You Are What You Consume

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to analyze the impact of individual's self-concept in consumption pattern. Consumers intentionally or unintentionally consume different products and services during their lifetime and their consumption pattern or preferences are closely associated with their sense of self. Similarly, consumers tend to avoid commodities or services that contradict with their self-image. A number of empirical studies have been analyzed further to investigate the influence of self-concept on brand or product selection.

Keyword: Consumer, Brand, Product, Self-concept and image.

INTRODUCTION

Self concept has been considered as one of the most important concepts in psychological literature. It is important to study self-concept as a part of consumer behaviour as many purchases carried out by customers are directly related to the image individuals have of themselves (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). In defining the formation of self-concept, Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) states: A person always evaluates possessions in this own environment, and this evaluation includes an examination of himself as if he is just another object.

Thus, the self-concept involves ideas and feelings that he has about himself in relation to others in a socially determined frame of others.

The formation of self concept is a continuous and lifelong process. A young person selects certain characters to be his role models, and tries to follow them. As he grows older, he becomes more practical and experienced realizing that he has certain limitations. Gradually he learns about skills that he is capable to achieve and capabilities that he cannot achieve. On the basis of that evaluation, he recognizes the scopes and options he has and identifies his strength and shortcomings. An individual may set different goals in his lifetime. Based on his strength, shortcomings and preferences; a person can accomplish some goals while others are discarded.The idea of self-concept has been under-utilized in the field of marketing and has not received any extensive attention from marketing scholars (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). However, Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) argued that, the idea of self-concept and self-image can be used to develop more effective marketing program (p. 14). From the perspective of business, the study of self concept is, however, important as individuals' associate specific image with themselves that frequently describes specific purchase behaviour patterns (Heath & Scott, 1998, p. 1110). For example, the customer may purchase a product as they feel that the product will improve

their self- image. Similarly a customer may decide not to buy a particular product or not to purchase goods at a particular store if he perceives that the selection is not consistent with his perception of himself (Britt, 1960).

The self concept has normally been conceptualized as multidirectional concept consists of five components namely: the ideal self, the apparent self, the social self, the perceived self, and the actual self (Burns, 1979; Markin, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1981, 1982, 1986). Markin (1979) explains the multiple components of self as follows: "…the perceived self is how individual sees himself; the ideal self is the role model, which one desires to be; the social self is how a person thinks others perceive them; and the apparent self is how people actually view the individual. The actual self is the composite of all these concepts". Due to the diversified nature of self- concept, it is clear that the way a person perceives himself can also vary significantly from the way he would like to be or the way others consider him (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 17). Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) further argued that "these varying dimensions can all exist simultaneously, but they are not mutually exclusive; they usually overlap at least partially, and the extent of overlap will depend on person to person" (p. 17). Several scholars argued regarding the necessity and applicability of making division among the aspects of self-concept. The differentiation can be justified if the person's behaviour is affected differently by what he is, what he has been and what he hopes to be" (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 18).

According to Onkvisit and Shaw (1987), the self-concept has a number of distinctive properties (p. 14). Firstly "self-concept is not innate- it has to be learned. Learning can be considered as a continuous and active process by which a person determines who he is and on what basis he should formulate his ideas and those of others (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 14). Secondly, "self-concept is stable and consistent. However it is true that self perception is subject to change with time and experience, but self concept tends to be relatively stable, specially the entire decision making process for a particular purchase (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 15). Thirdly self-concept is purposeful. It exists for the purpose of both protecting and enhancing a person's ego. The individual becomes protective and perhaps aggressive, when his self-image is being threatened by others' criticisms" (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 15). Finally, "self-concept is unique as it encourages individualism. Through the consumption of specific branded item, customers promote their own self-concepts, as distinctive brands may represent who they are and what they are at" (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, p. 15).

