One Or Many?: Examining Consumption Experiences From the Lens of Multiple Selves

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This paper explores multiplicity in consumers’ self-concepts and their relationship with consumption experiences. The study uses dialogical self theory to understand the multiple voices in consumers. A mixed-method approach was used in order to understand consumers’ selves. Metaphor analysis was then used to understand informants’ consumption experiences at a general level and from the perspective of each of the selves. The findings illustrate that the same consumption object or experience can evoke different sets of feelings for different selves, and that consumption decisions are based on feelings of self that is dominant at the time of consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores multiplicity in consumers’ self-concepts and their relationship with consumption experiences. It builds upon recent streams of consumer research that recognize multiplicity in self concepts and examine multiple selves in different consumption contexts. It addresses the question, what is the meaning of consumption experiences from the perspective of multiple selves? More specifically, does a consumption experience entail one set of attitudes and feelings that are consistent across selves or does it involve many sets of attitudes and feelings that vary across selves?

This research draws from dialogical self theory, which views multiple selves as narrative voices that occupy multiple self-positions (Hermans and Kempen 1993; Raggatt 2000, 2002). This theoretical perspective relies on people’s life stories centered on important attachments to people, historic events, beliefs, and consumption activities as the basis for their self-positions. This theory assumes a natural state of multiplicity and allows multiple selves to enter into dialogical relationships. By grounding our study in this theory we are able to gain a broader understanding of the consumer selves, which then can be applied to better understand consumption experiences from the perspective of the different selves.

In this paper, the term multiple selves is used to mean multiple voices that speak from different positions, which is very different from schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. Moreover, we choose to use the word “multiple selves” instead of “self positions,” “multiple voices” or “dialogical self” as it is a more generic term that is consistent with current marketing literature on self-concept.

The dialogical self differs from other more commonly used perspectives in consumer behavior. It is different from the situational self (Schenk and Holman 1980) in that the focus is on the position from which the person is narrating an experience, which is not necessarily tied to a particular situation. Dialogical self is more of an internal perspective based on affective attachments as opposed to a self image that is desirable in a particular situation. It also varies from identity theory, and social identity theory. The dialogical self is a broader construct that subsumes roles and social memberships. While social identities gain salience through positive affirmations, dialogical self emerges from positive and negative attachments. Dialogical self also differs from other conceptualizations as it allows for dialogical relationships. Consequently, the consumption choices would be different from what they would be in the absence of dialogical relationships.

This study employed a mixed-method approach in order to understand consumers within a larger context over and above current explanations of multiple selves as role identities, social identities, and narrators of consumption stories. Raggatt’s (2002) personality web protocol, comprising narratives and multi-dimensional scaling, was adapted and used in combination with metaphors in order to discern multiple selves. Metaphor analysis was used to get a further understanding of the feelings attached to the selves discerned and to understand informants’ consumption experiences at the overall and self levels.

There were 12 hours of data collection for each of the study’s six informants. In this paper we report data from two individuals. The findings illustrate that the same consumption object or experience can evoke different sets of feelings for different selves. This has significant implications on how we study consumer behavior and also for market researchers in their endeavors to understand consumers’ attitudes and opinions. Further, by examining positive and negative consumption experiences from the lens of multiple selves, this research contributes to current literature in post purchase evaluation.

Current research suggests that products that evoke primarily positive emotions during the consumption experience are positively evaluated (Oliver 1993; Stokmans 1998; Westbrook and Oliver 1991), which was also found in our study. However, when understood from perspective of certain selves, even positive experiences could involve primarily negative emotions. More interestingly, some products and experiences that were considered negative and evoked overall negative feelings were described as very positive experiences when understood from perspective of certain selves. These findings suggest that researchers would benefit from examining consumption attitudes and feelings from perspective of the consuming selves in order to understand complex consumer processes such as post purchase emotions and evaluations.

The findings in this study, consistent with dialogical theory, suggest that decisions are not based on overall feelings or attitude towards a product, but based on feelings of the self that is dominant at the time. The idea of dominant self is similar to that of identity salience (Arnett et al 2003; Dimofte, Forehand, and Deshpande 2003; Forehand, Deshpande and Reed 2002; Kleine et al 1993; Laverie et al 2002). Yet, an importance difference is that the sphere of influence for the dominant self extends beyond that of salient identities, which are primarily concerned with identity-related consumption behaviors. Further, we found that the dialogical self perspective allowed us to study products that are not clearly related to any identity and may be outside the purview of identity studies.

We also found that overall metaphorical feelings were different from feelings expressed by the different selves. This reveals limitations of research methods that do not take into account feelings and attitudes of the different selves. By looking through the lens of multiple selves as a dialog between multiple self positions, we can gain a richer understanding of consumption patterns in consumers. Instead of relying on compensatory reasoning as is done in multi-attribute models, we see that consumption is often based on dominant feelings of one self which may not be congruent with other selves perspectives.

The findings in this paper reiterate the importance of studying consumer behavior from the perspective of multiple selves. Other research programs can adapt the methodology used in this study to examine multiple selves in other consumption contexts such as brand loyalty. Further, this study demonstrates the use of dialogical self theory, which can also be used to understand other consumer topics such as ambivalence, conflict resolution, addictions, and self-control.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


