The Importance of Image to Boston College Students

Author: Shelby Lee Garber

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2990

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2013

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.
Senior Honors Thesis

The Importance of Image at Boston College

Shelby Garber

Boston College Sociology Department

Advised by Professor Gray

April 25, 2013
I. Introduction

Before the kickoff of a football game my sophomore year, a questionably-sober male student approached me and said, “I just had to come over here and tell you, when I think of BC, I think of you. The Irish redhead, just, yeah.” Though it may not have been the most eloquent statement, I considered it one of the best compliments I could have received. What better praise could there be than representing the institution I loved so much? Of course, it brings to light some interesting sociological factors as well. How did it come about that a redhead is the quintessential BC girl? Though I am partly Irish, my heritage is mostly German. I’m sure he didn’t expect me to be Jewish or from Florida. Did the gold bow in my hair contribute to his thought process- and why? Is it because the “BC girl” is always aware of her appearance and put together? Needless to say this incident encouraged my interest in this topic and helped bring me to this study of image at Boston College.

Undergraduate students at Boston College understand what is meant by the terms “BC boy” and “BC girl.” It is not uncommon to hear a student describing another and use this terminology. The meanings and implications are well known enough to carry weight as defining factors. BC students are very aware of the stereotypes associated with this institution and the specific image to which BC students are thought to conform: wealthy, good-looking, and preppy. This known image brings with it certain expectations for incoming and current students, as well as social pressure. “Students warn that Boston College is ‘not the place to go to class in your pajamas.’ People, particularly women, are ‘very well-dressed’ and ‘stylish,’” (The Princeton Review). The way in which these expectations manifest themselves for men and women are certainly linked, but also distinct. Gender is a key factor in determining how BC students create,
define, and maintain their image. For men, there is the more specific image of the “BC bro.” An article from The Rock, an online student newspaper, describes this image, “A bro can be defined as a person (most often male, though not exclusively) who frequently sports preppy pastel clothing, backwards fitted hats, and lacrosse (lax) pinnies. A bro who actually plays the sport of lacrosse can also be further classified as a ‘lax bro.’ Bros typically have a biological affinity for Natural (Natty) Light as well as dipping tobacco,” (Malone). This comical depiction illustrates an image that is, of course, not universal among BC men but common enough that a wide readership would appreciate the article. When the term is used, most undergraduates have a good understanding of what it means. For both genders, “The overall image for both sexes is a fairly preppy, Abercrombie & Fitch or J. Crew look, and most people on campus fit that description. There are people with other styles on campus, but they are few and far between,” (College Prowler).

Of course, issues surrounding image affect almost everyone, regardless of gender or other social factors such as age, class, or geographic location. Creating an image, and therefore an identity, is a process that every social being must undergo. “Individuals move from one [lifestyle] to another as the salience of particular lifestyles changes,” (Crane 2000). The challenges associated with this necessity are not unique to BC or even a four year college experience, though there may be additional difficulties with image formation at this point in one’s life. Most students find themselves in a new social setting with new rules, regulations, nuances, and expectations. They can be easy or difficult to identify and subsequently follow. Students arrive at college after spending at least four years creating one image in order to navigate the social environment of his or her particular high school and now must adjust or even recreate this process. Undoubtedly this transition is seen as an opportunity for many; a fresh start
to adopt a brand new image and become an entirely differently person could be exactly what the student desires. However, even in these optimistic cases, the development of an image in accordance with a new environment and new people (presumably all attempting the same daunting task) is at best challenging and at worst overwhelming for any college freshman or transfer student due to the myriad of choices to be made (Crane 2000). This process is simply part of going to college in the United States. Therefore I do not argue that the idea of a dominant or prevailing culture is unique to BC; however, I do believe that the culture here requires a significant effort through time and deliberation due to its specific characteristics of being known as a wealthy and well-dressed student body.

Many factors contribute to the formation and maintenance of image, especially for Boston College students. I examine the source of this distinct image via the values that determine status. It is possible that students come to BC already relatively homogenous, though I attempt to prove that the established BC culture also contributes to individual students’ image formation. My study emphasizes those aspects of image that relate to appearance and more specifically, clothing. There is a distinct fashion culture at BC in terms of both style and brands that is worth exploration. Other aspects of image for men and women at BC include exercising, food and nutrition control, topics of conversation in which students often engage or are considered acceptable, cool, or important, and the amount of time and effort put into creating the presentation of the self on a daily basis.

In addition to the reputation of its undergraduates, Boston College as an institution itself has several defining characteristics. A central aspect of BC as a university is its identification with the Jesuit, Catholic tradition. BC and most students hold this tradition in high regard and are proud of BC’s religious and philosophical affiliation. A key component of Jesuit ideals and
therefore BC’s mission is to work and live for others. BC students are to be “men and women for and with others” during their time earning their degree and in the work they pursue after college. This philosophy is assumed to be a central part of every BC student’s life. In my study I examine the ways in which this ideal can or is reconciled with what I perceive to be the high priority BC students give their own image in their everyday lives. In more general terms, I hope to understand the relative values BC students place on work on themselves and others. My hypothesis, therefore, is that Boston College undergraduates are more concerned with their image formation and maintenance than traditional Jesuit ideals in their everyday lives.

II. Rationale

This topic carries with it personal significance and curiosity from me. Since I was a little girl, my mother and grandmother took me shopping for new clothes every year. I am thankful for their time and effort to teach me how to dress appropriately for my body and for almost every conceivable social scenario, from a summer barbeque to a job interview. Because I was taught that different appearances belong in different social scenes, I have long been aware of appearance and what it conveys to others. Above all else, I have been aware of and concerned with looking “appropriate.”

As I moved into high school, my awareness became a source of self-consciousness. Though I would never say I had self-esteem issues (my parents would argue quite the opposite), I was at times painfully aware that I did not have certain articles of clothing that many of peers wore. I was confused as to how they knew these articles like Abercrombie sweatshirts and North Face backpacks would hold social value. It seemed to me that suddenly everyone had them except me. However, I never complained nor asked for these status items; my parents had also taught me to be financially smart and I was all too aware that I had no need for such pieces.
Instead I maintained my own fashion and style through more discount brands and was always mostly happy with how I dressed. In this regard I must also credit my high school and my peers for creating what I now understand to be an exceptionally tolerant environment.

I distinctly remember touring Boston College for the first time during the summer before my junior year of high school. The feelings of belonging and desire to be a part of that student body overwhelmed me. Though I never had a first choice for schools, BC always felt “right.” As I look back across almost four years of experience in this environment, these sentiments are somewhat surprising to me. Yes, even then, I was focused on appearing put together every day but I did not have any of the staple items a BC girl has in her repertoire. I suppose my style fit in well enough at the time to make me feel welcome and that I could comfortably spend four years of my life with students like the ones I saw that day. Upon matriculation and coming back to campus not as an idealized goal but as my new home, I took my already socially aware mindset into overload. I immediately began analyzing the style and brands of my fellow students and their overall image, and have ever since. Though I initiated this activity as a mechanism to determine how to best fit in as a BC freshman and make friends, it has continued out of a hyperawareness of the importance BC students place on image and a genuine curiosity about the subject.

I believe that over the course of my time at BC I have only become more aware of the ideas around image (my own and that of others), though that is not to say my self-esteem has suffered. I would argue that I am certainly more concerned about looking appropriate than I ever was, especially in light of the fact that financially, I simply cannot compete with the majority of the student body in terms of what brands and luxury items they sport. However, my awareness does not stop at this point. I feel as though I constantly compare my appearance to those of
others, especially women, in the same social situation at BC. Whether I am in the library or at a party, I judge my image against others’ to self-analyze and determine if I appear appropriate for the occasion. It is not a matter of whether I look better or more attractive; I simply want to understand how well I fit in and look like I belong. I chose to write my senior thesis on this topic because I want to know why I feel this awareness about my image—where does this pressure come from? Why is there a rather specific image to which most students, usually including myself, appear to aspire?

My personal involvement and submission to highly valuing image contribute to my non-judgmental approach to the aspect of my project that attempts to determine whether or not students give equal importance to the Jesuit ideals of working and living for others as do they do for their own image formation. I do not intend to offend anyone through my research or conclusions. I attempt to be as accurate as possible while avoiding judgment on the individual. I do not assume any expectations nor view individuals or the study body as a whole negatively if my results demonstrate a high prioritization of the self; I do not inherently consider this conclusion negative or detrimental. Nor do I enter this study with a predisposition to believe that BC students and culture are image-obsessed narcissistic over-consumers; I understand that being well dressed and having some awareness of image does not directly lead to or even imply this conclusion. I also do not aim to critique Boston College in any way, including in its admission process. My research comes from a place of genuine curiosity about my environment and the way in which I have developed in it, wondering if others have experienced similar phenomena, and why. Having said this, my work will attempt to be honest and accurate and I will not shy away from unpleasant conclusions.
III. Literature Review

My literature review addresses a variety of concepts that ultimately all provide a foundation for my topic of image at Boston College. The research on consumerism explains the power this force has over people in modern society, particularly young people. Michael Ryan describes that material goods and the competition through which they are acquired all hold meaning for the individual and social groups. As Carol Miller and Patricia Murphy explain, advertisers tap into this power and attempt to define the individual’s image for him or her through the necessity of owning and brandishing their products. Juliet Schor provides insight to the specific ways consumer ideals affect this generation more than others and how they are more brand conscious. Of course, this idea directly relates to fashion, a major concept in this study. Fashion is pervasive and powerful and, as Susan Kaiser elaborates, its ability to constantly change adds to its complexity and the amount of time and effort required to maintain it. This author furthers that fashion affects different people and groups in distinct ways based on what is valued by those groups. Aron O’Cass sheds light on how knowledge of fashion is crucial though incredibly difficult to maintain. Part of the reason fashion remains ever changing is due to the next concept, status. Status is difficult to define and it is even harder to identify its source. On the most basic level, as Michael Sauder, Freda Lynn, and Joel Podlony describe, status comes from social interactions in which values are established and assigned. The millennial generation, or current college students, has its own set of values, some of which come from the concept of narcissism, about which Jean Twenge and others such as Rachel Krause have much to say. This generation has been taught that their lives should focus around themselves, their needs, and their desires. This general acceptance of a certain mentality is an example of collective consciousness, another concept in this study. Sociologist Emile Durkheim describes how norms and values can pervade an entire society through this process. Of course, even when submitting
to such a method, the concept of **the self and the generalized other** cannot be ignored. George Herbet Mead’s extensive work on this subject provide a strong foundation for how the individual creates, evaluates, and modifies his or her image based on his or her study of how others perceive him or her. Erving Goffman supplies valuable theory on the presentation of the self and the fronts that one portrays. Finally, a study of **Jesuit ideals** from Boston College’s own website literature provides a foundation for the core values of BC and concludes this review. A Jesuit education is meant to serve as a way to learn how to live and work for others. Because my study questions how relevant these ideals are to the average BC student’s everyday life, the importance of them to the institution must be evaluated.

**Consumerism**

Consumerism has existed since the formation of market economies, though its nature has changed over many years of human development. It began as a way to obtain goods necessary for survival in a structured and productive way but later was attributed more social meaning. “Veblen and Mauss were the first social theorists to detect and conceptualize a social logic of emulation and competition for prestige and power in consumer practices,” (Ryan 2007). Society placed value on different goods and services that could be bought, and thus was born the idea that consumerism can function as a display of wealth, status, and power. “So while acts of consumption are the acts of individuals, they also are organized through a social logic of emulation and competition for prestige and power,” (Ryan 2007). Without the social construction of values, consumerism would not have the hold it does on people’s lives. Not only did the idea of the system change, but the way in which it functioned did as well.

Consumer goods had a shorter ‘life expectancy’ than producer goods; further, planned obsolescence made for commodities that would disintegrate within a predictable span of time and/or use…the fashion cycle also accelerated the
depreciation of commodities even before they were physically used up (Ryan 2007).

In today’s society status or power may be temporarily achieved by the purchase of a particular item but it cannot be maintained. The consumer must constantly update his or her goods in order to sustain the image created.

The social construction of consumer ideals further contributes to class divisions. “Capital is neither a thing nor a person, but a social relation of production that appears as the social relation between things. Commodity exchange integrated the members of different classes of modern society, but in a process that produced and reproduced the domination of capital,” (Ryan 2007). Consumerism allows higher classes to establish the values of consumer culture in such a way that lower classes cannot compete. Whether it is intentional or not, those with status give themselves more power and create a system in which upward mobility is almost impossible.

Lefebvre sees it as a class strategy, not an accomplished system. If it were a system, how would anyone become conscious of its problematic features? He concedes that the consumer society takes care of individual needs, but it does a poor job of recognizing and taking care of social needs. This helps us understand why the US, the wealthiest nation within the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, has failed to produce universal health care, day care for working families, public spaces for recreation and leisure, and a public life (Ryan 2007).

In this way, consumerism focuses on the desires of the wealthy and those with status rather than social issues of those in need, further perpetuating the system.

Consumerism is an idea that permeates many aspects of society. "Consumers are left with haunting images of perfection and wealth and the increasingly desperate realization that they will never achieve the idealized state depicted in advertising," (Richins, 1991, p. 71). In this way the concept becomes a dominating force that influences people’s ideals and goals for themselves. It affects not only how people act but also how they feel about themselves and about others’
perceptions of them. “They [advertisers] bombard us with images of the embarrassment, social isolation, and failure that befall people who do not consume appropriately, and of the love, admiration, and success that reward people who consume appropriately,” (Miller and Murphy 1997). Consumerism becomes a matter of identity and status within society rather than an external or superfluous factor. “…Advertisers want to change the way people think, not about any particular product but about their relationship to products in general; they want to convince consumers that they need products to complete themselves as individuals and to attain their goals,” (Miller and Murphy 1997). This powerful concept is able to manipulate how people not only portray themselves, but how they define themselves and their personalities.

The United States is in a way plagued by these aspirations of a higher-class lifestyle that people believe can be attained through consuming certain goods. Boston College sociology professor Juliet Schor continues these ideas of almost reckless consumer goals through what she calls “the new consumerism.” She describes, “…the new consumerism,’ by which I mean an upscaling of lifestyle norms; the pervasiveness of conspicuous, status goods and of competition for acquiring them; and the growing disconnection between consumer desires and incomes,” (Schor, 2000, 7). People are constantly looking forward and striving for a lifestyle they cannot afford. They also shop more frequently than ever before. Schor describes, “We shop on our lunch hours, patronize outlet malls on vacation, and satisfy our latest desires with a late-night click of a mouse,” (Schor, 2000, 3). Trying to keep up with the others they see around them, people develop unrealistic expectations based on their means. “The result is a growing aspirational gap: with desires persistently outrunning incomes, many consumers find themselves frustrated,” (Schor, 2000, 10). Consumers push and try to reach beyond their limits in order to achieve the lifestyle they perceive as most desirable. However, people are disillusioned in their consumer
incentive. They do not acknowledge their lifestyle goals as the primary reason. Schor explains, “Consumers believe their brand loyalties are driven by functional dimensions, but a whole host of other motivators are at work, for example, social meanings as constructed by advertisers; personal fantasies projected on to goods; competitive pressures,” (Schor, 2000, 22). Not only are consumers under immense social pressure to obtain goods beyond their means, but they also do not even realize the influence of these outside forces.

