products, whereas Judit, encouraged by her daughter to use cosmetics, is not particularly open to the idea. Moreover, although their mothers do not approve of or wear cosmetics, Éva and Ester buy products for them and consider their mother's aesthetics ("natural colors") in making their own cosmetic selections. Extending the brand community results of McAlexander et al. (2002; see also Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), we find that a consumer-centric complex web of relationships prompts product involvement.

Involvement with Branded Products

As we talked and shopped with our informants, we learned that some are involved with the idea of branded products but are not necessarily involved with a particular brand (Fournier 1998). Moreover, some have antibrand attitudes, that is, they are not interested in the idea of brands. In figure 1, we posit that consumers' ideological positions prompt involvement with branded products, which is consequential in prompting not only product involvement but also brand commitment and brand experimentation.

The concept of involvement with branded products is rarely talked about in brand research and is frequently taken for granted in U.S. contexts. In our Central European context, involvement with branded products varies widely, which is attributable to the fact that prior to the early 1990s few branded cosmetics products were available, and brand information was not salient (Drazin 1994; Feick, Coulter, and Price 1995; James 1995). Involvement with branded products seems grounded in consumerist ideologies associated with brands, which is consistent with Holt's (2002) arguments. He observes that in postmodernity, "brands have become the preeminent site through which people experience and express the social world" (p. 82).

We consider the relationship between cosmetics involvement and involvement with branded cosmetics products using survey data and find a significant relationship ($r = .32, p \leq .001$). To a lesser extent, involvement with branded cosmetics is related to both brand commitment ($r = .18, p \leq .01$) and brand experimentation ($r = .16, p \leq .001$). Nonetheless, among our informants, involvement with branded products seems to be a common precursor to brand commitment and brand experimentation. Several informants (e.g., Ester and Éva) who link cosmetics and branded products to consumerist ideologies are involved with both cosmetics and branded products. Moreover, as illustrated in figure 1, consumers may be involved with branded products but not the product category. For example, Alexandra embraces a consumerist ideology and is involved with branded products, but not cosmetics. She experiments with Western brands, including trying new cosmetics brands, but directs her meager resources to products that are more consistent with her life projects.

The Origins of Brand Commitment and Brand Experimentation

Our findings highlight that product involvement is related to both brand commitment and brand experimentation. In the survey data, we find a strong relationship between product involvement and brand commitment ($r = .28, p \leq .001$) and an even stronger relationship between product involvement and brand experimentation ($r = .36, p \leq .001$). Our understanding of consumer-brand relationships is enhanced by explicitly considering how product involvement prompts both brand commitment and brand experimentation. Several informants report on experimenting with new brands as part of their information search in the product

category. As Ester says, they are “still looking.” Our findings lend empirical credence to Ratchford’s (2001) theoretical argument that consumers experiment with brands as investment in future choices. Our depth interviews also support the notion that greater involvement with cosmetics is linked not only to brand commitment but also to increased brand experimentation (which may be mediated by economic circumstances). For example, Éva selectively experiments with high-priced Western cosmetics brands such as Estée Lauder and Clinique, whereas Ester defines a point at which it is “too expensive to try,” and Adriana experiments only occasionally, often sharing her daughter’s products. These women would like to have more money so they could experiment more. Informants less involved with cosmetics and not involved with branded products express little interest in brand experimentation. Judit is committed to California Fitness; Mona and Laura express antibrand attitudes. Some of our informants (not reflected in the seven informants we concentrate on here) are involved with appearance and cosmetics but not involved with the idea of branded products. This tended to be truer of our Romanian than our Hungarian informants. These informants have a ready supply of beauty secrets that enable them to take care of themselves without branded products. When economically feasible, Adriana likes to experiment with brands, but she also has homemade beauty solutions.

Our findings highlight the importance of distinguishing the attitudinal and behavioral components of brand commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Contrasting Mona and Judit’s brand commitment is instructive. Although behaviorally Mona is brand loyal, brand name does not carry meaning or importance for her. Judit, however, has a meaningful relationship with California Fitness based on a clear connection between this brand and her ideological position, life themes, and life projects. Judit’s case illustrates that a meaningful brand relationship can evolve directly from an ideological stance sans involvement with the product category or branded products. This finding is consistent with Fournier’s (1998) observation that brand commitment may originate without reference to product involvement.

