

# *Consumer Self-Concept, Symbolism and Market Behavior: A Theoretical Approach*

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What is the relationship between the psychological characteristics of a consumer and his purchase behavior? In this paper the authors briefly review pertinent research and lay theoretical foundations for a model of consumer behavior based upon an individual's self-concept and the symbolic value of the goods he buys.

**E**FFORTS to understand the totality of consumer behavior have taken researchers into related fields, with some of the most fruitful results in terms of both theory and practice coming from the behavioral sciences. Two conceptual areas within the behavioral sciences which promise to yield meaningful information about consumer behavior are self-theory and symbolism. A substantial amount of work has been done in these areas, primarily by psychologists, but marketing researchers and theorists do not seem to have developed the marketing potential of the available theory and substance.<sup>1</sup> Some products, brands, and stores have long been recognized as having psychic values to certain market segments, but little has been done to fabricate formal theories useful in predicting consumer behavior.

This article is an effort to develop a partial theory of consumer behavior by linking the psychological construct of an individual's self-concept with the symbolic value of goods purchased in the marketplace. The authors briefly examine previous research and lay theoretical footings from which a set of hypotheses and a qualitative model of consumer behavior are promulgated.

## **Review of Related Research**

### *Personality and Consumer Behavior*

A number of researchers have attempted to relate purchases of product types or specific brands to personality traits of the purchasers. These researchers advanced the basic hypothesis that individuals who consume in a certain manner will also manifest certain common personality characteristics, leading to prediction of consumer behavior. Evans conducted empirical investigations to determine if choice of automobile brand reflects the personality of the owner.<sup>2</sup> Applying the Edwards' Personal Preference Schedule, he could find no important personality differences between a limited sample of Chevrolet and Ford owners and, therefore, could not show that psychological testing predicted consumer behavior more accurately than standard marketing research. However, Kuehn submitted the same data to further statistical analysis and concluded that prediction could indeed be based upon two of the

<sup>1</sup> George A. Field, John Douglas, and Lawrence X. Tarpey, *Marketing Management: A Behavioral Systems Approach* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, 1966), p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin B. Evans, "Psychological and Objective Factors in the Prediction of Brand Choice: Ford vs. Chevrolet," *Journal of Business*, Vol. XXXII (October, 1959), p. 340.

measured personality characteristics (dominance and affiliation).<sup>3</sup>

Westfall experimented with automobile owners to determine if the personalities of owners of standard models, of compact models, and of convertible models varied.<sup>4</sup> Using the Thurstone Temperament Schedule as a personality measuring instrument, he found little difference between the owners of compact and standard models, but discovered that convertible owners are more active, vigorous, impulsive, dominant, and social, yet less stable and less reflective than the other two groups of owners.

The results of these and similar studies demonstrate the existence of some relationship between personalities of the consumers and the products they consume.<sup>5</sup> Yet the results indicate as well the limitations of our understanding of this relationship. Because of the limited results produced by these and similar studies, further refinements in the theoretical foundations may be necessary to provide useful insights.

#### *Personality, Product Image, and the Consumption of Goods*

A further refinement in the attempt to relate personality and purchases was the advancement of the assumption that consumer buying behavior is determined by the interaction of the buyer's personality and the image of the purchased product. Pierre Martineau, a strong advocate of this position, argued that the product or brand image is a symbol of the buyer's personality.<sup>6</sup> In later work, Walter A. Woods identified various types of consumers and the importance of the symbolic content of the product to the purchase. Woods asserted that where ego-involvement with the product is high, product image is important to the consumer.<sup>7</sup>

Along similar lines, Duesenberry advanced the idea that the act of consumption as symbolic behavior may be more important to the individual than the benefits provided by the functioning of the product purchased.<sup>8</sup> The relationship of product image and

personality was further substantiated by a recent study that found a low, but statistically significant, correlation between the masculinity of cigarette smokers and the perceived masculinity of the brand they consumed.<sup>9</sup>