The current generation in college has been affected more by consumerism than any previous generation. Professor Schor also offers extensive insight on this trend as well. Her work helps greatly to explain the background of and the state of mind of young people when they enter college. “Kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture,” (Schor, 2004, 9). Marketers are taking notice of this trend and directing their efforts toward children and adolescents, as Schor explains, “Marketing is also fundamentally altering the experience of childhood. Corporations have infiltrated the core activities and institutions of childhood, with virtually no resistance from government or parents. Advertising is widespread in schools,” (Schor, 2004, 13). They are bombarded with advertisements making them constantly aware of brands and their status associations. Children are given a kind of consumer autonomy that puts them in control of what they want. Schor continues, “Today, marketers create direct connections to kids, in isolation from parents and at times against them. The new norm is that kids and marketers join forces to convince adults to spend money,” (Schor, 2004, 16). The pressure is on kids to make their own consumer decisions. Marketers, through this strategy, make children aware of the consumer culture and the existence of their choices.

These influences affect young people more greatly than ever before. “Children’s social networks are increasingly constructed around consuming, as brands and products have come to
determine who is ‘in’ or ‘out,’…who deserves to have friends or social status,” (Schor, 2004, 11). Brands have a considerable influence on children’s psychosocial developments. Schor elaborates, “More children here than anywhere else believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status. American kids display more brand affinity than their counterparts anywhere else in the world; indeed, experts describe them as increasingly ‘bonded to brands,’” (Schor, 2004, 13). Even as young children they use brands to help describe their identity. The brands they display have deep social meaning and begin to determine personality and status. More than anything else, children want to belong, an anxiety into which marketers have tapped, as Schor clarifies, “Marketers have defined cool as the key to social success, as what matters for determining who belongs, who’s popular, and who gets accepted by peers,” (Schor, 2004, 27). Thus, this generation of children, adolescents, and current college students have been heavily influence by consumer culture in developing their image.

Fashion

Fashion is a way individuals express themselves and can be a personal and intimate concept for many people.

It [fashion] allows the fulfillment of values such as acquisition, happiness, etc. and assists in portraying acceptable images. Fashion clothing as possession may be seen for its role as a code…as materialists have been found to rely heavily on external cues, favouring those possessions that are worn or consumed in public places. The important aspects of possessions for materialists are utility, appearance, financial worth and ability to convey status, success and prestige. Such products are thought to include fashion clothing, because it is particularly susceptible to differences in consumption stereotyping, and therefore to differences in ability to encode and decode a range of messages (O’Cass).

Clothing and fashion have a dominant control over the image one portrays and is absorbed by others. It is a critical aspect of appearance that gives such an important first and lasting impression. Materialists recognize this significance as “…consumers’ involvement in fashion
clothing will be significantly affected by their degree of materialism, with more materialistic consumers’ being more involved in fashion clothing,” (O’Cass).

Fashion can affect certain groups in different ways. Though gender differences cannot necessarily be identified in terms of concern for image, there are distinctions for fashion.

Gender related effects on involvement have also been identified by researchers such as Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) and Auty and Elliott (1998) who have shown that women are more involved in fashion than men. Further, Goldsmith et al. (1996) have shown that women more than men consider themselves more fashion innovative and it is considered here that this should as such extend to involvement. This is born out by the practical side of fashion with significant numbers of magazines targeting women and the numbers of fashion clothing stores who market solely to women (O’Cass).

It is possible that gender plays a key role in determine one’s awareness and concern about fashion; however, it is important to note that this does not cover awareness or concern for overall image, the construction of which goes much deeper than fashion or even clothing alone. In addition to gender, age differences play a part in fashion as well. “It appears that younger people in general place more emphasis on their appearance than older,” (O’Cass). “The commodification of youth culture and style, coupled with the large baby boom generation, highlighted the importance of age as an identity variable in fashion consumption in the 1960s. The idea of being or looking youthful seemed to be more important than looking rich,” (Kaiser 2007). Consequently, it can be determined that young women place a very high emphasis on appearance and fashion in their lives.

Knowledge of fashion is mostly empirical and dependent on one’s surroundings.

Essentially then in the context of fashion clothing, product knowledge is viewed as knowledge of brands in the product class and in terms of product-use contexts and product attribute knowledge, frequency of use and experience with fashion clothing (Johnson and Russo, 1981, 1984; Raju and Reilly, 1979; Lastovicka, 1979). Importantly, consumers vary greatly in their knowledge about fashion clothing and their degree of familiarity with it. Knowledge can come from product experiences, ad exposure, interactions with salespeople, friends or the
media, previous decision-making or previous consumption and usage experiences held in memory (O’Cass).

People associate certain fashion including styles and brands with different experiences or groups of people. These groups or environments can range from a family to a college, which lends to the idea of a collective culture that can be formed in an institution. Knowledge about a product increases when one is exposed to it often.

Fashion knowledge is developed when consumers combine separate meaning concepts into larger, more abstract categories of fashion clothing knowledge. The perspective taken here is that the degree of a consumer's subjective product knowledge (familiarity, experience and expertise) should be affected by their degree of involvement in fashion clothing (O’Cass).

The more one knows about a product, which includes knowledge of the status and image associated with it, the more one becomes aware of fashion in general. Knowledge also extends to confidence in making the right choice with regard to selecting the socially appropriate brand for the context.

In the consumer behaviour literature, the confidence construct is used in two theoretically different ways. It has been used to refer to a buyer's overall confidence in the brand (Howard and Sheth, 1969). It has also been used to refer to the buyer's confidence in his ability to judge or evaluate attribute of the brands (Bennett and Harrell, 1975) (O’Cass).

The compelling forces behind fashion are complex and diverse.

Among the most intimate of normative changes, however, are those in which consumers engage as they fashion their bodies in everyday life. One of the most compelling theoretical and empirical questions surrounding fashion is its relation to shifting cultural moods, as well as to just who shapes, and is affected by, these shifts and the strong norms that eventually accompany them in a deeply personal and embodied way (Kaiser 2007).

Changes in different aspects in fashion have the power to affect different sections of the population. Fashion defines personal identity, though this can be influenced from varying sources as well. “From a sociological point of view, fashion is about more than the latest runway
styles presented by celebrity designers; it has to do, instead, with collective ways of making connections with others and, at the same time, marking differences,” (Kaiser 2007). In this way it becomes a collective agreement of which brands and styles mark certain images. However, “In the context of fashion, there is no longer a single ‘fashionable’ look each season; with an increased awareness of what it means to be a multicultural society and global economy, there are multiple looks that can represent ‘shifting strong norms’ within specific groups simultaneously,” (Kaiser 2007). There are a few consequences of this shift, one of which is the increased difficulty in defining one’s image and identity. Though it allows for more freedom of personal fashion, it also requires more choices on the part of the individual to sort through and determine which is most appropriate or acceptable.

The fashion industry has also evolved in way that has allowed for certain cultural ambivalence to grow.

Designers and consumers alike manipulate, bend and break cultural codes to the point of calling into question their origins, contents and purposes. Moreover, the range of choice in the marketplace contributes to a state of confusion bordering on chaos. Culture itself becomes ambivalent, sending contradictory and confusing messages to individuals about what appearance styles are fashionable and why (Kaiser et al. 3).

The variety of choices is overwhelming and forces consumers to make so many choices that they can become almost meaningless or irrelevant, possibly no longer reflecting a deliberate and desired image but rather a more bland and simple product of the process. However, this ambivalence could have its advantages. “Ambivalence confuses, devours, and tortures. But it also defines and orders, transforming the unknown into a knowable opposite,” (Kaiser et al. 1). The choices that people make in their fashion categorize them, helping the rest of society to easily identify their personalities and roles. “…Few people are immune to the implications of the
fashion process when they enter the marketplace,” (Kaiser 9). Regardless of whether they are aware or ambivalent, people are subject to the influence and whims of the fashion industry.

**Status**

Though status is easily understood by most, it can be difficult to specifically define.

“Status, for organizations as well as individuals, is broadly understood as the position in a social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference (Goode 1978, Whyte 1943),” (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Status can either be well established or changing.

Although it has been long recognized that status distinctions are rooted in shared values or conceptions of what is more or less worthy (Goode 1978, Mills 1963[1954], Veblen 1994[1899]), recent organizational work has applied and extended this insight by showing how changes in both the bases of status distinction and the manner in which these values are adjudicated powerfully influence the distribution of status (Sauder et al 2012).

The view of those within the society can change, thus distributing new and different status values. Other research suggests that status is influenced by external factors. “…Third parties do not influence status through the formation of ties, but by pronouncing judgments that are noted by the broader community,” (Sauder et al 2012). These judgments can come from reviews or awards and can establish a general accepted view of the good in question. Status also depends on culture in many ways.

Just which characteristics actually are status characteristics—carrying certain specified social advantages and disadvantages—depends on cultural definitions and other features of a society. All status characteristics, however, whatever the society and its culture, confer advantages and disadvantages (Webster and Hysom 1998).

The creation of status involves many different factors.

Status construction theory describes two related processes. First, a ‘differentiating resource’ process attaches status value to characteristics among certain actors through behavioral enactment and misattribution mechanisms. Second, a training or ‘altercasting’ process transmits status value definitions to other actors through additional interaction mechanisms (Webster and Hysom 1998).
Thus through behavior and interactions, status associated with items and people is created. The construction of status can take place on the most micro of levels. “Interaction, constrained by the distribution of individual characteristic variables, is crucial for acquiring, maintaining, and transmitting the status value of characteristics,” (Webster and Hysom 1998). Even in an interaction between two individuals, questions of status come into play. “Fiske and Taylor 1991 shows that ‘mere differences,’ especially in appearance variables, can be sufficient to categorize individuals: People construct cultural schemas to identify self and others,” (Webster and Hysom 1998). Status is created as a way of socially organizing people, with or without the context of the self. It is also used as a mechanism to determine the appropriate action to take. “Johnston (1985, 1988) developed the idea that specific personality attributes—behavioral predispositions that individuals are believed to possess—are likely to be inferred or imputed in cases of ambiguous communication, where actors are not certain of each other’s tendencies or their likes and dislikes,” (Webster and Hysom 1998). Status and the factors that contribute to it serve as immediate indicators of how to respond to that individual without the need for much context. The formation of status can apply to a variety of aspects of life.

Jasso's theory distinguishes between quantity goods…and quality goods…The former, such as dollars of income or numbers of cattle owned, are additive and transferrable; the latter, such as beauty, wittiness, or athletic skill, are neither transferrable nor susceptible to cardinal measurement. These types appear to be what we have called respectively ‘exchangeable resources’ or ‘consummatory valued characteristics’ and ‘status-valued characteristics’ (Webster and Hysom 1998).

Status’s creation permeates all characteristics of the individual.

**Narcissism**

Narcissism is not simply a confident attitude or a healthy feeling of self-worth. ... Narcissists are overconfident, not just confident, and — unlike most people high in self-esteem — place little value on emotionally close relationships.
Two myths about narcissists are 1) that they are insecure (they’re typically not), and 2) that you have to be a narcissist to succeed today (in most contexts, and long-term, narcissism is actually a deterrent to success) (Twenge 2011).

The Millennial generation, current adolescents and young adults, have been accused of such a trait in various studies and literature. Jean Twenge has done extensive research on this topic.

The millennial generation has been raised in a culture that places ‘more focus on the self and less focus on the group, society, and community,’ Ms. Twenge says. ‘The aphorisms have shifted to ‘believe in yourself’ and ‘you're special,’” she says. ‘It emphasizes individualism, and this gets reflected in personality traits and attitudes’ (Chau 2012).

Thus it can be determined that the millennial’s environment in which they were raised is at least partially responsible for this outcome. However, it does not mitigate the results. “One study says that Millennials are more narcissistic than their elders, and increasingly value ‘money, image, and fame more than inherent principles like self-acceptance, affiliation, and community,’” (U.S. Business).

This narcissism translates into action, not only a general mentality. “The millennial epoch, composed of those born between 1980 and 2000, is the fastest-growing demographic of those who purchase luxury goods. Consumers of this generation increased spending on premium fashion and services by 33 percent in 2011,” (Krause 2012). Young people are increasingly buying more items they simply do not need, only want. “How do millennials manage, you ask, when they lack fruitful careers and are often in debt? Some skimp in other areas, like rent, food, and long-term fiscal management plans, while others buy on their parents’ dime,” (Krause 2012). Millennials are so focused on the here and now that they do not leave enough finances to plan for necessities or the future.

It is possible that narcissism is not entirely bad for society.

On the other hand, this could also be grounds for a defense of narcissism, at least up to a point. Maybe too much empathy is crippling, and a little solipsism is a
necessary spur to action. If a little ‘look out world, here I come’ self-centeredness is what it takes to get young people involved in charity work or political campaigning, the theory might go, then so much the better for self-centeredness! (Douthat 2010).

Belief in one’s abilities and importance can lead to social goods and might be worth the egoism that develops with it.

**Collective Consciousness**

Emile Durkheim developed the idea of collective consciousness to address the idea of shared thoughts on a macro level.

The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it *collective or common conscience*… It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them (Durkheim).

It is possible for many individual consciences to come together in agreement and form a shared thought that permeates the majority of the society. Durkheim furthers this notion with explanations of collective representations, which are “norms and values of specific institutions,” (Ritzer, 1996, 86). Institutions hold their own norms and values outside of the individual that remain stable and consistent over time.

**The Self and the Generalized Other**

Symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead defines the self as, “basically the ability to take oneself as an object; the self is the peculiar ability to be both subject and object,” (Ritzer, 1996, 341). Mead’s theory revolves around the idea of creating the self based on what others think. People constantly judge themselves as if they were others in order to evaluate their appearance and actions. “The general mechanism for the development of the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves unconsciously into others’ places and to act as they act. As a result, people are able to examine themselves as others would examine them,” (Ritzer, 1996, 341-42).
People create the idea of the generalized other and put themselves in that place in order to
evaluate themselves. “The individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to
modify the resultant process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it,” (Mead
1934/1962:134). The development of the self comes about through social activity and
relationships. It is a mental process and, according to Mead, therefore a social process.

Erving Goffman develops one of his most famous ideas, that of dramaturgy, which
describes the daily process through which people present themselves in society as if they were actors going through different stages of a play. It involves constant self-reflection and judgment of how the performance is being received by the “audience,” or the rest of society. The manner of the performer tells the audience what role he or she expects to play in the situation, while the appearance includes items that tell us the performer’s social status. Goffman further argues that the presentation of the dramaturgical self is a conscious and concerted effort.

Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he maybe neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression,” (Goffman, 1959, 6).

The motivations for the effort can come from many different sources or goals.

Belief in one’s act depends upon both the audience and the actor’s acceptance of his or her performance.

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he
puts on-and this seems to be the typical case then for the moment at least, only the
sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the ‘realness’ of
what is presented. At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be
taken in at all by his own routine (Goffman, 1959, 17).

It is possible for the individual to be fully aware of the act he or she is performing rather than
demonstrating an authentic representation of the self.

The “front” that is established is a key factor in the overall performance.

‘Appearance’ may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to
tell us of the performer’s social statuses. These stimuli also tell us of the
individual’s temporary ritual state, that is, whether he is engaging in formal social
activity, work, or informal recreation, whether or not he is celebrating a new
phase in the season cycle or in his life-cycle. ‘Manner’ may be taken to refer to
those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the
performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation (Goffman, 1959, 24).

The performer has the ability to control many aspects of the initial and sustained impressions he
or she creates. It is possible for appearance and manner to contradict each other and though it
does not shatter the image, it does provide a different perspective of the individual’s role and
expectations. However, “Such coherence [between appearance and manner] represents an ideal
type that provides us with a means of stimulation,” (Goffman, 1959, 25). People understand
better and feel more comfortable when all goes according to plan. “When an actor takes on an
established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it,”
(Goffman, 1959, 27). Roles come with expectations and pre-constructed responsibilities. Though
one does not have to follow them, surely social acceptance is more guaranteed and smoother if
one does.

The idealization of certain roles and performances can deeply affect the individual during
this process. “…When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to
incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than
does his behavior as a whole,” (Goffman, 1959, 35). The individual works to recognize the values of society and actively portray them in his or her performance.