The effect of self-concept in consumer behaviour can either be positive and negative. According to Onkvisit and Shaw (1987), self-concept can either have positive or negative influence on human behaviour: a negative self-concept affects behaviour adversely, where as a positive self-concept serves as a positive rein-forcer" (p. 15). For example, people often feel dull, unimpressive and will perform in that way, when they wear clothes that they do not like, but people often feel and act attractive and active when they wear their preferred clothes.

POSSESSION, STATUS, OWNERSHIP AND SELF IN THE LIGHT OF CONSUMPTION

Consumers intentionally or unintentionally identify that their possessions are associated to their sense of self (Goffman, 1959; Belk, 1988). Consumers normally attach to possessions to have better ideas on consumer behaviour. As Tuan (1980) states, "our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because to a large degree we are what we have or possess" (p. 472). The particular concept is not a new one (Belk, 1988). As William James (1890) states, "if we define possessions as things we call ours; we are the sum of our belongings" (p. 291-292). Since individual considers self-concept as valuable possession, he will always try to behave in a certain way that promotes the enhancement of this concept. The

ownership of certain brands or products are however important as their particular mode consumption may represent status (McCraken, 1988; O' Shaughnessy, 1992; Packard, 1959; Bell et al., 1991). In broader sense factors like, social success and achievement are often measured through the consumption of material goods.

The concept of conspicuous consumption and status consumption are however important in marketing literature which denotes, the acquisition of products or luxury items to enhance one's prestige in the society. In the consumer literature, status consumption and conspicuous consumption are often used interchangeably (O'Cass and Frost, 2002), however in a recent study O'Cass and McEwen (2004), noticed that both these construct are different. Conspicuous consumption often resembles the display of wealth through specific consumption pattern (Mason, 1981). As Trigg (2001) states, conspicuous consumption is an act through which an individual can display wealth by carrying out extensive leisure activities and luxury expenditure on consumption and services in order to enhance his social status and prestige. Duesenberry (1949) argued that, conspicuous consumption depends on not only the way an individual spends but also his spending in comparison to others. He emphasised on the influence of reference groups to purchase decisions or patterns. A number of researchers have supported the viewpoint in their research findings (Easterlin, 1995; Congleton, 1989; Rauscher, 1993). This perspective has been extended further by Wong (1997), who states that, in terms of conspicuous consumption, product satisfaction depends on the reaction of the audience rather than the usefulness of that product. Kilsheimer (1993) defined status consumption as, "the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social position through conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the person and surrounding significant others" (p. 341). However, it has been argued that conspicuous consumption is something more than consumers' desire to gain prestige from the acquisition of status based brands (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004 p. 27). Conspicuous consumption is more related to the visual display or the overt usage of luxury or branded products in the presence of others, whereas status consumption emphasize the personal nature of owning possession, which may or may not be displayed publicly (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004 p. 27). For an example, a customer may wear Calvin Klein undergarments as he considers the brand to be luxury (status consumption), and he can afford to spend money on that. It may not mean that he will display his under garments to people, to improve his social status, which is in contrast to wearing a labelled Calvin Klein shirt or jeans (conspicuous consumption). However in terms of conspicuous consumption, the degree of social visibility is high, perceived risk is also high (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004 p. 252). Individual's preferences are more likely to be dependent on the consumption choices of others in the society (Hwan Lee, 1990). In extreme situations of high perceived social risk, individuals are more likely to anticipate the evaluations of others and make consumption choices accordingly (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004 p. 252). It is, however, important for individuals to determine the way other people in their social group interpret the meanings of certain products and brands (Ligas and Cotte, 1999). Elliot and Wattanasuwan, (1998) argued that, people consume products in order to reflect his/her affiliation or connection to a particular social group. It helps consumers to establish self-brand connections to the brands used by social or reference group that they belong. For example, if an individual considers himself as intellectual, and his member group of intellectuals tends to drive BMW, he may also choose to drive BMW to support his level of intelligence. Conversely, individuals may tend to avoid associations derived from groups to which they do not belong. Conspicuous goods may have different appeal in comparison to frequently purchased goods as they satisfy not only the material needs but also the social needs like prestige and status (Belk, 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967).