Though meaningful, the early work has not developed the theoretical relationships between the personality of the individual and the product image. To be useful as a guide to marketing decision-making and research, the variables of the buyer's personality and the image of the purchased products need to be organized into a conceptual totality that will allow relevant material to be systemized, classified, and interrelated. Further, the conceptual interrelationship of these variables should be arranged and developed in such a manner that the *why* of the interrelationship is explained. Exposure of all the elements of the theory to critical evaluation should encourage testing of hypotheses, followed by improvement (re-testing of theory) so that more informed judgments can be made relative to the marketing value of the approach.

#### **Self-Theory and Consumer Behavior**

A more specific means of developing a theoretical approach to consumer behavior is to link the psychological construct of an individual's self-concept with the symbolic value of the goods purchased in the marketplace. The concept of the self is more restricted than personality, which facilitates measurement and centers on the critical element of how

*Viewpoint*, Schuyler F. Otteson, William Panschar, and James M. Patterson (editors) (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 125-132.

<sup>9</sup> Paul C. Vitz and Donald Johnston, "Masculinity of Smokers and the Masculinity of Cigarette Images," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. XLIX (October, 1965), pp. 155-159.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred A. Kuehn, "Demonstration of a Relationship between Psychological Factors and Brand Choice," *Journal of Business*, Vol. XXXVI (April, 1963), p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Westfall, "Psychological Factors in Predicting Product Choice," *JOURNAL OF MARKETING*, Vol. 26 (April, 1962), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> For a bibliography of similar studies see: *Are There Consumer Types?* (New York: Advertising Research Foundation, 1964), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Martineau, *Motivation in Advertising* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1957).

<sup>7</sup> Walter A. Woods, "Psychological Dimensions of Consumer Decision," *JOURNAL OF MARKETING*, Vol. 24 (January, 1960), pp. 15-19.

<sup>8</sup> James S. Duesenberry, *Income, Savings, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949). For a discussion of the theory of consumption, see James S. Duesenberry, "A Theory of Consumption," *Marketing: The Firm's*

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the individual perceives himself.<sup>10</sup> Further, use of self-theory allows application of the behavioral concept of symbolic interaction; this provides meaning to the association of an individual's buying behavior with his self-concept.

### Self-Theory

Self-theory has been the subject of much psychological and sociological theorizing and empirical research with the accompanying development of a rather large body of assumptions and empirical data.<sup>11</sup> The available knowledge strongly supports the role of the self-concept as a partial determinant of human behavior and, therefore, represents a promising area for marketing research.

Current theory and research places emphasis on the concept of the self as an object which is perceived by the individual. The self is what one is aware of, one's attitudes, feelings, perceptions, and evaluations of oneself as an object.<sup>12</sup> The self represents a totality which becomes a principal value around which life revolves, something to be safeguarded and, if possible, to be made still more valuable.<sup>13</sup> An individual's evaluation of himself will greatly influence his behavior, and thus, the more valued the self, the more organized and consistent becomes his behavior.

### The Self and the Interaction Process

The self develops not as a personal, individual process, but it evolves through the process of social experience. From the reactions of others, man develops his self-perception. According to Rogers:

A portion of the total perceptual field gradually becomes differentiated as the self . . . as a result of the interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interactions with others, the structure of the self is formed—an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the 'I' or the 'me' together with values attached to these concepts.<sup>14</sup>

Since the self-concept grows out of the reactions of parents, peers, teachers, and significant others, self-enhancement will depend upon the reactions of

those people. Recognition and reinforcing reactions from these persons will further strengthen the conception the individual has of himself. Thus, the individual will strive to direct his behavior to obtain a positive reaction from his significant references.