Perhaps the most important piece of sign-equipment associated with social class consists of the status symbols through which material wealth is expressed. American society is similar to others in this regard but seems to have been singled out as an extreme example of wealth-oriented class structure—perhaps because in America the license to employ symbols of wealth and financial capacity to do so are so widely distributed (Goffman, 1959, 36).

Symbols and an understanding of their meaning and status are crucial in the development of the performance. An incorporation of the appropriate symbols demonstrates a natural belonging in that environment. The ideal performance cannot be executed if the preparations and effort become visible. “It is important to note that when an individual offers a performance he typically conceals something more than inappropriate pleasures and economies” (Goffman, 1959, 43). In order to maintain the idealization through and through, it must appear completely natural.

**Jesuit Ideals**

Boston College prides itself on being a leading Jesuit institution of higher learning in the United States. “Boston College is committed to maintaining and strengthening the Jesuit, Catholic mission of the University, and especially its commitment to integrating intellectual, personal, ethical, and religious formation; and to uniting high academic achievement with service to others,” (www.bc.edu). The Jesuit influence is a key component to the university’s mission. In a list of twenty reasons to select BC on its website, the first element is the core curriculum which specifically references the Jesuit aspect of education. “The Core Curriculum is the backbone of Jesuit education at Boston College. The ‘core’ is designed to give students an understanding of the significant forces that have shaped world culture and history and the ability to connect themes and ideas across a wide spectrum of disciplines,” (www.bc.edu). This mission is heavily stressed even in the admissions process. Of four required supplemental essay questions, the first
in the 2012-2013 application is, “1. St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, encouraged his followers to live their lives in the service of others. How do you plan to serve others in your future endeavors?” (www.bc.edu). In order to be a successful and suitable student at BC, an individual must share these goals. It is beyond evident that students at Boston College are expected to uphold Jesuit ideals.

**Conclusion**

In turn, each of these concepts will allow me to delve into a different aspect of image formation at Boston College. Consumerism demonstrates the powerful market pressures that influence BC students to buy, including many products that contribute to their image. A study of fashion illustrates from where the styles and brands of clothing to which BC students are prone come and why they are important. Status explains why BC students value what they do and how certain images have higher value in the eye of a BC student than others. Narcissism could explain the emphasis on the self that many BC students may have, including motivation for allowing him or herself to be swept up by the whims of consumerism and fashion. Durkheim’s work on collective consciousness helps explain how the norms and values BC students assign to certain material items could pervade the majority of the student body. Mead’s self and the generalized other describes the process through which BC students evaluate the success or failure of their image and allows them to modify accordingly based on the reactions of other students. Finally, a study of Jesuit ideals allows the study to determine the relative values of BC students and whether or not they hold weight against the other concepts that pervade students’ everyday lives. From this extensive foundation, I will build the rest of my study including operationalizing the variables and forming survey and interview questions and further analyzing the data.
IV. Operationalization of Variables

For the topic of importance of image at Boston College, many variables must be discussed. From the source of the image and style to student self-awareness, there are many factors that contribute to this subject. I hope to cover a full range of themes that will completely and holistically define image at BC.

One of the most important variables when determining the concept of fashion, a key component of image in my study, includes which brands are worn and used by students. “Brands used” is defined by which brands of clothing, technology, or accessories do students wear or use most frequently. This variable includes but is not limited to casual clothing that is worn to class, brands of phones, computers, and music players, and accessories such as backpacks or covers for phones and computers. One interview question stated, “Which brands of clothing and technology do you use most often?” A list of common brands at BC determined by observational research were provided, along with the opportunity to add if the student finds that his or her favorites are not available. Because most brands carry with them a specific style or image, in determining which are most common among BC students I will understand what style students attempt to portray. The image associated with brands often involves a socioeconomic element as well, and therefore this question allowed me to understand the economic status students want to display as well, be it authentic or not.

In addition to examining which brands are used by students, I studied the importance of this aspect to them. Many factors go into every purchase including accessibility, price, and, of course, need. A brand for the sake of the name or logo alone plays into style in a way that directly relates to image. In order to address specifically the importance of owning or using a brand for its own sake, I used a distinct question, “When shopping for a new article of clothing
of technology, how important to you is the image associated with the brand?” This question more directly relates to the concept of consumerism because it investigates why students buy what they do. If the purchase is made more out of a necessity or specific function, then it is less related to image and appearance than if bought for the sake of possessing or displaying the brand itself. This question also looks into how conscious students are of brands and the images associated with them when buying something new. This element is telling in terms of fashion knowledge, discussed above, and generally how much students are aware of these factors. An increased awareness demonstrates the pervasiveness of fashion knowledge and other aspects of consumerism in their lives and how much it matters to them when they construct their appearance.

Because I wanted to study not only what the BC student ideal type is but also from where it comes, I asked a follow-up question to the previous two. Once the student has identified which brands he or she uses most and thought about whether or not the brand itself holds value, I followed with, “Why do you choose these brands over others?” Below I would list various options such as “better quality,” “cheaper,” “more readily available,” “more appealing style,” “name recognition,” and “other.” I allowed students to list as many as apply and gave them the opportunity to define what they mean by “other.” As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the choice behind the purchase is crucial in understanding what factors of the consumer culture are most important to the average BC student and how he or she forms his or her image. Though I provided some potential responses that I believe would be common, the opportunity to elaborate a different motivation ensured that I did not miss a factor that may have been overlooked, which increases the accuracy of my study on why BC students gravitate toward certain brands.
I also wished to focus on the awareness students have of their own image on a daily basis. A large factor of self-awareness is how much time students spend assembling their appearance each morning. From selecting an outfit and appropriate accessories to styling hair and (for women) makeup, the amount of effort put into this process directly relates to the importance of image to a BC student. Thus, the next question in the interview was, “How long does it take you to get ready in the morning, from selecting your clothing for the day to being ‘ready’ to walk out the door?” In this way I was able to measure both the amount of time in planning and actually putting clothes and other accessories on the body. The time students spend on assembling their appearance every morning correlates to how much effort they put in; the more time spent, the more the student cares and is aware of how he or she looks when he or she walks out the door. The appearance can be thought to be more deliberate and planned the more time invested in its formation. Conversely, if a student does not spend much more time than is required to shower and put on clothes, it can be determined that either that student does not attribute much importance to his or her image or, perhaps, can quickly achieve the desired result.

Though the image presented for a normal day has been the main focus of my research, I believe that the time spent getting ready to go out at night to a party or bar is a factor in the importance of image to a BC student as well because this social aspect of college life is predominant at BC, particularly on the weekends. The effort involved to create an image for this atmosphere could vary and should be specifically addressed. Therefore, I asked, “How long does it take you to get ready to go out at night, including choosing your clothes?” Measured in hours, this amount of time would allow me to understand in part the amount of effort put into forming the desired image before going out at night. As elaborated in the previous paragraph, the amount of time invested in students’ appearance for the nighttime social scene is telling about how much
they care about this element. The more time spent, the harder the student is trying to perfect a
certain appearance or image, or the more effort it takes to reach that image in the first place. If
not much time is spent in this way, then the student does not give high priority to his or her
appearance in these situations.

BC culture places a high emphasis and value on exercising and spending time at the Plex.
Not only does this directly affect appearance through losing weight and gaining muscle, which
are considered important to men and women on campus, but the activity itself holds value also.
To assess this variable, I would measure time spent working out, which would include physical
activities on and off campus. This variable is operationalized through hours per week. Because
this number would be drastically different for an athlete because their exercise regiments are
structured and mandatory, I make a distinction between this activity and those that are chosen
voluntarily because they more directly correlate to the effort to create an image. Thus, I asked,
“On average, how many hours per week do you work out (outside of mandatory training if you
are on an athletic team)?” The responses to this question would help determine how valuable
working out and the results of a leaner and more muscular body are to BC students. It can be
determined that the longer students spend exercising, the more they care about the physical
condition, appearance, and improvement of their bodies.

Image and appearance are both heavily influenced by the body, and many students focus
on nutrition and what food they eat as contributing factors to these concepts. The specific
variable would be time spent thinking about and planning nutrition, which is the amount of time
a student focuses on what he or she eats daily. This variable could include ensuring a
proportional consumption of the food groups, purposefully avoiding a food group like
carbohydrates or red meat, or more extreme examples such as calorie counting. This process can
be measured through hours per week. The interview question used was, “On average, how many hours per week do you spend thinking about or planning your nutrition?” If a student spends a significant amount of time dedicated to this task, it can be determined that he or she highly values keeping track of food. This value could come from a simple desire to be healthy or have a more deeply rooted cause such as how food affects the body’s outward appearance. In this way, this question explores another dimension of maintaining or manipulating appearance and its importance to BC students. On another note, BC is known for being an incredibly fit campus, but this reputation comes at a price. This variable is controversial at BC because eating disorders are such a prevalent issue. Though my study did not delve deeply into this complicated matter, I recognize its importance and contribution to my topic of the importance of image. To someone who is sick and has developed a condition like anorexia or bulimia, the importance of image will clearly be extremely high. However, a student would not need a disorder to feel the pressure of attending a school at which there is such a high emphasis on physical activity and being in shape.

The importance of image to self is a crucial variable for this topic. An image can easily be created without any bit of concerted effort (though this probably becomes part of the image as well.) My study revolves around the idea that the image that BC students portray requires effort and is concerted and deliberate. The importance of image is defined by the value students give to creating and maintaining their image relative to other aspects of their lives. This variable lends a comparison to school or academics, job searches, and time spent socializing. It may be difficult to measure the value and priority level the image is allocated by the student. To do so, I asked, “What do you usually prefer to do in your free time?” and offer the list of choices of “work out, shop (in person or online), read, watch TV or movies, watch sports, play video games, and other.” Among these options, working out and shopping most directly affect image and
demonstrate a concentration and priority for it. The “other” option was evaluated on an individual basis of whether it illustrates a prioritization of image or not. The results from this question help determine what activities are most valuable to BC students that directly contribute to image. This question was modified slightly as I conducted more interviews and catered to the course of discussion in each group in order to present the most exhaustive list of free time activities possible without become too specific or individualized.

Finally, topics of conversation are a crucial factor in overall image portrayal as well. People are easily judged by how well they fit into different conversations and can keep up with topics that are thought to be common or important. For example, working out and nutrition are common themes of conversation for BC students. Fashion is widely discussed as well with specifics ranging from party dresses to new sneakers. I operationalized this variable in a similar way to the importance of image using a list of potential topics with the opportunity for additions from the participant. The concluding question was, “What do you find yourself talking about the most with other BC students?”

V. Methodology
The methodology I used was primarily focus group interviews (Gray et al.). I wanted to reach as many students as possible. Also, group interviews encourage discussion and, even based simply on the conversations I had had before beginning documented research, bring new ideas and themes to light as students can build off each other’s arguments. Students became more comfortable talking about concepts they have noticed in terms of the importance and homogeneity of image at Boston College as others began to admit they have noticed as well. Focus groups were particularly informative because they give attention to the opinions of the
participants. Since I am studying the view of Boston College students, their perspective is crucial to the understanding of the topic.

I collected my sample through a snowball sampling method (Gray et al.) of first asking people with whom I have some connection who I believe are good candidates because they represent a large section of the student body and will be honest. I reached out to friends in different years, classmates, and other members of Americans for Informed Democracy, a nonpartisan political activist group of which I am vice-president. Some participants I requested bring another person to fill out the group. I also asked those initial people to refer me to others who they think would be appropriate and willing to participate, and the process continued until I had my full sample.

It was important for me to structure the focus groups in a deliberate way. In order to study the importance of image to BC men and women of all ages (and possibly determine if it changes over time), I will organize the sample into distinct groups. I conducted one interview for one group for each year of mixed gender. There was a final group of one student from each year as well. Each group consisted of four people, two men and two women, to allow for diversity of opinions and voices but to not shut out any one either. Thus, my total sample size of the focus groups was twenty undergraduates. Though have a record of each student’s year, I did not have him or her disclose that information in the mixed age group. Freshmen or sophomores could be intimidated by upperclassmen and assume their opinions are superior while I give equal weight to each year’s perspective and am specifically interested in any shifts that potentially occur over the four years. I scheduled the group meetings by collaborating with the participants to find a time that worked for everyone. Since I could not obtain a classroom or office to use, I ran the focus group in my residence, a modular apartment with a common space large enough to
comfortably accommodate the group. Before each group I alerted my roommates to my plans so they generously provided us privacy.

I began each group by introducing myself and explaining my intent of investigating the topic of the importance of image to Boston College students. I then asked permission to record the discussion with a tape recorder for my research later so I did not have to take copious notes during the conversation, while reminding the students I would not disclose their personal information. No student ever refused or seemed uncomfortable. Then I distributed the brief survey before the conversation began and asked the participants to fill it out immediately. The survey, which can be found in Appendix A, covers broad concepts to allow the students to begin to process their opinions. In addition, it is likely the survey answers include honest opinions and reflections because these thoughts were later shared with the group. Next, in order to direct the conversation itself I asked the questions from the operationalization section above. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B, with questions that have the highest priority listed first and optional, though still useful, inquiries below. During the discussion, I attempted to intervene as little as possible to allow the conversation to flow freely and naturally, though I occasionally did step in to ensure every topic was addressed and every person had a chance to share. At the end I was sure to ask if they had any suggestions for my future studies or if they thought there was anything I had omitted or overlooked, or even a topic to which I had given too much importance. Each focus group lasted about an hour, including the time necessary for the survey.

A disadvantage of this method of focus groups is the effects of “group think” or people falling into a theme of discussion and not expressing their true opinions for fear of judgment. In order to avoid these complications, I provided the survey before the group interview. This both
allowed me to assess individual opinions and put the students participating in the mindset of the topic and its related themes.

In addition to the focus group method, I used some observational analysis (Gray et al.) as well. As a BC senior I have extensive first-hand experience relating to these issues. I believe I am qualified to identify different styles, brands, and trends people wear and use on site and will used these skills while observing the student body in different atmospheres on campus. I spent a total of about ten hours observing students and their appearances in dining halls, libraries, and at the Plex. Specific factors for which I looked were the brands students wear which I identified through logos or my own fashion knowledge; style, which I can identify broadly in categories like “preppy,” “sporty,” and “casual;” brands of accessories like backpacks, cell phones, and laptops; if it appeared that students through their appearance are attempting to stand out or blend in and in which ways; and if women and men style or somehow take the time to manipulate their hair. I recorded observations with a template to keep track of the date, time, location, common brands and items, and a section for other unexpected circumstances. This template can be found in Appendix C. These descriptions are also supplemented by advertisements and photographs from online catalogs, BC fashion blogs, and other BC websites that demonstrate the image BC students portray.

I also had the opportunity to observe various ways in which the awareness of image at BC manifests itself. Through analysis of different events such as lectures and plays, especially those organized and run by students, I was able to obtain a better understanding of the issues surrounding image that are most important or interesting to students. For example, the Women’s Resource Center works in collaboration with many organizations on campus once a semester to put on “Love Your Body Week.” During this week there are discussions, lectures, and
performances all about body image and the many facets of this personal and social phenomenon. An examination of the purpose behind this well-known and well-attended event provided data about the need for this kind of support on campus due to the many pressures regarding appearance.

Finally, I happened to take a course that very directly relates to this study this spring semester. The Capstone Seeing, Loving, Serving reflects on how the BC experience has changed the way students see themselves, their own lives, their loved ones, and society. Professor Mary Troxell uses various readings in philosophy, theology, and sociology to help students focus their perspective on their past and what lies ahead. Throughout the course of the semester, many topics associated with image at BC were discussed in depth and these appear at various points in my analysis.