Both Veblen (1934) and Mason (1981) assert that people express themselves by consumption, in numerous ways. However, it is important to consider that, not all consumption may exert the same level of importance in defining individual's self- identity. The intensity of attachment and emotional significance associated to particular purchase is, however, important in explaining the role of possessions in his or her self-concept (Ball and Tasaki, 1995). Attachment varies across the population with respect to the kind of object (Ball and Tasaki, 1995, p. 159). For example, a person may prefer to use house or car in order to maintain his/her self-concept rather than a pair of shoes or furniture. Although average Americans are attached to their automobiles, it is, however, difficult to measure their attachment level for a number of other products they consume. Ball and Tasaki (1995) states that "the objects that are expensive; socially visible; reflective of the individual's roles, relationships, accomplishments and experiences; and usually personalized by the efforts of their owners are clearly more likely to reflect self" (p. 159). Similarly, not all products may express the equal level of symbolic meanings, and some goods are, however, more leading in terms of conveying symbolic meanings than others. Music and dress can fall within the first category, whereas food, art, culture and sports are others. They suggest a system of communication messages to the relevant target "audience" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Coșgel 1992, 1994, Crane 2000, Dolfsma 2004) and they enable individuals to develop and maintain social relations (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Miller 1995).

   Consumers frequently consume different products and services during their lifetime, and the preference in clothes, furniture and activity is age related (Leventhal, 1997; Solomon et al., 2002). According to Spero and Stone (2004), middle aged people possess higher income, stable career, and as a result they have higher access to credit and debit that makes them lucrative segment in terms of consumption. As Underhill and Cadwell (1983) observes, these consumers feel eight to nine years younger than their actual age, and it creates the difference between their chronological age and cognitive age as well as their spending habits. From childhood to adulthood, an individual has to pass through a number of stages, and this transition involves a significant change in status and behaviour (Hill, 1992). Consumption habits take on a greater role in distinguishing the pre-adult from the adult (Ozanne, 1992).   In western culture, young people tend to demonstrate their maturity and 'adultness' to their peers through their consumption (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004 p. 253). They tend to establish their self-identity and prestige by consuming material possessions (Belk, 1988), especially at the time of adolescents when many young people suffer from the identity crisis problem.

IMAGE, CONSUMPTION AND SELF CONCEPT

Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) defined image as "total set of attitudes the halo of psychological meanings, the associations of feeling, the indelibly written messages over and above bare physical qualities" (p. 15).   According to Chernatony and McDonald (1998), "when an individual communicates with other members of society, they observes and learns the responses and attitudes of others towards the symbolic meaning of brands, and thus their consuming behaviour of brand is influenced by other people" (p. 131). A number of marketing scholars stated consumption as an unconscious express of self and through consumption individual tries to build identity. As Elliott and Wattanasuwan, (1998) states, when the entire system of consumption is an unconscious expression of self, the consumption of the symbolic meaning of brands is a social process that helps an individual to construct and maintain an identity. In other words, individuals express themselves by choosing brands whose personalities are perceived to be congruent with their own personalities (Aeker, 1999; Kassarjian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982).   Organizations, corporations,

products and retailers have their own personalities and images and the images differ from person to person, product to product and company to company. The image can be weak or strong, vague or clear and customers use image in order to enhance their self concept (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). There are two distinct types of product image; (1) Brand image, (2) Product category image. Brand image is however important as people use specific brands and products to develop and represent self images and expose these images to themselves or to others (Huffman, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2000). Besides brand image, product category image can also determine personality. For example, Cigarettes having high tar are avoided by intellectual type and tend to attract rural smokers; whereas low tar cigarettes are more preferable to better educated and rich people. Popular brands for instance, "Now" cigarettes use middle-aged models as wealthy horse breeders whereas Merit brand represents a flamboyant- young in spirit image. Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) concludes, "Product image can vary from one product form to another as well as from brand to brand within the same product form (p. 16). Like products, retail stores, can also have distinctive images and personality. Consumers perceive discount and department stores quite differently although they carry same products.