### Context of the Interaction Process

The interaction process does not take place in a vacuum; the individuals are affected both by the environmental setting and the "personal attire" of each involved individual. Therefore, the individual will strive to control these elements to facilitate proper interpretations of his performance.<sup>15</sup> Items of the environmental setting or the personal attire become the tools or a means of goal accomplishment for individuals in the interaction process.

### Goods as Symbols

A more meaningful way of understanding the role of goods as social tools is to regard them as symbols serving as a means of communication between the individual and his significant references. Defined as "things which stand for or express something else," symbols should be thought of as unitary characters composed of signs and their meanings.<sup>16</sup> If a symbol is to convey meaning it must be identified by a group with which the individual is associated whether the group consists of two people or an entire society, and the symbol must communicate similar meaning to all within the group. The nature of goods as symbols has been attested quite adequately by Veblen,<sup>17</sup> Duesenberry,<sup>18</sup> and Benedict.<sup>19</sup>

### Symbols and Behavior

If a product is to serve as a symbolic communicative device it must achieve social recognition, and the meaning associated with the product must be clearly established and understood by related segments of society. This process is in reality a classification process where one object is placed in relation to other objects basic to society.

The necessity for any group to develop a common or shared terminology leads to an important consideration; the direction of activity depends upon the particular way that objects are classified.<sup>20</sup>

Classification systems are society's means of or-

<sup>10</sup> E. Earl Baughman and George Schlager Welsh, *Personality: A Behavioral Science* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 339.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ruth Wylie, *The Self-Concept* (Lincoln, Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> Calvin S. Hall and Gardener Lindsay, *Theories of Personality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1957), pp. 469-475, or David Krech, Richard S. Crutchfield, and Egerton L. Ballachey, *Individual in Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962), pp. 495-496.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore M. Newcomb, *Social Psychology* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1956), p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> Hall and Lindsay, same reference as footnote 12, p. 483.

<sup>15</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1959), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Mentor Books, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> Same reference as footnote 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mentor Books, 1934).

<sup>20</sup> Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1959), p. 9.

ganizing and directing their activities in an orderly and sensible manner.

A prime example of symbolic classification and consumer behavior is fashion. If a particular style becomes popular, behavior of a segment of society will be directed toward the purchase and use of items manifesting this style. As the fashion declines in popularity, the group will discontinue purchase of these items and may reject the use of the remaining portion of previous purchases. Thus, an act of classification not only directs action, but also arouses a set of expectations toward the object classified. Individuals purchase the fashion item because of their feelings about what the item will do for them. The *essence* of the object resides not in the object but in the relation between the object and the individuals classifying the object.

Classification and symbolism become means of communication and of directing or influencing behavior. If a common symbol exists for two or more people, then the symbol should bring forth a similar response in each, and therefore members of a group can use the symbol in their behavior pattern. Further, the symbolic social classification of a good allows the consumer to relate himself directly to it, matching his self-concept with the meaning of the good. In this way self-support and self-enhancement can take place through association with goods which have a desirable social meaning and from the favorable reaction of significant references in the social interaction process.

#### Goods and Self-enhancement

The purchase and consumption of goods can be self-enhancing in two ways. First, the self-concept of an individual will be sustained and buoyed if he believes the good he has purchased is recognized publicly and classified in a manner that supports and matches his self-concept. While self-enhancement results from a personal, internal, intra-action process, the effect on the individual is ultimately dependent upon the product's being a publicly-recognized symbol. Because of their recognized meaning, public symbols elicit a reaction from the individual that supports his original self-feelings. Self-enhancement can occur as well in the interaction process. Goods as symbols serve the individual, becoming means to cause desired reactions from other individuals.

These two means of self-enhancement are represented in diagrammatic form in Figure 1.