VI. Data Analysis

Consumerism

Boston College undergraduates, like most Americans, fall into the consumer mentality in several ways. When buying a new item of clothing or technology, they consider the brand and the association it has, as one student reported he does, “definitely think about it,” (FG 1). In other words, they are aware of the image that brands project and they will necessarily be giving off the same message when wearing or using that item. Students further acknowledge that there are some brands that most people at BC have, men and women. Brands such as North Face, Under Armor, Patagonia, L.L. Bean, J. Crew, Timberland, and Apple are pervasive and quite noticeable around campus (Observations, FG 2, FG 4). For women, brands such as Longchamp and Uggs are also quite popular (FG 4). One student added, “BC could be a walking ad for lululemon,” (FG 5). Because these brands and items are so obvious, students feel pressure to play into this
consumer culture and obtain the same or similar items to fit in (FG 2). Because so many can be immediately identified, this means BC students are brand conscious as well and aware of what brands others display. When one student listed the brands he perceives as common at BC, he then laughed and then said, “Yeah, the type of stuff I wear,” (FG 5). This method of gaining social acceptance is easy to accomplish for most students since it is so visible.

The process begins freshman year when students are heavily focused on what they can do to fit in. They look for what brands and items are displayed by others and even if they resent the prevailing culture, they play into it out of social pressure to keep up in what one student called, “brand warfare,” (FG 2). This choice is significant because it means that for some, fitting in is more important than retaining individuality, though this will be discussed more in the analysis on the self and the generalized other. Though students interviewed mostly denied personally playing into brand culture, one student noted and others agreed, “I think a lot people do go to J. Crew on purpose,” (FG 3) in order to keep up with other students. Despite the emphasis that she is not loyal to brands, one student reported, “I do have certain stores I love like Made Well, Urban Outfitters, Steve Madden…But I go there because I like those stores…not a lot of BC students would shop there,” (FG 3). Even though this young woman said she likes these clothes because they are different, the data suggest otherwise. These are brands that may not be the most popular at BC but still follow the modern, preppy, and upper class image typical at BC. Thus, the student attempts to maintain individuality but remains safe within the accepted and familiar BC image. Another female participant was quick to mention when asked why she chooses certain brands, “I mean, I shop at Express but I don’t think many other people do,” and later, “I go to Express because I like the way their jeans look better than any other jeans that I’ve gotten…I just like the way they look on me,” (FG 4). This student, like others interviewed, understands her consumer
choices as fitting in to BC culture, though not fully submitting to its conformity as she emphasized her loyalty to Express as an element that allows her to be different. Another student furthers that even if one wears an expensive brand, it is not always to show it off. She explains that when one of her peers seemed to judge her negatively for carrying a Coach bag, she thought, “It’s just a bag!” and continued, “I wasn’t trying to flaunt it, I was just wearing it,” (FG 3). Here, this student also demonstrates a desire to prove her distance from her perception of the general BC consumer culture that does place a significant importance on brand names for the sake of the brand itself.

Students’ opinions on consumerism also overlap with fashion. As explained in the previous paragraph, in some cases the consumer item should speak more to the student’s style and fashion sense rather than brand preference or elitism. One participant also explained, “With brands it’s tough because a lot looks like J. Crew,” (FG 5). It can be difficult to determine if clothes are from a store like that, but the point remains that many items worn around campus appear as though they could be from there. In this vein, people wear clothing that looks like it could be of a certain brand, even if it is not from that store. Students describe that to shop only at one or a few stores would be too limiting in style, though they, “…do know students who would only shop at certain stores,” (FG 3). Students are aware of the brand consciousness of others and how some only wish to represent themselves wearing a few names. One student expressed her frustration with this trend of so many people wearing the same brands, “…J. Crew [is] made for people who are tall and skinny, so it’s hard to find things that fit me there…but now I’m over it if it doesn’t look good,” (FG 3). This student further emphasizes the importance of brands but that style and looking good are more important.
Other students described how they frequently shop at J. Crew purposefully because they know they can find anything they need there since they have a range of clothing for different occasions. Here, the shopping process is, “less about the brand and more about convenience,” (FG 5). Although, another student coyly remarked, “Maybe we just tell ourselves that,” (FG 5) in order to justify this consumer habit. Bigger, more popular brands also come to mind more easily when students think about where to go when they need something new. One student elaborated, “…brands are so circulated, brands are always at the top of your mind. And you know where everything is,” (FG 5). In this way, convenience again serves as a primary motivator, or at least excuse, for consumer choices. Even if another store with an appropriate product is physically closer or even cheaper, students are likely to go straight to a place they already know and trust.

As the observations demonstrate of students with the latest trends, consumerism also influences students’ desire to have the newest items by making the goods seem old and out of fashion quickly.

The importance students attach to style over brand applies to technology as well. One student commented on his use of an Android, cell phone “I like the keyboard and the way it looks… I sort of thought I didn’t want to be another person with an iPhone,” (FG 4). Here, the student genuinely likes the Android for its practical and stylistic features. At the same time, however, the brand name is a point of pride, even if it pushes him in the opposite direction from conforming; it remains an influence. Another student ironically commented that he, too, has all Apple products but, “I don’t like it…just because everybody else has it,” (FG 5). Along the same vein, one student noted, “I have a friend who specifically avoids brands, but that’s the same as thinking you’re above them,” (FG 2). This student points out that working around brand names still requires one to be aware of and influenced by them. One female junior further distances
herself from consumer ideology, “I just get things that I think I look good in,” (FG 4). Students in the focus groups made a point to call attention to the ways in which they do not conform to the typical BC image, particularly with regard to consumerism and brands as previously mentioned. Though they did not deny falling into the general student body in some ways, they also took the time to explain how they were distinct and individual.

While many consumer products are valued for their high-end name, some have worth in other ways. Female students who shop at stores like Forever 21 and H&M know that what they buy there is cheap and low quality, which they purposefully seek, as one student explained, “You don’t buy them to have forever,” (FG 3). When planning an outfit to go out at night, students intentionally purchase clothes that are not valuable so it will not matter if something happens to them like a spill or a tear. One student noted that she shops at Forever 21 for, “…a theme party or something when you know you’re going to get it ruined,” (FG 4). In this way, students display a consumer consciousness in that even if they are sometimes willing to spend more money on clothing, they do not want it to go to waste. In stores like these, students can find clothes that are still stylish, even replications of more expensive clothes, and not have to worry about them getting ruined. One student clarified excitedly, “You can find good knock offs of expensive dresses. You can look just as good for half the price!” (FG 3). While finding a good deal is valuable, especially for clothes that may not last, maintaining the performance of wearing expensive clothing is still important. Students may brag about deals but the reality is they do not want to look like they are dressed cheaply. For other settings like going out to a nice dinner or a business meeting, students will splurge on better, higher quality classic pieces that they know will last a long time. In general, BC students do not seek cheaper brands, as one student laughed at this suggestion and replied, “Definitely not for the cheaper!” (FG 5).
The consumer culture at BC is also heavily governed by New England weather, as the students in focus group 2 made note, “I think the weather is a big factor, too,” (FG 2). Even though there is social pressure to own the same brands as other students have, there is a practical side to consumerism here as well. Students buy many items because they are essential here. North Face is a popular brand because it makes high quality winter coats, a necessary staple of a New England winter wardrobe. One student noted, “I see a lot of long winter coats, which no one wears back home…but here you need it, it’s practical,” (FG 3). This style is specific to the weather and region. However, even though consumerism does entail an element of need, it also involves a heavy amount of social meaning.

The social construction of consumerism contributes to class divisions because the dominant social class, usually the wealthy, sets the standards for what are fashionable, in style, and generally desirable commodities. Because most BC students come from middle to upper class backgrounds, what they buy represents the standards for acceptable and even enviable goods. This process inherently emphasizes class and its power, as the students with wealthier backgrounds can better keep up with the changing trends in clothing, technology, and other items. For example, the majority of students have Apple products like MacBooks and iPhones (FG 3, Observations). The ability of many students to compete in this way puts pressure on others, those who can and cannot, to maintain the same level of consumerism in order to fit in. Because consumer culture changes so frequently, it self-perpetuates and allows the wealthier, dominant students to maintain this status and their power to set the standards of consumerism at Boston College. One student commented on the pressure to maintain certain brands, “I wish it didn’t matter…don’t buy or not buy something because of the brand,” (FG 2). Her lamentation solidifies the idea that brands and consumer influences are real and powerful at BC.
Consumer ideals also find their home with BC students, particularly women, in how often they shop. Some female students often go into Boston with groups of friends solely to participate in this activity. One student described her activities in her free time, “My friends and I go out to Boston a lot…I go shopping a lot. I actually got in trouble for spending too much money, so I have to cut back on that,” (FG 3). For this student, shopping is a social activity that achieves spending time with friends, experiencing Boston, and feeding her subscription to the consumer culture. She even recently spent more money than her parents wanted as she became caught up in buying new clothes with her friends. Others spend a significant amount of time shopping online, whether it is for a specific item or a way to procrastinate. In fact, when I was first explaining this study to my roommates, they all brought up how much time they and their friends spend shopping online. As the year progressed, I observed from the frequency with which their purchases arrived in the mail that they were not exaggerating. One female student noted that her frequent online shopping necessitates knowledge of brand names because she, “…must have a store in mind first before I start looking for things,” (FG 4). A male student explained his shopping process as much less frequent and because he will, “buy maybe a shirt or pair of pants at a time…I tend to go for quality. There’s a family store back home that I like to go to,” (FG 4). Because he and other male students buy new clothes less often, they are willing to spend more money for higher quality pieces that will last.

Finally, and to their credit, BC students see themselves as a part of the global community. While this influences them in very positive ways intellectually and spiritually and develops a sense of service and responsibility, it also adds broader and more complex influences on the consumer culture. Because students are aware of different trends and changes in them around the world, they are pressured from outside of BC to keep up in this way as well. As one male student
explained, “BC image evolves...as the culture changes...There’s a gap between the global culture and BC but I think it’s very close,” (FG 1). This student realizes the outside forces acting on BC and that while it is its own environment, these trends are factors as well.

**Fashion**

BC students, both men and women, display a particularly high level of fashion knowledge. For young people in general fashion is an important aspect of their culture. Because knowledge of styles, brands, and trends so heavily depends on one’s immediate surroundings, it follows that BC students would organically become more homogenous in this way. One student summarized, “Everyone dresses similar, casual but preppy,” (FG 3). Another student described, “Very preppy for the most part, high priority on looking presentable,” (Survey). This student acknowledges the goals of fashion at BC to look put together and appropriate. When asked what comes to mind from the term “BC image,” one student answered, “I think of people dressed up walking through O’Neill plaza,” (FG 5). The general image is to look nice and put together on a normal day walking around campus. Students also dress conservatively in that they do not wear items that would catch a significant amount of attention, reveal too much skin, or have hair dyed unnatural colors (Observations). Another student noted his surprise with regard to the consistency, “how many people wear khakis all the time,” and that they are, “dressed up more than I thought they would be casually,” (FG 4). The simple exposure to preppy styles around campus that are characteristic of so many BC students leads them to understand, trust, and gravitate towards those same styles. One male student from Pennsylvania said his high school was not preppy at all but now he is, “in to going to J. Crew,” and said he was, “not as preppy as I dress now,” (FG 5). Some students in my Capstone class agreed that they dressed differently after coming here and observing the fashion trends popular on campus (Capstone 3/12).
students of focus group 2 emphasized, the dominant culture of New England styles is both obviously and highly influential when choosing one’s own fashion. One student from that group explained, “[Style] is different for where people are from…People buy things when they come here to look like Northeastern clothing,” (FG 2). Their style changes upon arrival to fit the scene. Focus Group 3 also explained that Northeast style is pervasive and immediately noticeable and said, “It has a lot to do with location,” (FG 3). Location, especially in a place like the east coast that does have a dominant style, is very influential in BC students’ own fashion choices. Students who grew up in this area are able to make an easier transition while students from other regions change their fashion once they become a part of BC culture.

Students’ descriptions of their personal style mostly match these discussions of fashion at BC. Most students in the surveys, whether they are originally from the area or not, described their own style as preppy. One student wrote of her style, “modern and preppy with a bit of edginess,” (Survey). Another student explained, “I would describe it as practical/moderately nice. I tend to wear jeans, a button-down shirt, and sneakers/boots,” (Survey). One student acknowledged the influence the BC culture has had on her style as she wrote, “Kind of preppy from being at BC but normally more laid back,” (Survey). Her exposure to these styles has changed the way she dresses, a phenomenon I argue is common.