Understanding Product Involvement

Our depth interviews suggest that we need to reconsider the breadth of the product involvement construct. Some of our informants are ambivalent, even conflicted, about the cosmetics product category. For Alexandra, ambivalence is neutrality that includes both positive and negative feelings about cosmetics. Laura’s case is different and challenges our measurement and understanding of involvement. She is consumed by her attraction to and distaste for cosmetics and by the ideologies and beliefs she links to them. Product category ambivalence of this sort may be more common than we realize and may be especially important in transitional contexts. Prior research has generally neglected product category ambivalence; thus, there is a clear opportunity for future research to enhance our understanding of this

aspect of product involvement (Otnes, Lowry, and Shrum 1997).

Consistent with our discussions with cosmetic industry representatives of Procter & Gamble and Nivea in Budapest, as well as previous research (Gal and Kligman 2000a; Nicolaescu 1995a), our survey data indicate a tendency for younger women to be more involved with cosmetics than older women ($r = .24, p \leq .001$). Our depth interviews with women ages 22–40 illustrate that within that age group, women both younger (Ester) and older (Éva and Adriana) can be highly involved with cosmetics. Our informants not involved with cosmetics were older, 38 and 40 years old, whereas the ambivalent informants were in their mid-20s.

Survey results also suggest that higher incomes and being employed are related to greater cosmetics involvement ($r = .19, p \leq .01$; $r = .16, p \leq .01$). Although statistically significant, these correlations are not particularly strong. Our depth interviews provide some insights as to the possible reasons for the low correlations. With regard to income, although informants referenced product price and income in their discussion of buying cosmetics, women with significant (Éva), as well as those with little (Ester), discretionary income were involved with cosmetics. Their involvement was not based on income but, rather, on the extent to which cosmetics fit with their life themes and projects, and the extent to which they supported a consumerist ideology. Additionally, although our informants acknowledged the pressures of employment as related to their cosmetics usage, this did not always translate into cosmetics involvement.

Consistent with previous research (Mittal and Lee 1988), our survey results indicate that women with greater cosmetics involvement are more likely to use a variety of products from the category (all significant at $p \leq .001$): face cream ($r = .46$), lipstick ($r = .54$), eye makeup ($r = .44$), nail polish ($r = .50$), and rouge or face powder ($r = .43$). As we have suggested, our informants’ purchase and use of cosmetics was at best loosely tied to their involvement with cosmetics. Although purchase and usage behavior among high-involvement consumers conformed to prior expectations, several of our low-involvement consumers felt pressure to purchase and then did purchase and use cosmetics products.

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research enhances our understanding of product involvement and brand commitment, introduces the idea of involvement with branded products, and takes a closer look at brand experimentation. Within the context of Central Europe in transition, we link macroenvironmental factors (i.e., prominent political and cultural ideologies and discourses, as well as cultural intermediaries), social networks, and personal life themes and projects to the development of consumers’ ideological positions. We further consider the effects of ideological positions on product involvement, brand commitment, involvement with branded products, and brand

experimentation. In contrast to previous research, we demonstrate that consumers with little or no interest in either the cosmetics product category or branded products may still be committed to particular brands, and we thereby illustrate that involvement is a divisible construct across consumer-product relationships and consumer-brand relationships. Further, we provide insights on how product involvement leads not only to brand commitment (as posited by prior research) but also to brand experimentation. Finally, our findings suggest that involvement with branded products facilitates product involvement, brand commitment, and brand experimentation.

Our study opens the door for many avenues of research within the domains of cross-cultural research, consumer-product relationships, consumer-brand relationships, and consumer-branded product relationships. First, our findings point to the importance of ideological positions in the development of product involvement and involvement with branded cosmetics products. In our research context, we find that Central European women's consumerist and appearance ideologies affect their involvement with cosmetics and involvement with branded products. We believe that it would be useful to investigate further product categories that are not as closely connected to consumerist ideologies in order to scrutinize the independent impact of involvement with branded products on brand commitment and brand experimentation. Thus, additional research in other product categories and in other cultural contexts would be worthwhile. Undoubtedly, even examining within-region differences in Central European women's involvement with cosmetics and brands would be enlightening (Millar 1994). One of our Romanian informants remarks of Hungarian women, "the first moment you cross the border into Hungary you feel you are passing to another level of civilization. Here in Transylvania, it is the same . . . you can see immediately good influences from Hungary."

Our research reiterates that people's lives as consumers are interwoven with their ideological beliefs and their life projects (Huffman et al. 2000) and that social influence is an important determinant of consumer behavior (Bearden and Etzel 1982). We illustrate that Central European women's lives as consumers of cosmetics are linked to their roles as wives, mothers, friends, employees, and colleagues. Clearly evident in our research and worthy of additional thought is the adaptive quality of interpersonal relationships in the context of cultural change. Our research documents that a broadly accepted ideological position, the increased importance of women's appearance in Central Europe, has had pronounced effects on women's interpersonal relationships. Additional study might consider how changes in culture affect interpersonal dynamics—including consideration of the changing nature of role relationships, role reversals, and related emotional tensions—as well as how these changes influence consumption patterns and product involvement.