Individual A purchases and uses symbol X which has intrinsic and extrinsic value as a means of self-enhancement. (Symbol X could include a purchase of a certain product type such as a swimming pool; purchase of a specific brand such as a Pontiac GTO; or a purchase from a specific store or distributive outlet.) The intrinsic value is indicated by the double-headed arrow a, while the extrinsic values are indicated by the arrows b, c, and d. By the

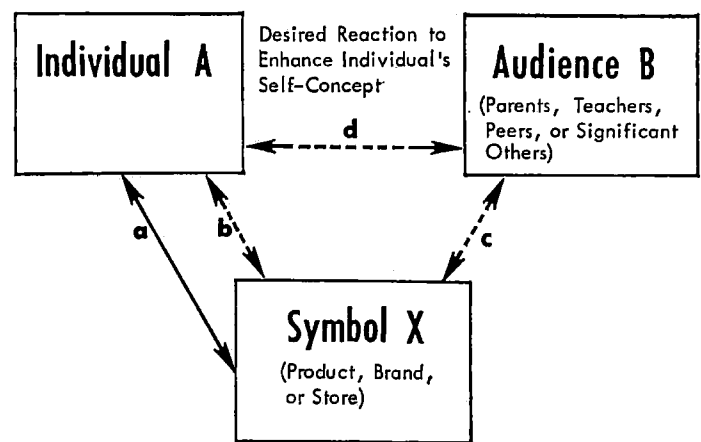


FIGURE 1. Relationship of the consumption of goods as symbols to the self-concept.

use of symbol X, an individual is communicating with himself; he is transferring the socially attributed meanings of symbol X to himself. This internal, personal communication process with symbol X becomes a means of enhancing his valued self-concept. An example of this situation is the individual who owns and uses a standard 1300 series Volkswagen. He may perceive himself as being thrifty, economical, and practical; and by using the Volkswagen, which has a strong image of being thrifty, economical, and practical, the individual achieves internal self-enhancement. This private and individual symbolic interpretation is largely dependent on one's understanding of the meaning associated with the product. Though the individual may treat this process in a private manner, he has learned the symbolic meaning from public sources.

By presenting Symbol X to Audience B, which may consist of one or more individuals from parents, peers, teachers, or significant others, the individual is communicating with them. Double-headed arrows b and c indicate that in presenting Symbol X to Audience B, Individual A is attributing meaning to it, and that in interpreting Symbol X, the relevant references in Audience B are also attributing meaning to the symbol. If Symbol X has a commonly-understood meaning between Individual A and the references of Audience B, then the desired communication can take place and the interaction process will develop as desired by A. This means the behavior of the significant references will be the desired reaction to Individual A (as shown by arrow d) and, therefore, self-enhancement will take place.

#### A Model of Consuming Behavior

The following qualitative model is proposed to clarify the systematic relationship between self-theory and goods as symbols in terms of consumer behavior.

Consumption of Symbols: A Means to Self-Enhancement

1. An individual does have a self-concept of himself.

2. The self-concept is of value to him.
3. Because this self-concept is of value to him, an individual's behavior will be directed toward the furtherance and enhancement of his self-concept.
4. An individual's self-concept is formed through the interaction process with parents, peers, teachers, and significant others.
5. Goods serve as social symbols and, therefore, are communication devices for the individual.
6. The use of these good-symbols communicates meaning to the individual himself and to others, causing an impact on the intra-action and/or the interaction processes and, therefore, an effect on the individual's self-concept.

Prediction of the model:

7. Therefore, the consuming behavior of an individual will be directed toward the furthering and enhancing of his self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols.

This model becomes the theoretical base for a conceptual means to understand consumer behavior. The self-conception approach to understanding consumer behavior is not all-inclusive but does provide a meaningful conceptual framework for the systematic ordering and comprehension of consumer behavior. Of further importance is that this model, although general, can be an aid to the marketing decision-maker and a guide for future research.

#### *Self-Concept Theory of Behavior and Marketing Research*

This theoretical model can and should be used as a guide for further research. As Myers and Reynolds state, "We need to know a good deal more about the matching process and the conditions under which it does and does not occur."<sup>21</sup> Opportunity and need exist for both theoretical and applied research.