At BC, people also understand that there are different outfits and styles for each gender appropriate for different settings (FG 2). For class, students tend to look casual but put together. Popular items in cool weather, which usually is present for most of the school year, include sweaters, nice, non-ripped jeans, sneakers, and leather boots for women (Observation). Students also point out that, “…any kind of boots and leggings,” are very common looks for women (FG 3). When asked to describe image at BC, one student stated, “Girls: Hunter boots, black North
Face fleece, Longchamp purse,” (FG 1). Women tend to dress nicer than men and in fact, one student reported that he has noticed that men, “intentionally dress down for class,” (FG 2). He elaborated why he noted this phenomenon, “I’m taking this acting class and I have to wear sweatpants…and yeah, it makes me uncomfortable,” (FG 2). He continued that part of the BC image for men is to not talk about the idea of a BC image; it is more silent and assumed. Although, students report that there are certain styles that can be seen consistently with men like the, “weekend uniform: Polo, snapback [hat], khakis, and Tims [Timberland boots] with the tongue out,” (FG 2). This type of fashion is so prevalent for BC men to the point that the other students in the group laughed and acknowledged the truth of the description. For women, the expectations are higher and more specific. Many feel as though they cannot wear sweatpants or pajamas to class (FG 1). A senior female acknowledged, “I rarely see girls wearing sweatpants to class but I see guys wear them all the time,” (FG 1) [student’s emphasis]. These double standards lead to more pressure on women since they feel as though their fashion defines them more. Women in general are more involved with fashion than men and are more heavily targeted by advertisements, though the pressure on BC women seems to be significant. The intensity of this pressure and its effects on self-esteem are discussed in more detail in the section on the self and the generalize other. However, at BC fashion does not influence only women, since men report feeling similar pressures.
Above is a photograph of four students, three women and one man, on Bapst lawn who represent the typical BC fashion image. Scarves are common accessories for women, especially in the fall, as are leather boots. Jeans are popular for men and women for their practicality and classic look. The three backpacks visible are all North Face brand, as is the man’s jacket. All four students portray clean and classic looks without outlandish patterns or colors or rips. Their looks are all similar and directly fit into what the data demonstrate to be the BC image.
BC students’ fashion knowledge extends to nicer, more professional settings as well. From important meetings to presentations, both men and women understand the standards for business fashion. Above, a group of students studying abroad in Geneva, Switzerland outside the United Nations Office demonstrate their more professional outfits. They are dressed conservatively, in traditional professional colors. Their clothes and the students themselves appear clean and well maintained. They give off the image that they belong in this environment.
The popular BC blog “Her Campus” published an article in November 2012 titled, “6 Biggest Winter trends,” highlighting velvet as a must-have element this season. The style itself is classic and preppy with a bit of a modern twist through the embellishments. The brands featured, which including J. Crew, Gap, Zara, and Topshop, contribute to this image. This outfit demonstrates what BC women would consider a casual look for class, illustrating how they do tend to dress up on a daily basis. It is also worth noting that aside from the $8 nail polish, the cheapest suggested item to accomplish this trendy look are the loafers from Zara, at $49.90.
The students in the photograph above are enjoying an event in their residence hall. The women appear casual with a preppy twist, as the cream sweater, gray coat, and light purple jacket all suggest. The male student displays athletic wear with the logo of his club team, unidentifiable in this photo. He, too, appears as a typical BC student in portraying an athletic and exercise conscious image. All of the students are dressed conservatively in style, color, and pattern as well.
The online blog College Fashionista operates at college campuses around the country, selecting random students they see as that week’s “fashionista” or “fashionisto” if they select a man. Alex Sarabia, a junior at BC, was selected in November in this role. His style fits the picture my research supports for a male student who does put effort into his appearance- preppy, put together, and professional but casual. He appears stylish while being consistent with typical style at BC.
Diane Cote was spotted by the same bloggers on a cloudy, wet day. She sports Hunter boots, a Calvin Klein vest, and a Ralph Lauren sweater. She also portrays the casual, preppy, but still interesting look typical of so many BC students. Her look appears laid back, though she clearly put effort in to coordinate the pieces as well. Her clothing also has practicality, an important factor in New England. She is able to look fashionable while staying warm and dry.
Student Michelle Dong demonstrates BC fashion, as the weather turns warmer in spring. Her classic sweater and button down are brightened by the hot pink color that represents the season. The skinny jeans keep her look young and modern. Her pearl earrings and white watch add a touch of individuality while maintaining the classic style she and so many other BC students express.
Above a group of students display a collection of different representations of the BC image associated with fashion. Men wear t-shirts or collared shirts and do not shy away from colors or bold patterns. In warm weather, khaki shorts are very popular. The women have greater range, perhaps because there are more fashion options for them. Floral patterns and khaki or denim shorts are common. Plaid is a popular pattern for men and women year round as well. The one student in athletic wear represents those students who seem to always be on their way to the Plex. Overall, the students appear preppy and comfortable. They present themselves in different ways yet there is coherence among all the looks.
On a bustling day in the quad, a group of students in the photo above socialize. Their outfits on this typical day reflect the general image of BC as well. They are dressed casually but look presentable. Bright colors are popular in the warmer seasons, though neon colors or offensive patterns are nowhere to be found. Skirts are a common option for women while khaki shorts seem to be the top choice for men. Again, no one stands out for his or her fashion choices, either in a negative or positive way. The photograph feels natural and flows well as it displays a rather homogenous group of people.
In a scene from an evaluation of the various dining halls around campus, the photo above displays a group of students (and one smiling employee) posing in the new “On the Fly” location in the upstairs of Corcoran Commons. One student, clearly a nurse making her way to or from her shift at a hospital in Boston, sports her BC scrubs. Another female student is wearing a BC sweatshirt, by which she fits in and displays her pride. This gray, hoodless sweatshirt is particularly common around campus, I would argue due to its classic, preppy look. The male student is also dressed casually but retains looking presentable through a modern, young jacket. The two young women on the left demonstrate the popularity of scarves as practical and fashionable accessories. All the students are dressed in neutral, calm colors as well.
For nicer settings, such as going out at night, both genders tend to dress up more. Here, the, “style more than brand,” matters, particularly for men, as one student commented. (FG 2). One male student’s process in changing to go out at night simply involves, “pick[ing] out a nicer shirt than I wore during the day,” (FG 4). However, students also acknowledge that men can, “get away with a huge array of options,” (FG 1) and no one would notice if they were more dressed down or up when going out or for class, unlike for women. The students in the focus group 4, all juniors, offered insight into the different party settings and how they specifically influence fashion choices for men and women. One student explained the difference between a gathering of all one’s friends and a social event where one would not know many people or where one would hope to meet new people. In the first scenario, one student clarified, “You just want to look alright…alright is good enough for friends,” (FG 4) because one knows he or she is already accepted by this group. By contrast, when making a first impression students make a stronger effort to dress up. Specifically, women bring out, “the shortest of the short dresses…[and] the most makeup,” (FG 4). Both the men and women in this group acknowledged that this dichotomy in social situations probably matters more for women, particularly because men have more of a standard going out look that applies to many situations whereas women are faced with a plethora of nuanced choices to make. Thus, the people one is with and the comfort level one feels around them directly influences fashion choices and the amount of pressure students feel to look their best.
Above, freshman Gabby LoMonaco displays her going out look, courtesy of the style blog of HerCampus, a popular website for college women. She is dressed in clothes that would be considered too dressy for class and should be worn out at night. Skinny jeans with an embellished top constitute a common look at BC on the weekends. Her top is tight and slightly lower cut, but not immodest. It appears she has also taken the time to straighten her hair, something most BC women would not do on a daily, routine basis.
www.facebook.com/UGBCfans/photos_stream

The photo above demonstrates more typical going out looks for men and women. It was taken at the pub series, a UGBC event that converts rooms around campus into pubs for an evening. Because it takes place on campus, the students are dressed more casually than they would be for a night out in Boston, especially going to a club. The female students wear nicer tops with subtle embellishments that dress them up, like lace. The dark, tight jeans are a very typical look for nighttime and help to make the outfit nicer as well. For men, the standards are a little looser. Both students look appropriate in either a t-shirt or v-neck sweater, though a button-down would be suitable as well. The dark colors also signify more of a night outing.
Finally, these female students display some dressier looks for going out at night. Though this photo was taken at the same on campus event, I would argue they were planning on going to a bar or off campus party afterwards, or at least that is what their slightly fancier outfits imply. With the lace cutout in the dress and the shorts of the woman on the right, they reveal more skin than would be typical for class. The woman in the middle sports a bright, attention-catching top contrasted with dark jeans to make it more suitable for nighttime. All three have styled their hair and taken time on their makeup as well. They look put together, appropriate, and stylish.
Though a very different scene, there is also a fashion culture adapted to what people wear to the Plex. As previously mentioned, lululemon is a very popular brand. Above, a group of women exercise in a class. They portray typical work out looks, with mostly Nike brand shorts and sneakers. This brand is classic, reliable, and now makes clothes and shoes in bright, preppy colors that attract many BC students in and outside the Plex.

Fashion is also a mechanism of uniting people (or standing out), especially because it plays such a significant role in defining one’s image. At BC and elsewhere, it is a way to make connections with others or display differences. Freshman year this aspect of fashion is especially important to BC students because they are very focused on trying to make friends and, as one student explained, “I mean, you don’t want to alienate yourself based on what you’re wearing,” (FG 1). One of the most prevalent fashion choices around campus that serves this function is Boston College gear from the bookstores. One student explained, “I can’t go a day without seeing people wear it,” (FG 4). Wearing BC sweatshirts, t-shirts, and hats is an easy and organic way for students to show their inclusion and unity with the community. Additionally, it
demonstrates students’ pride in attending BC and that their identity as a BC student is a significant aspect of their overall image.

Of course, the most recognizable form of fashion unity at BC occurs on Saturday in the fall semester. For football games, every student dons his or her Superfan shirt, a bright gold tribute to his or her loyalty and unanimity. Even though the team has been less than successful in the past few years, this fashion trend remains and continues to give students a sense of belonging and a link to an entity bigger than themselves. Above is an example of the turnout that also must serve to intimidate opponents.

A note about BC athletes: Many Boston College student athletes are easily recognizable around campus as such because they are constantly decked out in standard issue BC Under Armor gear. These sweats and backpacks are high quality and some are personalized with their teams or numbers with tags they add later. As one student explained to me in casual conversation, this subculture on campus dictates that if one is part of this group, one should
display it through the free merchandise. In fact, this culture would deem athletes who attempt to break this mold by wearing other clothes to class that require more effort as trying too hard, even looking ridiculous. It is important to note that the unanimity also serves a teambuilding and uniting social function. In this way, athletes break from the traditional BC image of preppy while maintaining status around campus as part of an exclusive group that displays expensive brands.

Because the fashion industry itself recognizes the desire for individuality while fitting in, there are many looks that are acceptable while still being categorized into the same style. The preppy, nicely dressed fashion of BC can be represented in many ways so there can exist some originality and variation. At the same time, the influence of a recognizable consistent fashion culture continues through all four years. In fact, the variety of options could contribute to the anxiety that many BC students seem to feel about the fashion culture, as aforementioned with regard to women’s going out fashion. Both men and women understand what fashion and styles are common and feel the pressure to conform to them to fit in with the rest of the student body as BC is, “very obviously image conscious,” (FG 2). Some students actively choose to participate in this fashion, what many students call the “BC uniform,” in order to not be singled out in this way (FG 2). In many ways, fitting in contributes to a generally easier and more pleasant college experience, especially at a university like BC where the students who stand out are incredibly noticeable.
In fact, BC junior Erika Bjerklie was noticed as one of these students who stands out. The BC branch of the fashion blog College Fashionista highlighted her outfit above as, “her quirky and bold style [that] makes her hard to miss,” (JohannaGolden). Yes, her style is more alternative than most BC students but the fact that her style is so distinct in a skirt, tights, and t-shirt is a testament to how homogenous BC’s fashion is. I argue that at most other universities she would not be noticed for her different style.
The male student above was photographed at an undergraduate government fashion show. He portrays a classic preppy look while the red pants add the individuality that some students want to display. In this way, the student is able to fit in to the general student body while maintaining a sense of individuality. The article in *The Heights* describes the show as representative of most BC students’ image though with some departures from, “the traditional preppy BC style,” (Sadeghian).

And in fact, especially this year, there is strong legitimacy to this worry of departing from traditional BC style and standing out negatively. With the emergence of a Twitter feed called @BCFashionPolice, there is now more pressure than ever before on students, particularly women, to conform to BC fashion standards. The students who operate the feed pick out
individuals and comment on their outfits, sometimes positively but usually in a criticizing manner. Sometimes the users include pictures, though never names. Thankfully, the backlash against this Twitter has been widespread and intense. Students said it is “…so mean to call people out” and “ignorant” and acknowledge its bullying nature (FG 3). A female freshman commented, “Why would you ever want to make someone feel like that?” (FG 3). She acknowledges that the remarks are meant to negatively affect other students and make them feel bad about their fashion choices. One student described, “I saw a lot of backlash fast, which I wasn’t expecting. It actually gave me more faith in the general student body to let people express themselves however they want,” (FG 1). All the same, students explain that factors like this are further reason to try to blend with certain fashions, “Not to fit in, [but] so it’s not the focus,” and so, “people see you for you,” (FG 1). This theme of acting as a fashion authority has continued into other social media as well. On the Facebook page “BC Confessions,” a page meant for anonymous postings about real issues and insecurities, one student took the time to use it to tell others to, “Stop wearing sweatpants to class,” (FG 4). Individuals like these only add to the already significant pressure on BC students to look presentable and conform to BC standards.

Of course, fashion, consumerism, and materialism all overlap in unavoidable ways. The fashion BC students display necessarily also portrays, to a certain extent, their consumerism and materialism, since more materialistic or consumer-minded students will be more involved with fashion, as the literature explains.

Status

Though most universities may have a certain associated image, BC’s student body stands out as portraying an image of high status. BC students are noticeably image conscious and work to display what one student described, “there’s an image but it’s definitely an elite image,” (FG
2). From brand names to nutrition, most aspects of a BC student’s life are related to status value attributions in some way. I argue, as one student explained, that the fundamentals of status at BC reside in the fact that students are self-aware and aware of BC culture (FG 1). Because status is socially constructed and only applicable in environments where the values ascribed to different items and actions are shared, undergraduates’ acknowledgment that they see and understand these hierarchies is strong evidence that they are real. Students, to an extent, agree on what brings one status and what does not at Boston College; there is a common, accepted culture of what is worthy. It is important to note in this regard that students further acknowledge the existence of what is known as “the BC bubble,” (FG 1), which is to say that BC as a culture is somewhat self-absorbed and isolated from more common norms. What is normal becomes distorted within this bubble and students recognize this paradigm shift in status attributions between BC students and the general population, or even other students in the Boston area. The image BC students display has highest status within BC rather than in the outside world because other groups would value different qualities.

Although brands and fashion have been heavily discussed in previous sections, they deserve some attention here as well. Certain brands have associations (FG 1), which relate to status in that they are valued higher or lower by students. Status also overlaps with fashion since how dressed up a BC student is (or is not) for class makes a difference in how others perceive him or her (FG 2). Because students notice that others in more fashionable styles and brands are given higher status, this will influence the image they attempt to portray as well. Students describe how it is hard not to compare oneself with others, “when it’s all around,” (FG 2). One group described ascribing to status values at BC as stages of resentment and resistance that are followed by succumbing while still resenting the social pressure. One student explains, “I didn’t
have any of this stuff when I came in freshman year. I felt the need for those brands but I resented it,” (FG 2). However, the backlash against the aforementioned Twitter account @BCFashionPolice through social media and conversations around campus demonstrates that the majority of the BC population does not condone bullying or belittling others based on fashion or status. One article reads, “Indeed, this body of self-proclaimed fashion experts who have gratuitously commissioned themselves with a most unnecessary mission seems to take real pleasure in maligning people,” (Yoon). Though there is a domineering culture that agrees on what status style choices are given, status is not given to those who use their judgment as a weapon. Even if it was meant in humor, this goal is not achieved, as one student elaborated, “I think a lot of people really took issue with it because it really wasn’t funny…There’s a lot to be parodied at BC and…this was just bullying,” (FG 1). I would also note here that in my focus groups I did not ask any question that directly relates to BC Fashion Police, but students wanted to talk about it in almost every group and asked if it could be discussed. Students see its inherent connection to the importance of image at BC and how some people like those who run the Twitter are so misguided as to what is appropriate, that they have no right to say such things or make that judgment, and that it is simply outrageous.

At BC, high status is also given to people who are body conscious, but only in certain ways. Students report that working out is important to themselves and others at BC (FG 3). BC is known as a fit student body and in fact, students note that there are very few overweight people around campus (FG 1). In fact, in her survey one student reported the first topic that comes to mind when she thinks of “BC image” is, “I have always thought that people at BC are very oddly obsessed with their weight,” (Survey). While there is high value placed on working out, solely exercising at the Plex is recognized as worthy. One student commented, “I think the remarkable
thing about BC is specifically going to the Plex to either do...an exercise machine or lift weights...It’s very much, ‘oh, did you go to the gym today,’” (FG 1). Activities that would be called “outdoorsy” are not as valuable as lifting or using the elliptical at the Plex. Even within this culture of being aware of one’s body and staying fit and strong, there is a more specific code that dictates what type of working out is best. Some students attribute status to how often one works out as well. As a student in focus group 2 noted, she overheard a female student talking about how she, “has to do an hour and a half of cardio every day,” (FG 2). The student in my group described how she felt this statement demonstrated an absurd standard, but that it was clear this other woman was in some way bragging about her exercise routine as it holds a desirable level of status at BC. The status associated with working out overlaps with fashion as well. One student quoted, “There’s that saying, BC students either look like we’re going out for the weekend or about to head to the Plex,” (FG 4). Wearing workout clothes to class, especially expensive and noticeable brands that have status value such as lululemon leggings and brightly colored Nike sneakers, is incredibly common for undergraduates. Because there is status associated with the activity and the products used for it, students display them often.

Another student furthered this idea when discussing working out, “BC students want to appear healthy, or think they are, but their habits are horrible,” (FG 4). While undergraduates spend much of their time engaging in unhealthy activities like binge drinking, they understand that at BC, status is associated with an image of someone who exercises and is health conscious. One student humorously remarked of other students’ habits, “Two miles on the treadmill is not going to offset chicken fingers and binge drinking,” (FG 4). This duplicity is discussed in further detail in the section dedicated to the self and the generalized other. Students in focus groups explained they work out for a myriad of reasons. One student clarified, “I do it for family health
issues…[and] it’s good to run when I’m in a bad mood and relieve stress,” (FG 3). Another student responded, “I like running. I was never a big athlete in high school. I like going in the morning before class. It’s a nice stress reliever,” (FG 3). These students both emphasize the health benefits, particularly relieving stress, an affliction that affects so many BC students. So while some students are more concerned with the status associated with their exercising, this is not always the case.