Products and brands, which consumer purchase, portray a particular image that represents how they wish to appear to both themselves and others. As a result, "consumer learns about the objects immediate utility, forms some perception about it, and compare these perception with their own value system in order to determine whether such characteristics will satisfy his/her needs" (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987).   The relationship between brand preference and self-concept has been supported by a number of studies. For example, Landon (1974) found positive correlations both for the ideal self-concept & purchase intention (from 0.11 to 0.52) and for the actual self- concept and purchase intention (from 0.30 to 0.60). Eriksen (1996) conducted a research on Ford Escort consumers and reported a positive relationship between self-image/product-image congruity and intention to purchase. The selection of a particular brand is, however, important as it is related to consumer's self-expression.

Levy (1959) argued that people do not purchase goods just for the utility of the product, but also what product means; thus brands can be symbols whose meaning is used to create and define a consumer's self-concept. Thus brands become associated to self when it can help consumers to achieve the goals that are stimulated by the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, p. 379). Brands can also work as tools for social integration and connect people to the past (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, p. 379). Brands, in particular, may act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem, allow one to differentiate oneself promotes individuality and helps people through life transitions (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, p. 379).

CROSS-CULTURAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, SELF-CONCEPT AND CONSUMPTION

People living in different cultures may vary in the extent of their integration to others and the social environment. Such variations may be based on the level to which cooperation, competition or individualism are emphasized (Triandis, 1988). An individual's association with a particular group is often expressed through individualism and collectivism characteristics (Wickliffe and Pysarchik, 2001).

Although the self-concept has often been considered to be different from other people's self-concepts and it may vary from person to person, recent cross-cultural evidence suggests that individuals' mental representations of self may depend on social aspects of self, such as relationships with others and membership in social groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989). Relevant research asserts that on average, Westerners tend to focus on the personal self, thinking of themselves in terms of unique

personal traits and attributes and de-emphasizing others (independent self-construal), whereas Easterners tend to focus on the social self and how the self is related to other people (interdependent self-construal; Markus and Kitayama 1991). For example, Triandis (1989) argues that more individualistic cultures are characterized by more focus on the private self and less emphasis on the collective self, with increased emphasis on the collective self for less individualistic cultures.

The individualism/collectivism literature emphasised on the difference between in group and out group orientations. In-groups may contain the nuclear family, the co-workers, neighbours, political party, co-workers, political parties, religious groups and fellow nationals (Triandis et.al., 1988). A number of decisions can be influenced by in-groups like; who to marry, what religious beliefs to hold, where to live, what to buy and where to shop or trade (Wickliffe and Pysarchik, 2001, p. 101). In the individualistic culture (i.e. UK), people consume to create a sense of belonging or to compensate for the loss of community belonging (Lindridge 2005, p. 148). In the collectivist culture (i.e. India) however, people consume to strengthen their social relationships.

Research indicates that both individualism and collectivism may exist side by side within a same culture. Buda and Elsayed-Elkhouly (1998) conducted a research on cultural differences between Americans and Arabs. The result of the study shows that Arabs were more collectivist than Americans. However, the study also revealed that, Arabs displayed collectivistic behaviours only with members of their in-group and exhibited individualistic behaviour with the people from out-groups.