Our research contributes to social science research on Central European women operating in a consumer culture. Nonetheless, our research has a narrow historical focus. We talked in depth with women between the ages of 22 and 40,

although our survey data draw on a wider age range. Many of our informants mentioned their mothers, a few their grandmothers, but aesthetics and beliefs that predate the socialist era and inform current ideologies about appearance and cosmetics are beyond the scope of this research. We anticipate that this would be a rich story. Visits to historical museums in Romania and Hungary reveal traditional costumes in bright colors with opulent displays of gold accessories. Fairy tales, too, offer interesting insights into appearance ideologies not focused on in this research. Intergenerational influences are subtle, but evident, in our data and are worthy of future exploration as well (Moore et al. 2002).

We find that brand experimentation is related to involvement with branded products and brand commitment and that even consumers who are happy with their current brand are willing to switch to other brands. Brand experimentation is intrinsically motivated switching that appears to be more grounded in the acquisition of product and brand knowledge (Ratchford 2001) than in boredom with a current brand or variety-seeking tendencies (Van Trijp, Hoyer, and Inman 1996). More research is needed to consider carefully the utilitarian versus hedonic nature of brand switching. One would anticipate that the nomological networks associated with these types of intrinsically motivated brand switching differ. For example, we could speculate that opinion leaders and market mavens, who are involved with a product category and the marketplace, respectively, engage in more utilitarian-based switching, whereas sensation seekers' switching behavior is more hedonically based variety seeking.

Finally, our study has identified the concept of involvement with branded products, that is, the idea that branded products are personally relevant to an individual. In the United States and developed-market economies, consumers are well acquainted with the concept of branded products, but in countries making a transition to a market economy, consumers have gone from knowing little about brands to being inundated with branded products across a broad array of durable and nondurable product categories in a relatively short period of time. There are several topics related to involvement with branded products that are worth investigation. First, research should explore involvement with branded products, without necessarily presuming brands' preeminent status, examining antecedents and consequences more carefully. Second, efforts should be directed to the development of an attitudinal measure of involvement with branded products. In addition, from a behavioral perspective, it would be appropriate to examine this construct in conjunction with consumers' brand preferences and choices across multiple product categories, repeat purchasing, and brand loyalty. Further, consideration of the links between involvement with branded products and country of origin is worthy of study. Such work could help to partial out country effects, branded product effects, and brand effects. Moreover, although the idea of involvement with branded products emerged from this research in Central Europe, we believe that future research should also consider the concept

in developed market economies. Such work might investigate consumers' multibrand loyalties, price sensitivity, and

risk aversion to contribute further to our understanding of involvement with branded products.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1

SCALE ITEMS, MEASURES OF ASSOCIATION, AND MEANS

	Cronbach's alpha	Mean
Involvement with cosmetics products: ^{a, b}	$\alpha = .92$	3.05
Are a part of my self-image		
Are boring to me		
Portray an image of me to others		
Are fun to me		
Are fascinating to me		
Are important to me		
Are exciting to me		
Tell others about me		
Tell me about other people		
Involvement with branded cosmetics products ^c		2.63
Brand commitment: ^{a, d}	$\alpha = .92$	3.77
I am really attached to the brands of cosmetics that I use		
I stick with my usual brands of cosmetics because I know they are best for me		
I am committed to my brands of cosmetics		
Brand experimentation: ^{a, e}	$\alpha = .81$	1.88
I switch among brands of cosmetics just to try something new once in a while		
When I am shopping for cosmetics, I am likely to buy new brands just for the fun of it		
I get bored with buying the same brands of cosmetics, and so I often try different brands		
Importance of appearance: ^f		3.45
Compared to five years ago, how important is it to you to have a well groomed appearance?		

^aAll items are five-point Likert items, 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

^bHigie and Feick (1989), derived from Zaichkowsky (1985) and Laurent and Kapferer (1985).

^cTotal number of cosmetic brand names listed as preferred or purchased.

^dDerived from Fournier 1998; Oliver 1998.

^eDerived from Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Raju 1980; Van Trijp et al. 1996.

^fFive-point scale with 1 (much less than five years ago), 3 (about the same as five years ago), and 5 (much more than five years ago).

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