It is worth taking a moment to discuss the dichotomy between what students reported of themselves in contrast to their opinions of other students’ working out habits. Almost all students interviewed stated that they do work out and it is important to them, and all who said this explained it is for health reasons and taking care of oneself. However, in every focus group students additionally described how they perceive other students as concerned more about the status associated with going to the Plex and how many value exercise more for the image it gives off for them. Here I see three explanations for the difference in what students report about themselves and how they describe others. First, the students I interviewed coincidentally are outside of the typical BC image in this way. Second, the students in my focus groups do adhere to the image they projected onto other students, but did not want to admit it or do not realize it. Third, and finally, there is the possibility that the majority of BC students are more like the participants in my focus groups who exercise simply to stay healthy and my participants cannot see that. In any of these three scenarios, it is clear that the image (perhaps inadvertently) given off by the general undergraduate population is that there is status attributed to working out at the Plex and there are specific norms at BC that hold value while others do not. Because I argue that reality is socially constructed, if this is what students perceive, they will feel the pressure to conform or deal with it another way, whether it exists or not.
This aspect of image at BC involves nutrition as well. While many students are simply concerned with being healthy, some groups attribute status values to what others eat. There is an overall pressure on women especially to, “keep up and look skinny,” (FG 3) which directly influences what foods they eat. The demand is so high in this regard for both genders that an article in The Heights earlier this year described how a senior, James Campbell, created the Campus Calories mobile app that allows students to track their calories at BC dining and keep a log (Costanzo). Campbell’s comments are particularly interesting with relation to image at BC as he explains, “I thought people should know what they’re eating. I thought it would be a useful tool, especially here, where people seem to really care about what they eat,” and later, “People seem excited about it,” he said. “Even all my roommates use it, and they’re guys,” (Costanzo). Not only does Campbell speak to a general desire to be food conscious, he also hits an interesting note when pointing out that “even” his male friends use it. He inadvertently explains that outwardly, nutrition is a more important aspect of image to women, although it is a less obvious concern for men as well. Clearly what they eat has high value to both genders since the app gained 2,000 downloads in only its first week.

Another student in a focus group also noted that nutrition is, “more of a sensitive issue with girls,” (FG 4), while a student in a different group explained that it is a, “big topic of conversation among my [female] friends,” (FG5). Two women in one group consecutively answered, “I think about it a lot,” (FG 4). Women tend to discuss what they are eating at the time as well in order to draw attention to what little food they are eating. One female student elaborated, “Girls in Mac will say, ‘I’m going to get…three pieces of melon for dinner,’” (FG 5). These women announce their, in reality, unhealthy, eating habits to their friends because it is more highly valued to eat less and appear delicate. In fact, as one student brought to my attention
and others confirmed, there are groups of female friends who count each other’s calorie intake (FG 2). Though it can played off under the guise of attempting to help and inform, a comment like, “Did you know your salad has this many calories?” (FG 5) as one student reported she has witnessed, inevitably attributes low status to eating a lot. This extreme example brings light to the larger issue that nutrition and calories can have status associated with them, at least within certain social groups at BC. The fact that this notion when discussed with other members of the focus group was easily believable furthers that this social hierarchy exists to some extent.

**Narcissism**

When asked what comes to mind when then term “image at BC” is stated, the first answer that one student gave was, “people are obsessed with how they look,” (FG 4). This theme of a great focus on the self to a narcissistic level appeared in multiple areas in focus groups. More than one group laughingly discussed the men in the Plex who, “check out themselves in the mirror,” (FG 4). This somewhat silly example demonstrates that even when in a situation where taking care of one’s body could be the focus, students are paying more attention to their appearance and the image they give off. Another student also commented, “It seems like people are very into themselves,” (FG 2) when describing the general BC undergraduate population. However, she and the other students in the same group continued to explain that once you get to know most people, “you can see they’re putting on an act,” (FG 2). This comment is worth some deeper analysis. The implication here is that BC students want to portray an image of self-centeredness and that there is such a large emphasis on the self here that it is, at least in some scenarios, more valuable to appear focused on the self than on others. At the same time, however, a different focus group offered quite a distinct opinion. The juniors explained that they believe the situation to be the opposite. Students, “try to appear like they care about people more
and want to appear nice and friendly,” but they are, in fact, “self-absorbed.” (FG 4). Here, the older students argue that the genuine nature of BC students is to be more narcissistic. Their cynicism starkly contrasts that of even sophomores, only one year below them, though this does not discredit either interpretation.

It is worth noting, as one sophomore male did, that BC’s motto “Ever to Excel” inherently has a heavy stress on the self, which could lead to or encourage narcissistic thoughts (FG 2). Such a motto encourages a constant focus on the self, to be the best one can be in every aspect of one’s life, which includes, “looking presentable for class, being in shape…” (FG 2). This endeavor necessitates attention on the self that could be placed elsewhere. Such a goal drives students to cultivate themselves in every aspect of their lives, from academics to body image to fashion and even encourages the belief that they deserve it.

**Collective Consciousness**

Boston College students are, in some ways, part of Durkheim’s idea of collective consciousness. Since they are members of the same institution, it is natural from a sociological perspective for common norms, values, and standards to become generally accepted. When asked to think about the term “image at BC,” students in the first focus group replied that there is one and, without communicating with each other, nodded their heads and agreed with each other’s descriptions on what that image was, based on the shared meaning the term has (FG 1). In every other interview there have been incredibly consistent descriptions of the BC image as well. When asked to describe typical BC brands and styles, though responses did vary, no students in any group ever disagreed with each other. Students explain that they recognize brands that many people have, and even acknowledge that they do so as one student said, “I notice it a lot,” [student’s emphasis] (FG 2). There is common ground here for BC students to be very
aware of the image portrayed by other students and their view of the general student body; that is, that BC is generally preppy, well-dressed, and wears and uses nice brands.

Other norms are generally accepted as valuable by the BC culture as well. It is assumed that most students work out and this element is an important aspect of the BC image, as can be seen in greater detail in other sections. As one student stated, “For a lot of BC students it’s a priority,” (FG 4) and is automatically viewed as a socially acceptable, even expected activity of a BC student. Another dominating aspect of collective consciousness at BC, and probably most universities, is the drinking and party culture. One student reported, “People are obsessed with the drinking culture here,” (FG 4). While drinking easily becomes the focus of weekends, it also overlaps into some weeknights. There are some who, “…all they talk about is partying and alcohol,” (FG 5). Even among students for whom drinking is not their entire social experience, “stories about going out,” and “mostly what happened the night before,” are two main topics of conversation because it is something to which everyone can relate (FG 1). This aspect of college life is important to image because, as one student explained, it is, “involved in how we perceive each other,” (FG 1). Students necessarily are viewed and categorized by their adherence to the drinking culture. Because students become so swept up in valuing parties and binge drinking, they become, “less in touch with personal activities that you would actually enjoy,” (FG 4). The drinking culture is so pervasive and overwhelming that it obscures individual values and activities from which students may get more joy. However, because the value of spending free time drinking (in some cases, to excess) is given such weight by so many people, students cannot break out of this collective consciousness and build their own individual image.

Even preparing to go out falls into this collective consciousness as it is assumed to be a social process at BC. A male junior commented, “Our house can be a bit of a
production...sometimes we have big house arguments over what the theme of the night is going to be,” (FG 5). He explained that he and his roommates, while they begin to drink, discuss and coordinate whether they will all wear button downs, Polo shirts, or sweaters. As he described this process he laughed and called it, “stupid things you wouldn’t think guys would do,” (FG 5), though he and his friends are probably not alone in this way. The assumed process of getting ready together applies to women as well. One female sophomore expressed how she and her friends travel from room to room helping each other pick out what to wear and socializing as they prepare for the party of the evening. She describes, “It’s not that it takes me that long to get ready, it’s that one person will get dressed, we’ll all go into my friend’s room and then she’ll get dressed. When we pick out our stuff, the whole process of it takes a long time. But...changing doesn’t take me that long,” (FG 5). Another senior said getting ready to go bars is, “more of a thought process,” (FG 1) and that, “you talk with your roommates because it’s a fun process. And you feel like you look good,” (FG 1). Again, they presuppose they value each other’s opinions and taste and that they will agree on what is the best outfit for the occasion. The support of roommates and friends legitimizes the outfit since these values are socially constructed, even down to the level of small groups. Thus, the opinion and influence of the friend group plays a major role in how students present their image on a night out as they strive to portray a connected front.

As an institution, Boston College upholds Jesuit ideals of living and working for others and educating oneself so one may benefit the community and the world. The student body is, “highly academic” (FG 5) and healthily competitive; it is assumed students care about school. Though I will address these themes in greater depth later, BC students form a collective consciousness here as well through the strong emphasis on and value given to service. Students
know that everyone is involved with service in some way, especially due to the “competitive service programs,” (FG 2) and this is considered very typical. It is commonly believed that there is worth in service and that BC students should participate.

While there are aspects of BC life to which the concept of collective consciousness can be applied, it is important to note that perhaps none are so complete as Durkheim intended when he created the term. This concept implies total unity in belief and while most BC students agree upon the above themes, none are accepted unanimously. This notion is particularly interesting when one considers Boston College as an institution. Not only is BC an institution of higher learning that would attract a small demographic in this sense alone, it is also more specifically Jesuit and Catholic. One may assume these values would be unanimous, though I argue that the tolerant and questioning nature of the Jesuit tradition allows for diversity of opinion. There are many non-Catholic students at BC, myself included, who feel perfectly comfortable and unchallenged, but also who obviously do not subscribe to these same beliefs. Thus, Durkheim’s collective consciousness idea serves to explain most of the similar thinking concerned the previously discussed topics, though it is not as complete as the theory implies.

The Self and the Generalized Other

“I want to know what people think when they see me around campus,” said one sophomore woman during a focus group. This simple declaration captures the essence of the concept of the self and the generalized other at Boston College. BC students are very concerned with how others perceive them. Because they are aware of the prevailing image at BC, they also know whether or not they follow it. They act in the roles of performer and audience member, which gives them more personal access to try to determine how others view them. In fact, when asked what she found herself talking about most with other BC students, one woman replied,
“Mentioning these themes,” (FG 1). Students are aware of the topics in this study and are self-aware enough to discuss them. Although this is not universal, many people simply want to appear a “normal” BC student (FG 1). As one student noted in a survey, “There is a tacit pressure to conform,” (Survey). The apprehension to not stand out from “the other” is particularly strong during the start of the college career as freshmen reported they “don’t want to stand out in the beginning,” (FG 3). During this time when first impressions seem paramount, students are even more reflexive and aware of their performances and the props they use to create their appearance and make it most believable to the audience. They constantly reevaluate to determine which aspects of their performance are believable and which need adjustment. However, this process does not stop once students have found friends and the pressures remain throughout their college careers. As previously explained in the analysis on consumerism, even when saving money and being a conscious consumer, students want to perform as someone who wears nice, expensive clothing because this is what they perceive as expected.

For BC students, the issues surrounding the self and the generalized other go deeper than the superficiality of clothing and brands. Due to the competitive nature of BC, students are constantly worried about what their peers are doing. One student explained the pressure of being surrounded by an audience of what he called “Renaissance students” and said there is a, “sense that someone is always doing something you’re not,” (FG 2). For BC students, the other is someone highly motivated and involved in service and multiple extracurricular activities, and this mentality fosters competition (Capstone 2/14). This social environment influences students to take on these roles, partially because they know it is expected of them. At the same time, though, there is also pressure to perform as though these accomplishments do not take much effort. A student described this discrepancy as BC students want to, “appear smart and that they
don’t try hard at school,” (FG 4). This issue has been heavily discussed in my senior Capstone class. BC students seem to always have it together and are constantly portraying themselves as competent, independent, and emotionally stable. Professor Troxell uses the term “effortless perfection” to describe not only how most BC students appear, but also the image most feel they have to portray. As one student wrote in a survey, “[Students] care about appearing really smart and like they don’t have to work hard,” (Survey). A significant portion of our discussion has been focused on the idea that while BC students perform as though nothing is wrong, people are almost always stressed and face many personal problems. However, because students perceive the other, the ideal type of the BC student, to be perfectly stable and have no issues, they feel as though they cannot show their vulnerability either. From coursework to personal life, everything should come easy to them and they should love BC. This, in turn, only adds more pressure to students’ lives as they feel they must deal with their problems on their own and not show any weakness or dependence.

Concern for the generalized other also affects men and women at BC in distinct ways. Women, “know they’re being watched in the dining hall” (FG 2), so to maintain the performance of a thin, health-conscious person, they, “go to the salad bar every night,” (FG 2) because this is what they perceive to idealized role of a BC woman. As time goes by and women become more self-aware and aware of BC culture, these strains can increase. When asked to describe image at BC in the survey, one student wrote, “Girls are really sensitive about their appearance, obsessed with looking good,” (Survey). This male student could recognize the importance of the presentation of self to women at BC. One female student, who was previously quoted discussing how she works out at the Plex now more than ever before, also commented, “I’m definitely more health conscious now too, like I think about what I eat and maybe it’s from external pressures,”
I argue that the environment at BC generates these concerns as the other is perceived to be someone who is fit. As one student commented, “I can count the overweight people [I know at BC] on one hand,” (FG 1). Being decidedly overweight is almost not an option at BC because it is so distinguishing, and not in a necessarily positive way. Those few students who are dramatically stand out.

Even women’s specific workout routines are influenced by the other. Though both genders pay attention to what others are doing, as one student said, “All people do is look at each other,” (FG 5), in the Plex, women face specific challenges. The awareness that they are constantly on display for others increases the anxieties around performing as a typical BC student. A female student noted that, “Girls are more self-conscious about what they’re doing,” (FG 4). The group elaborated to describe how women are expected to exercise on the elliptical machines, not the weight machines. This pressure from the other directly affects female students’ workouts as one explained, “If I want to use a rowing machine over by ‘the boys side’ I’m afraid of them judging how much weight I use,” (FG 4). BC women feel as though they must be especially conscientious about what others think when at the Plex in order to display an image of being fit but not too masculine. One female student described, “I see people in the Plex and think, ‘How the heck do you stay like that?’” (FG 3). Students become aware of how others watch them because they notice other people and evaluate their bodies. Even though this student explains how she is impressed by other women, she nevertheless demonstrates how women do notice each other. Thus, body consciousness comes into play as women try to judge how other students see them and how to portray their image based on what is expected from the other. The picture below depicts a typical day at the Plex, with women on the elliptical machines and men using the weights.
Unfortunately, these issues go even deeper for women and greatly impact their self-esteem. In late February of this year, an article in *The Heights* about how BC women graduate with lower self-esteem than when they enter as freshmen was published and quickly gained popularity. This theme became a common topic of conversation around campus and sparked some responses as well, generating other articles on the topic, such as an opinion piece in *The Gavel* titled, “Too Much Insecurity at BC,” (Faulkner). People are talking about the pressure BC women face on a daily basis and how it can be crippling and certainly unfair. While I argue that BC men face similar if not the same challenges, according to the same article, “men generally gain self-confidence during their four years here, despite having, on average, lower GPAs than their female classmates,” (Fissinger). For women, the other is more intimidating and presents an image with which most BC women feel they cannot compete.