From cultural perspective, the influence of individualism and collectivism on consumption has been considered important in marketing literature. In most Asian cultures, where people are seen not fully independent, that is they are associated to each other for making purchase decisions. For example a Chinese individual must consider the opinion of family members, and the members of his/her society, when making a specific purchase decision, whereas in Western culture like US, the decision making process is often carried out by the individual self and or his/her life partner. This concept is supported by Chen et al. (1999) who found out that both Taiwanese and Japanese families reported a high level of joint decision-making. Similarly another study conducted by Triandis et al. (1988), found that Japanese students pay more emphasis to the views of co-workers and friends than US students. A similar study has been conducted by Singh et al. (1962) found that Americans ranked highest in self-centred orientation, whereas Chinese and Indian students ranked highest in society centred orientation. As Chiou (1999) states, people in individualist cultures (i.e. USA & UK); consume products in order to express their inner value, while people in collectivist cultures (i.e. Taiwan & China); consume products to strengthen their social relationships.

The meaning that people associate to possessions is another essential part of culture. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) states, "objects can be considered as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives and markers to remind of who we are". Favourite objects serve as possessions that reflect local cultures, and as such different values and social structure (Craig and Douglas, 2005). The significance of rituals and customs are important in defining the strength of cultural ties and values. Rituals associated with consumption behaviour, or specific consumption occasions provide insights into the way in which consumer goods are embedded in and form an integral part of the cultural fabric of society (Arnould, 1989; Belk et al., 1989). Gift giving has been one of the most extensively studied social rituals (Sherry, 1983; Belk, 1988). In Japan, for example, the existence of formal rituals and customs (i.e. exchanging or giving gifts) is an important element binding the society and ensuring harmonious relations among its members. On the other hand in USA, the mix of multiple cultures and

origins results in diverse cultural traditions and rituals that often blend into one another. Particular consumption occasions like formal gift-giving rituals can provide useful indications regarding the way people establish and maintain his/her affiliation with the members of the society, as Elliot and Wattanasuwan, (1998) states, individual purchase products in order to reflect his/her attachment to a particular social group or culture.

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON CONSUMPTION

The affect of religion or religiosity on consumption and buying behaviour is however important, as "a person's religious orientation or belief may influence his/her buying behaviour" (Delender, 1990, p. 27). Religion refers to a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred things" (Durkheim, 1976). Religion or religiosity may act as a prominent cohesive force, because its principle is widely accepted and recognized unquestionably by many members of the society (Delender, 1990, p. 27). According to Delender (1990), religiosity can be considered as one of the most powerful and influential forces, that manipulates consumer behaviour. The level of self confidence and anxiety of individuals can be explained by analysing religious background (Sturgeon & Roy, 1979; Guthrie, 1980; Baker & Richard, 1982). Non-religious people appear to exhibit higher self indulgence, less anxiety and greater ability to combine anxiety into everyday life in an adaptive manner (Baker & Richard, 1982; Kahoe, 1984). They also appear to be more flexible, self-reliant, pragmatic and less sentimental (Hamby, 1973; Kahoe, 1984). However Pro-religious individuals appear to be less secure but more sensitive and empathetic (Wiebe and Ronald, 1980). The influence of religion in consumer behaviour and purchase decision remains under-researched as Cutler (1991) noted only 35 relevant articles out of a sample of 7000 publications published in between 1959-1989. Findings of a recent study by Delender & Leon (1988) revealed that, "for major durable goods in Catholic households, husbands were the major influence in making most purchase decisions. However in Jewish households the husbands and wives were equally responsible in making most purchase decisions. The study also revealed that, in pro-religious household, husbands were dominant in terms of major durable goods purchase and the decision making process" (pp. 80-83). Lindridge (2005) conducted a research on Asian Indians, Indians living in UK (British Indians) and traditional British citizens, to examine the affect of religion and culture in consumer behaviour. The results of the study indicate that, Indians living in Britain appeared to be more individualistic, which is in contrast to their core collectivistic orientation (Lindridge, 2005, p.148). The findings of earlier researches suggested that self identity of British individuals tended to reflect a greater individual orientation, where as the self identity of Indians tended to reflect a greater collective orientation. However, he argued that people from collective cultural background (i.e. Indian) may assert individualistic cultural values if they are more exposed to western cultural values based on individualistic orientation (Lindridge, 2005, p.148). Lindridge, (2005) further noted that, Indians living in Britain viewed religion not at all important were significantly less materialistic in comparison to their Asian Indian equivalent (p.146). Furthermore, the study revealed that Indians living in Britain were less interested to attend religious institution (i.e. Temple), and small or non-attendance at a temple tended to result in heightened levels of individual self-identity and greater need to engage in the consumption process compared to Asian Indians (Lindridge, 2005, p.146). "Using possessions as symbol of status", can assert significant differences for Indians living in Britain. Considering the importance or influence of religion in daily life, the British Indians who either visited temple several times a year or never visited temple, indicated religion as being not important at all, and were less likely to use possessions as status symbols when compared to their Asian Indian equivalent