When they compare themselves to the other, women perceive they are not as valuable, using whatever socially constructed status values exist at BC. “Problems that were frequently
cited by students as being harmful to one’s self-esteem included the pressure to look or dress a
certain way, the hookup culture, and the housing lottery,” (Fissinger). There are specific aspects
of BC student life that contribute to the pressure, especially on women, to maintain a certain
image all the time. The article continues, “…Students today feel more pressure to look perfect all
the time. ‘Ten years ago the women weren’t as groomed as they are now, and you just notice
how much more time women are putting in,’ she [Fleming] said. Both Fleming and DeLeeuw are
concerned about the body image issue at BC because they view it as a ‘girls being mean to girls’
problem,” (Fissinger). The fact that the image of being put together and “groomed” is so
noticeable is the central element to self-esteem issues. Because the other exhibits these qualities
and is all around, female students naturally compare themselves and end up feeling inadequate.
This constant comparison method also contributes to unhealthy competitiveness among girls,
which only furthers the insecurities and lack of support women feel from each other. Even when
female students do successfully portray the desired thin appearance, other women are likely to
judge them and, “though very speculative…say ‘She has to have something,’” (FG 1). Whether
or not they truly believe it, they will assume or say to other women they think that person has an
eating disorder. This type of judgment only perpetuates all the issues surrounding image and
self-esteem among females at BC. Thus, the burden BC women face comes from other women.
They create an unbreakable cycle in which all are expected to hold an image, and one that
requires time and effort. Since their self-esteem decreases over the time they spend at BC, I
argue that specifically the culture here effects students and shapes the image they portray.

For men, by contrast, the issues surrounding image and presentation of self are somewhat
taboo. One student explained, “guys have a silent image,” and they, “put pressure on
themselves,” (FG 2) rather than talk about it. They notice the image associated with BC men but
it is not something they discuss with each other. For example, students feel as though only women are able to talk about their nutrition, even though both genders think about it a significant amount, as one student explained, “There are guys who think about it a lot,” (FG 4). Men are not allowed to discuss such themes and if they did, their friends would mock and make fun of them (FG 4). One female student thought of her male friends discussing nutrition and commented, “If a guy said that, they’d say ‘stop being a bitch’ or whatever… ‘get some muscle power,’” (FG 4). Even if these themes are prevalent in their lives, there is social pressure to maintain the performance that they are not important, or at least under control. It is interesting to note that while both men in this focus group denied thinking about their own nutrition past when they are purchasing their food, they also both commented that other men think about it frequently. Here, these male students may be enacting the same rule they just explained, that they are “not allowed” to talk about it. Thus, men experience the same kind of self-reflection and attempt to access the perspective of the other. The image of the BC man is to look as though he cares about his appearance and image while simultaneously giving off the impression he does not care too much. As stated in the previous paragraph, however, the pressures that men face are not so intimidating as to make them feel unworthy. BC men in general are up to the challenge and not deeply psychologically affected.

By the time students reach their senior year when they have established their identities and have a solid friendship group, the anxiety has been somewhat assuaged and the performance and constant reevaluation matters less, as one senior explains, “because we’ve all gone to school together for this amount of time,” (FG 1). As time goes on and students become more familiar with the other and their audience through building a stronger social base, they are less concerned about the impressions they give and give off and become more comfortable with themselves.
Two seniors discussed these issues with regard to working out. “I think there’s a difference between freshman year and senior year. Freshmen, when they’re trying to fit in and decide what their image at BC is going to be, when they’re picking their clubs and picking their major, look around and see a lot of fit people and think ‘I’m going to be fit.’ …But now, I don’t think there’s any external pressure at all,” (FG 1). Although, another senior in the same group then commented, “I feel like it was the opposite for me. Freshman year I didn’t really care and this year I feel like I’ve worked out more than I ever have. I also think that’s the proximity to the Plex,” (FG 1). Regardless of how seniors’ lifestyles have changed, they generally feel more at ease about those choices. Seniors are also more comfortable staying in for a night rather than feel like they have to go out all the time (Capstone 2/14). However, while these difficulties are assuaged by senior year, they do not completely disappear.

Despite all of this anxiety, when asked in the anonymous survey if they felt as though they fit in with the general student body, most students replied they did and while factors like intelligence and motivation were mentioned, the majority said the feel this way because of how they dress (Surveys). One student reported, “Yes, I don’t think I stand out in relation to other BC students, girls specifically,” while another described, “I would say that I fit in with the student body because everyone tends to dress about the same as I do,” (Surveys). These students all also described their personal style as at least somewhat preppy. One student who said she does fit in emphasized her style as comfortable and consisting of sweatpants, sweatshirts, and t-shirts. This student can analyze herself in contrast to the other through her sense of style by acknowledging the general culture is to put effort into one’s appearance. Regardless of whether or not students conform to the BC image, the other is clear and obvious all around. This ideal is so well defined for students that one female participant expressed concern to me when discussing her morning
routine that she perceived as different. She interjected, “Yeah, I’m worried about this survey because I feel like I’m not like a typical BC student,” (FG 4). I encouraged her, “What do you mean by that?” and she continued, “Because I don’t wear makeup to class. Normally I wear sweatpants and stuff…Normally, I just don’t care and that’s not typical for a BC student. I feel like a lot of BC students do care about labels but I guess the people who came to this don’t,” (FG 4). Here, this student demonstrates her ability to define the other as a specific image, as well as separate herself from and compare herself to this idea. Her perception of her audience is as an entity from which she is distinct. She views herself as so distant from this image that she questioned the validity of her participation in my research. Even when students do not view themselves as contributing to the BC image, they can still easily identify it. One student expressed her frustration, “Everyone is too busy trying to fit in to realize they already relate to people. They’re too scared to break out of the mold,” (FG 2). Perhaps these individualities would be more accepted than students think, though the pressure to remain connected to the other is too high to allow students to take this risk.

Other discussions suggest that students are not as successful as they presume in maintaining their performance and contrived image, however. One student noted, “A lot of people have fake appearances of themselves they are trying to pull off,” (FG 4). This perception demonstrates that students are aware of each other’s performance. As Goffman explains, BC undergraduates are all performers and members of the audience, and the latter role gives them access to see that the others are false. Another student finished the thought, “I think of Catcher in the Rye. Phonies,” (FG 4). To a fellow BC student, a performance can come off as inauthentic, which punctures the overall performance irreparably. People become so swept up in conforming to the BC image that they lose their authentic selves.
As mentioned earlier and in other sections, students spend a significant amount of time thinking about their bodies, especially with regard to how others see them. While the general image of BC students is to be body conscious and physically fit, there are alternative movements on campus that fight this pressure and impact BC image in distinct ways. The Women’s Resource Center works directly to this goal. In that vein, it presents Love Your Body Week, a week of programs, discussions, and performances all with themes of accepting bodies of all shapes, colors, and sizes, especially one’s own.

**The Women’s Resource Center (OHP) presents:**

**Love Your Body Week!**

**Monday, November 12**
- Exercise Caution
  4:45 p.m. | McHenry 211
  on BC Rec

**Tuesday, November 13**
- “Doea This Thing Make Me Look Fat?”
  10:00 p.m. | Higgins 205
  on OHP, English Dept.

- TRANSform Your Vision
  7:00 p.m. | Higgins 300
  on OHP, Center

- Just Carico
  9:00-11:00 p.m. | Fitz MPR
  on OHP, Center

**Wednesday, November 14**
- Mindful Eating is Food for Thought
  12:00 p.m. | Higgins 205
  on OHP, Center

- Hair Porn
  5:00 p.m. | McHenry 205
  on OHP, Center

**Thursday, November 15**
- Metabolic Mix-up: Weekend Edition
  12:00 p.m. | McHenry 211
  on OHP, Center

- Dr. Pepper Schwartz: Intimate Bodies
  7:00 p.m. | McGuinn 121
  on OHP, Center

**Friday, November 16**
- The Good Body
  7:00 p.m. | Cushion 001

Although programs like this speak to a BC image that is more diverse and accepting, they also further prove how much BC students think about their bodies, particularly in comparison to other people and what others think. Love Your Body Week turns around the perspective when
looking at the body to a healthier and less self-conscious lens but at the same time still supports a
strong focus on the body. In drawing such intense attention to the issue, though it is incredibly
constructive, it does further the importance of the body as a socially meaningful object. Some
other programs provide forums for students to express their ideas and feelings about these issues
and combat the importance of the body. Unsaid is a weekly discussion group designed to foster
communication about, “the unspoken and unrealistic expectations of ‘beauty’ and ‘health’ at
BC,” (WRC).

Another manner in which BC students display their self-awareness and concern for their
appearance is what I will call the “Robsham Window Phenomenon,” about which I first learned
from my orientation leader the summer before my freshman year. BC students take advantage of the large glass windows of Robsham theater that act as full-length mirrors to look at themselves as they walk by. This trend is so common and noticeable that the organization Boston College Television made a video of someone on the inside of the lobby running up to the glass as people walked by evaluating their appearance with a poster that read, “YOU LOOK GREAT.” When the students saw the sign, they all smiled and waved, most a little embarrassed but all genuinely happy. This video rapidly circulated Facebook and was the buzz around campus for a few weeks in the fall semester. I believe it brought up important and relatable issues like concern for the self and the generalized other and how students judge themselves too harshly.

I argue that the existence and the popularity of Love Your Body Week and the like demonstrates there is a demand for this kind of support at BC. This week fills an emotional and psychological need that is noticeable and common since there is such pressure and focus on the body as an object that others observe. Unsaid puts into words the anxieties that BC students have and questions the values attributed to health and beauty as unreasonable. There is enough to be discussed that the group can meet as frequently as once a week as well. Clearly, the culture of comparing one’s image to others is common and affects many students deeply.

Jesuit Ideals

The Jesuit ideals of BC and its students also have an impact on image and its importance. One student explained that this philosophy is what “makes the difference” in BC students from students from other schools (FG 1). While students from any college are influenced by that school’s culture, the Jesuit aspect further shapes BC students’ identities. Two distinct groups explained that applicants know this is a vital part of BC’s culture and would not matriculate if it did not appeal to them in any way (FG 1, FG 5). One student explained the Jesuit appeal,
“People look at it and see how it is and maybe that’s why they apply,” (FG 5). The implication here is that prospective students already share Jesuit values or at least find them appealing. A senior noted that, “People who super stand out won’t want to come. They are repelled by it,” (FG 1). Along this theme, one student supposes that, “The admissions board picks people who will fit in at BC,” (FG 1), meaning that this aspect of their image is already present before they are influenced directly by BC culture. The Jesuit ideals of BC students round out their image, adding to the aforementioned qualities that seem to be more focused on the self. The environment here makes it normal for students to discuss their faith experience, which is not true of other universities where it is considered private or taboo (Capstone 2/17). For BC students, spending spring break relaxing on a Caribbean beach and going on the Appalachia service trip are equally normal experiences. One student explained that BC’s motto “Ever to Excel” demonstrates how “being well rounded” is also a part of the BC image (FG 2). Students are expected to look presentable for class, be in shape, and volunteer and these activities and values are not in conflict with each other. Rather, taking care of oneself in every way upholds the Jesuit model.

Some are more skeptical of the Jesuit influence, however. Because there is a large emphasis on service, participation gains social status rather than simple value in helping others. There is, “a large perception that people do, for example, Appalachia to meet people,” (FG 1), implying that the Jesuit influence is not a significant factor. While the presence is real, it may not be fully absorbed by the undergraduate population. In fact, one participant said he did not even realize BC was Jesuit until he came here and comically described, “Day one I came here and was like, ‘Oh…we have Mass!’” (FG 4). Another student commented that this experience is a perfect example of how much Jesuit ideals directly influence BC undergraduates (FG 4). For some, it is completely irrelevant to their college experience, their image, and their lives. The same group
continued to describe their cynicism about BC students’ motivations for doing service. They explained, “…obviously there are some people who do it because they’re passionate…[but there are] so many people who want to brag about it,” (FG 4). Though the group was not unanimous in this opinion (one student argued Jesuit values are legitimately important to BC students), it becomes clear from these comments that the image students wish to portray is one of caring for Jesuit ideals and service since they are aware the BC community values them, even if these motivations are not pure.

One student described her puzzlement upon entering BC in this regard. Due to the Jesuit status of the university, she explained, “I was confused when I came here. I thought people would be less superficial,” (FG 2). She sees the image of being too focused on the self and the image of living for others in conflict. Another student in the same focus group agreed that the image many BC students give off is one of self-centeredness, but then furthered that, “once you get to know them you can see they’re putting on an act and do believe in Jesuit ideals,” (FG 2). Some students attempt to help their peers by pointing out when they are slipping into a more self-centered mentality. One female student explained when they are acting spoiled her friends will tell each other, “You’re having a BC biddie moment right now,” (FG 5). For those unfamiliar with the term, “BC biddie” is sometimes used to describe the more negative aspects of the female BC image, a young woman who is too concerned with her appearance, material objects, and what others think of her. This is the image from which so many students attempt to separate themselves, as explained in the section on the self and the generalized other. When I asked her for an example of a statement that would provoke this intervention she said, “Like, ‘Sometimes it is so expensive to get my BMW fixed,’” (FG 5). She continued, “We make an effort to not become absorbed with it…try to be men and women for others…[and] focus more
on that,” (FG 5). In a later group altogether another student described most BC undergraduates as, “…wonderful and involved in their studies…[there’s] a lot more than meets the eye,” (FG 3). A different student furthered, “People have more to contribute than you’d think,” (FG 3), which she has discovered in class “and especially in 48Hours,” (FG 3). These environments where Jesuit ideals are forefront better allow students to express this aspect of their image rather than in casual conversation or at parties.

Finally, yet another group explained the distinction in topics of conversation with different friends. Among people who are more like acquaintances, more superficial subjects like partying and “basic conversation starters” are common because they are easy to talk about and students know they will have shared experiences in this regard (FG 5). One student elaborated, “College is an intense part of your life because you’re around so many people your age so it’s probably a common thing to fall into what you’re all going to relate to…which is the more superficial things,” (FG 5). Another student furthered, “Some people love to talk about partying, that’s an easy topic,” (FG 5). The students in this group continued to make clear that among close friends the conversations delve into deeper themes and display their true emotions and personality (FG 5). In terms of comparing conversation topics of acquaintances, “My close friends joke about it,” (FG 5). Their closer, more trusting relationship allows them to laugh about the superficial topics as well as delve into deeper, more real discussions. In these conversations, their true ideas, values, and personalities are revealed. Thus, even if BC students do not initially portray the Jesuit ideals of the university, most do support them and they are a factor in their overall image.
VII. Implications

I believe my study could have broader importance in various ways. First, this project questions what students truly focus on. One might think that, as university students, the clear priority should be classes and receiving the best education possible. That should guide every day and take up the most time. My topic considers instead that BC students focus more or even mostly on their own image creation and maintenance. I hope that my work reveals the sheer amount of time that goes into the exhausting effort of preserving this particular image that involves so many components. From keeping up with the latest fashion and trends to working out consistently and maintaining a healthy diet, the image BC students create involves simply a lot of time. Because topics of conversation have a large influence on image, students may feel the need to be on top of the latest fashion, music, or sports news. Of course these topics could be a part of a true passion a student has, which a Jesuit education would therefore encourage. However, I hope I demonstrate that the fascination with image leads students to focus on these themes almost purely for the sake of image maintenance. Students should become aware of how much work and effort they put into this process and perhaps realize the disproportion between this and the real reason students in general and particularly BC students, in light of the Jesuit tradition, are in college: to receive the best education catered to the student’s passions and skills in order to better the community.

Second, my study asks how it is possible that so many students are so similar. Is the BC admissions process this specific? It is natural that a university would look for a certain kind of student who would emulate BC ideals and feel comfortable here. Students who fit in will be happier and more successful, which is good for the student and the university, so this process is logical. However, to what extent does the “fitting in” factor hold weight? I doubt that BC is
purposefully selecting students with the same preppy style who all use iPhones. My study asks how a group of students who are so homogeneous have come together.

Continuing with this topic, my study asks where does this image come from and why is it so important to BC students? I argue that students are not fully aware of the atmosphere here past what their desire to fit in helps them notice. However, because most students are so successful in this process, one must assume that it becomes natural and organic. Students go through the motions of conforming to the culture without fully understanding from where the influence comes or why they follow it. Students simply fall into the process of obtaining the goods and knowledge that allow them to fit in here. I hope that my study will make students aware of the process and examine in themselves why crafting this image is so important to them.

I also want to focus on why this particular image holds so much weight. A preppy style is considered the norm here and it is easier to be accepted if one conforms to this style. Certain brands bring with them status as well. North Face, Vineyard Vines, and J. Crew are all easily identified with both men and women around campus. I argue that it should not be assumed that these brands are “better” or more normal than others. It is taken for granted that this is what is valued and simply how people dress at Boston College. No one should feel coerced into maintaining this image at all times. Why is being so put together all the time valued highly? I would like to discover why the wealthy, preppy, and trendy style has been chosen as the one with the highest status.

Along this theme, I shed light also on the privilege that is so obvious and prevalent at this university. Not only is it taken for granted that these brands are cool, but it is also assumed that wearing clothing and using expensive technology is a normal lifestyle. BC students may not realize that in most other environments, dressing to this level and wearing Ralph Lauren and the
like as standard casual clothing to class is not normal with regard to the rest of society. It is not normal for almost everyone one knows to have an iPhone and an Apple computer. Students hold themselves and others to very high levels of expectations when it comes to what possessions they have. It is expected that women wear lululemon to work out and that men have the latest Under Armor apparel. Within this culture of wealth and privilege, BC students may find it difficult to break out and realize that this is not an average or diverse population, nor is it realistically representative of the rest of society. Most college students do not share the dominant culture at BC across the country; I hope to help BC students understand that.

If the importance of image is found to be a source of self-esteem and anxiety issues on campus, I hope what my study reveals will encourage discussion and action to address these problems. Whether it is through resources available on campus such as counselors or specific events led by resident assistants, any acknowledgment or support would be helpful for many students. I hope that an awareness of the importance of image and how it can affect an individual on a daily basis will make students feel as though they are not alone in their struggles and should not become overwhelmed by these pressures.

My study could have implications that extend outside the BC community as well. In many areas of society consumerism can be proven to be a powerful force. The pressure to buy the newest or most fashionable item is strong and can affect many people socially, psychologically, and financially. The marketing that targets specific demographics is sophisticated and influential, especially for this generation. BC students are influenced by these forces through advertisements that demonstrate the trendiness or high-class status of an item. Not only does consumerism foster the idea of buying, but it also encourages competition of finding the best products at the best prices. Consumerism turns into a game for shoppers who compare
their purchases to each other’s. I hope this study demonstrates how overwhelming these forces and this process can be to both BC students and every consumer in modern society.

While consumerism can be easily recognized as an influential factor of BC culture, it can be difficult to identify the source of cultural norms and values in many settings. Though BC as an institution has a well-defined mission available through their website and in various forms of literature, the student body’s values must be ascertained through a social lens of observation and participation. The specific characteristics of any society may be obvious or subtle; I hope my study demonstrates the complications with identifying values and what is important in any specific environment, not solely BC. Moreover, the research could illustrate how an established culture is difficult to change. While the details may adapt to modern culture and evolutions in technology as a whole, the basic values and expectations (such as appearing stylish and trendy even if trends change over time) remain static. This phenomenon could apply to a range of scenarios and could give perspective on how to act or appear in a place that already has an established identity.

Finally, this work illustrates the process of image and identity formation and maintenance in general, not exclusively at Boston College. The multitudes of factors that contribute to this process make it clear that it is complicated and requires a substantial amount of concerted effort. People face this challenge in any new environment. They must gauge the values of the majority and the status attributed to various items and activities. Subsequently, they determine how best they personally can fit in to this culture and demonstrate their knowledge and acceptance of its values without appearing as though too much effort was involved that their image seems forced and unnatural. Social beings must cope with this transition throughout their lives and I hope this thesis sheds some light on how this process is accomplished.
VIII. Conclusion

Image at Boston College is indeed more complex than I had thought at the beginning of my research. Through intensive focus group interviews and my own observation of the undergraduate population, this study has shown that the formation and maintenance of the BC image goes far beyond passing appearance. Though this depiction provides only the most superficial analysis of BC image, students are quick to describe the typical BC student as preppy and well dressed. Both the focus groups and observations concluded that some of the most popular brands that BC students display are J. Crew, North Face, Under Armor, lululemon, and Apple. These higher status name brands have become inherently associated with the BC image of a student who likes classic, preppy styles, and who can afford them. BC students are clearly part of the new consumerism, an ideology that subscribes to the idea that brands have identity associations and one’s consumer choices reflect one’s image. Because marketers specifically target this generation, it is natural for BC students to have higher consumer awareness and be concerned about what their brands say about them. They reach for the higher status brands because they believe they will portray a desirable image.

BC students have an awareness of what appearances are appropriate for different occasions and usually endeavor to dress suitably. For class, men and women tend to look nice and appear as though they put in some effort; however, the expectations for men are lower and women are more likely to feel judged for dressing more casually or wearing sweatpants. While the process of getting ready for the evening for men can be as simple as changing into a button down shirt, women, especially younger students, take the time to carefully select their outfit and put together a look. Women pay more attention to the details of their appearance, though they are not alone in caring about it. In both scenarios, men and women are keenly aware that it is
socially acceptable for men to wear a wider range of styles, from a suit to sweatpants, and no one would question either. Women, by contrast, are much more closely scrutinized and feel forced to conform to a narrower window of style options in order to be considered dressed appropriately.

In addition to fashion and brand names, BC students attribute a high status to certain types of fitness and nutrition. Working out at the Plex is seen as more legitimate than participating in an activity outdoors. Even within the confines of the Plex, there are status associations stratified by gender. Women are expected to use elliptical machines while men lift weights. If a member of either gender crosses these boundaries it is noticeable and uncomfortable, though most do not even have the courage or desire to do so. Students further note that women are especially conscientious of not breaking the norm and pay more attention to what others are doing. These unspoken rules of the Plex seem to be known to every BC student and contribute to their feeling self-conscious about their exercise routines. While working out is a healthy activity, some use the status it carries with it to establish some sort of hierarchy, as if the more one works out the better he or she is. This image of someone who brags about how much he or she exercises, specifically at the Plex, is familiar to BC students. Additionally, even with this environment that claims to be focused on health, there remain status attributions to certain fashion and brands of work out gear as well, such as lululemon leggings for women and Nike sneakers for men and women. These various status values come from both outside forces such as consumerism and fashion as well as the internally cultivated BC culture.

For nutrition, students are also very aware of outside pressure to appear a certain way. The status that applies to looking fit extends to what they eat and students feel a demand to be thin. Though women face this issue more sensitively and directly, it is a concern for men as well, as seen through their food choices and the widespread use for both genders of the Campus
Calories mobile app. Men talk about nutrition less and therefore it appears to not be as much of a concern for them though the research demonstrates this is not the case. For women, it is a common topic of conversation among friends, with discussions ranging from casually talking about what they are eating to an extreme of pointing out how many calories each other’s meals contain. This intense atmosphere places a tremendous amount of pressure on women to watch what they eat for fear of being judged by other females. It is worth noting here that while female students critique other women who make choices like these, they do notice them, further proving that women watch and judge each other and that women have reason to be self-conscious in this way.

Despite this image of high health consciousness, there exists a distinct dichotomy between the way students portray themselves in the Plex and the dining halls and how they act with regard toward their health on the weekends. While there is a culture to act health and body conscious during most of the week, the dominating party scene encourages excessive drinking, which is certainly not good for the body. In fact, the drinking scene is so overwhelming that it obscures students’ participation in other activities that they may even enjoy more. Students choose to drink and go to BC parties instead because they become absorbed by the value attributed to this lifestyle, though most are unable to see the contradictions in their behavior. However, drinking does factor in to the overall BC image in the “work hard, play hard” mentality. Though students care about academics and spend a significant amount of time studying, they are also expected to have the time and energy to party. The image students attempt to give off in this regard is twofold: smart and studious and relaxed and fun.

This complex image that BC students portray has multiple sources. This generation of students comes to BC already heavily influenced by a consumer culture that places value on
frequently shopping for new items and following the image associations of brands. They are already conditioned to absorb brand names as part of their identity. The new consumerism further encourages students to reach for the higher status items, the best lifestyle available, even if it is beyond their means. It is not a difficult transition to apply these principles to the already image conscious culture at BC. Because most students statistically come from the northeast region of the country, they arrive on campus having been influenced by the styles and brands of this area. BC fashion is representative of the classic preppy New England style, and many students have already adopted this way of dressing. Even so, there are certain items many students purchase after arrival on campus when they see their popularity. While some items are bought for practicality’s sake, many people add these staples to their wardrobes in order to better conform to the BC image. Other students change their style even more dramatically. Those who come from other regions in the country where the fashion is distinct find themselves naturally and consciously adopting the BC image in this way. Be it because BC styles are more visible and therefore more prominent in students’ minds or simply because they are more convenient and accessible, most undergraduates allow their style to become like what they see around them on campus.

Of course, there is social usefulness in this practice as well. During the difficult transition to college when one is attempting to create one’s entire new life and navigate a distinct social scene, one easily controllable factor is appearance. Freshmen perceive that if they conform to the standard BC image in these ways, they will more gently be immersed into BC culture and it will be easier to make friends. If they have these concepts in common with other students, they are also more likely to be seen and appreciated for their own personalities, rather than being pigeonholed unfairly for an appearance that stands out.
This desire to fit in is a major source behind the construction of the BC image. Though some concern about one’s image comes from a narcissistic sense of self-worth, the data suggest it is much more likely students are self-conscious and act more from a place of unease or even fear of standing out from the crowd. Students are very self-aware and perceptive of how others view them during most activities in BC life. They have a profound understanding of the other as the typical BC student and what is expected of them. As aforementioned, women in particular feel these pressures, especially because they are more likely to discuss them with each other. In fact, these issues run so deep as to be noticed by the university as a pandemic problem: their own studies show that women leave BC with lower self-esteem than they had upon matriculation, and, even more telling of a discrepancy, men leave feeling more confident. These studies and this thesis suggest that the perceived competition among women, the fear of judgment and the constant judging of each other, significantly contribute to this phenomenon. BC women are particularly concerned with their own image in relation to that of others and feel an intense need to keep up with the status quo in every way, from fashion to nutrition. These issues are so pervasive and important that offices like the Women’s Resource Center offer multiple support events throughout the year to address this growing need.

Men still face their own challenges through what one student called a “silent image.” They grapple with the same pressures to conform and keep up with their peers, though because these issues are not discussed, they are not given a chance to fester. In fact, part of the taboo associated with image is to give off that it is important. Though repression may not be the healthiest of strategies, it is helpful in that men’s ideas about BC image remain more self-contained and they do not tend to worry about the other or how people perceive them as much as women do.
The anxieties surrounding BC image change as students make their way through their undergraduate experience. During their freshman year, image formation is the key process. Students experience a kind of sensory overload and attempt to give off the image they believe is expected of them as a BC undergraduate. They automatically purchase specific items they think will help them assimilate more easily without analyzing if they in reality represent who they are. While these more frantic stresses soon dissipate, as students gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of BC culture, it is possible for other concerns to develop. For senior women, there is a bit of a contradiction in the research. Both genders report in my interviews that by senior year when they have established friend groups and even communities, they feel more comfortable with their identity and less pressure to conform to BC standards. At the same time, they also report being more self-aware, or aware of their own image in comparison to that of others, even more so than they were as freshmen. Additionally, there remains the issue that as a whole, BC women leave their undergraduate experience feeling less confident. These conflicting reports lead me to conclude that while women are able to form meaningful relationships and find close friend groups who they trust and around whom they feel comfortable, the general student body, the other, does not cease to influence them and their self-esteem. In fact, this study attempts in a way to provide comfort to those students who feel intense social pressure to conform or anxiety over not doing so. No one should ever feel judged or less worthy if he or she do not fit into what others think he or she should or what I describe as the typical BC image.

The influence of Jesuit ideals is the final element comprising BC image. While some consider the Jesuit influence an irrelevant part of their experience, it is undeniably present. The real influence it has is that it allows for open discussion about faith and service, which are unique characteristics for BC. Part of the BC student image, if not to participate directly in service, is to
be open to and accepting of it. Although the themes associated with BC image seem wholly focused on the self, and therefore contradictory to the Jesuit values of living and working for others, there is a way to reconcile these ideas. The BC motto “Ever to Excel” epitomizes the typical BC image. Students are encouraged to excel in every aspect of their lives, from serving others to taking care of themselves physically to caring for their appearances on a daily basis. In this way, through caring for themselves and the image they project, students are indeed upholding Jesuit ideals.

The most interesting and significant conclusion is not what the BC image is or even from where it comes. It is that while BC students can collectively describe the BC image in every aspect from clothing to exercising in the same way, no student perceives him or herself to be fully a part of this image. They admit they wear the clothing of the typical BC student, but explain they wear it because they legitimately like it and it is a part of their real style. They have fallen under the influence of consumerism that allows them to feel their choices are functional and independent. They recognize they care and think about their nutrition and exercising, but unlike their perceived motivations of most BC students, they do so for genuine health reasons, not to keep up an act. Throughout all the focus group interviews, students often made the effort to denote their separation from the BC image they had just described. Students perceive the other at BC in a slightly negative light that causes them to not want to fully identify with it. The other is more superficial, too concerned about brand names, narcissistic, forms borderline dangerous eating habits, excessively works out to the end of appearance primarily, and is judgmental of other BC students. No students in any focus group portrayed this extreme illustration, yet it was uncannily familiar to all of them. Thus, the question remains if BC students view the standardized BC image in too harsh a light or if students do feel this way and are unconscious of
it or unwilling to admit they, too, conform. Regardless, it is clear that BC as a microcosm of undergraduate life cultivates in students a profound awareness of the BC image, their relation to it, and the various mechanisms they use to submit to or reject it.
Appendix A
Pre-Focus Group Survey

1. What is your year of graduation?

2. Before hearing about this study, had you noticed anything to do with image at Boston College? If so, what?

3. How would you describe your personal style?

4. Would you say you fit in with the general student body? Why or why not?

5. Do you have any general thoughts or opinions about this study you’d like to express before the focus group begins?
Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Have you ever thought about image at BC? In what ways?

2. Would you say BC students are image-conscious?

3. Which brands of clothing and technology do you use most often?

4. When shopping for a new article of clothing or technology, how important to you is the image associated with the brand?

5. On average, how many hours per week do you work out (outside of mandatory training if you are on an athletic team)?

6. What do you find yourself talking about the most with other BC students?

Additional Reserve Questions

7. Why do choose these brands over others? Possible options: better quality, cheaper, more readily available, more appealing style, or name recognition?

8. How long does it take you to get ready in the morning, from selecting your clothing for the day to being ‘ready’ to walk out the door?

9. How long does it take you to get ready to go out at night, including choosing your clothes?

10. On average, how many hours per week do you spend thinking about or planning your nutrition?

11. What do you usually prefer to do in your free time? Possible options: work out, shop (in person or online), read, watch TV or movies, watch sports, play video games, and other
Appendix C
Observation Recording Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th># of People</th>
<th>Common Items</th>
<th>Common Brands</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/19; 12:15pm-1:15pm</td>
<td>Corcoran Commons</td>
<td>About 50</td>
<td>5/6 Apple computers, BC sweatshirts, BC backpacks, boys in sneakers, girls in boots, 7 North Face jackets at least, 3 Patagonias</td>
<td>BC, NF, Beats, lulu lemon, Nike</td>
<td>Everyone with clean, natural looking hair, generally look casual but put together</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Boston College. <www.bc.edu>


<http://chronicle.com/article/Millennials-Are-More/131175/> 


<http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/the-culture-of-narcissism/> 

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/rec/>. 


Women’s Resource Center. <www.bc.edu/wrc>