(Lindridge, 2005, p.146). As a result, Indians living in UK or British Indians appeared to be more individualistic and this change in self-identity may suggest an over-reliance on product usage and purchasing and their use of products to gain conformity with British White society, supporting previous research (Lindridge and Dhillon, 2002). The results of the study also indicate that; in individualistic British culture, religiosity had no significant influence on culturally construed consumer behaviour (Lindridge 2005, p. 148).

CONCLUSION

Individual's concept of self can influence his/her consumption, in general. Consumer purchase and consume products in order to support his/her self-concept. Consumption has become dominant in terms of expressing oneself, as in post-modern world people express themselves through consumption rather than occupational or professional roles.

The impact of religion on consumption and product selection is however important, as consumption and purchase decision may differ religion wise. Influenced by certain religious beliefs, the customer may go for specific consumption as they feel that the product will improve their self image and also will associate them to certain religious or social group. A customer may decide not to purchase a specific product or not to purchase goods at a particular store if he perceives that the purchase is inconsistent with his own perception of himself. In terms of food consumption, for instance, people in Muslim religion tend to consume Halal (foods those are lawful or religiously permitted to consume in Islam) foods and also tend to avoid foods those are Haram (foods those are religiously prohibited to consume in Islam). Muslim customer may also reject to purchase goods at a particular store, if he perceives that the store contains a range of Haram foods those are religiously prohibited to consume in Islam. Most religions forbid the consumption of certain foods (for example pork in Judaism and Islam or pork and beef in Hinduism and Buddhism) except for Christianity that has no food taboos (Sack, 2001, p. 218). People often express their religious belief through particular consumption, not only to show how dedicated they are to their religion, but also to support their association to certain social or religious group.

The influence of age on consumption has been discussed in some studies. Lambert-Pandraud et al. (2005) observe that middle-aged and old customers have a tendency to repeat purchase and to limit their purchase process to a few brands in case of automobiles. People tend to be selective in such purchase situations as they generally associate their individual image with their purchasing behaviour patterns and their preference for products are highly influenced by their individual image. More specifically, through conspicuous consumption people tend to show their wealth, and power. However, certain religious consumption can be more conspicuous by nature. For example, Eid-ul-Adha has been considered as one of the most significant and large religious festivals observed by the followers of the Muslim religion throughout the world. Rich and capable Muslims are required to sacrifice a cow, sheep, goat, camel or other appropriate animal in celebration of the occasion. The religious idea was to minimize the difference between rich and poor, as rich and capable Muslims are expected to distribute a portion of meat from the cattle they sacrificed by the name of God, to poor and needy people living in their community. However, in some Muslim culture (i.e. Bangladesh), people belongs to the upper-class society likes to spend more on these animals (i.e. purchasing more than one cattle to sacrifice or purchasing the expensive ones to sacrifice) to enjoy the ownership, that is socially visible and the person, who appears to be the owner of the cattle, is often admired and praised socially, for his/her consumption power. It can be asserted that the consumption here is more conspicuous rather than religious.

Finally, considering the arguments and examples presented in this report, we may conclude that, people consume order to reflect their individual image. However, it is important consider the impact of certain environmental factors related to culture, society and religion on the development and maintenance of individual's self-concept.

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