Further research is needed in terms of specific consumer decision situations to determine to what extent self-enhancement involves a conformity concept or an ideal self-image concept. For example, are consumers, through their consuming behavior and the interaction process, seeking support for their self-concept as they now perceive themselves, or are they seeking reactions that will promote the attainment of a more ideal self? For the average person, self-concept and self-ideal overlap to a large extent, although in specific circumstances one or the other could be the chief motivator of behavior.<sup>22</sup> This in-

formation is of central importance to help management evolve promotional efforts that either support the self-concepts of consumers as they now are or as they would like to be.

Useful results will be obtained from well-designed research pertaining to the present and desired symbolic content of products, brands, or stores, and how these symbolic meanings can be related to the self-concepts of present and potential users. Success or failure of a product often depends upon the social classification given to the product. Therefore, it is vital that the firm identify those specific products where the symbolic meaning of the product and its relation to the self-concept of the purchaser are active influences in the consumer decision process.

#### *Self-Concept Theory of Behavior and Marketing Management*

Firms can and should identify and/or segment their markets in terms of differentiated self-concepts. Recent research has indicated significant differences in self-concepts of different consuming groups both for product classes and for different brands.<sup>23</sup> Identification of self-concept segments may be a key element in the determination of marketing strategy and how, where, and to whom the exact tactics should be directed to achieve the desired goals.

Of real importance to the success of a brand of product is the development of a commonly understood symbolic meaning for the product. This means that management of a firm should carefully control the marketing of a product so that the relevant segments of the market properly classify the product and, therefore, behave toward the product in the manner desired by the marketer. Through product design, pricing, promotion, and distribution the firm must communicate to the market the desired clues for consumer interpretation and, therefore, develop the desired symbolic meaning for the brand.

#### Summary

From a review of the literature of the behavioral sciences, the authors have developed a more complete theory of consumer behavior based upon self-theory and symbolism. This theory can serve as a theoretical foundation for understanding and predicting consumer market behavior, with particular emphasis on its role as the guide for research and decision-making.

The hypothesis presented by the authors stresses the role of the image an individual has of himself as a motivator of human behavior in the marketplace. Because the self-concept is of value and of central importance to the individual, he will direct his behavior to maintain and enhance his self-concept. The

<sup>21</sup> James H. Myers and William H. Reynolds, *Consumer Behavior and Marketing Management* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> Same reference as footnote 10, p. 348.

<sup>23</sup> Edward L. Grubb, "Consumer Perception of 'Self-Concept' and Its Relationship to Brand Choice of Selected Product Types," unpublished D.B.A. dissertation, University of Washington, 1965, pp. 120-124.

self-concept is formed in the interaction process between the individual and others; therefore, the individual will strive for self-enhancement in the interaction process. Of prime importance is the fact that the interaction process will be affected by the "tools" used by individuals and their significant references. Many of these tools are consumer goods, serving as symbolic communication devices. By carefully using goods as symbols, the individual communicates meaning about himself to his references, which causes a desired response and has an impact on the interaction process, thus reenforcing and enhancing his self-concept.

Enhancement of the self-concept can occur through an intra-action process whereby an individual communicates with himself through the medium of goods-symbols, thus supporting his self-concept. This is an internal process which takes place without specific response from others regarding a particular act. However, intra-action self-enhancement is possible only through group classification systems which bestow symbolic value upon certain goods or "tools."

The model of consuming behavior presented here

is still in a theoretical state and, therefore, in need of research to refine and further substantiate its predictive value. Research is needed to determine whether and in what circumstances the motivating force is the presently held self-concept or the ideal self-concept. Basic research also is needed to determine what products have symbolic value and how this meaning is related to the consumers' self-concepts.

The advanced hypothesis is an activist theory having real value as a guide for present marketing decision-making. Marketers should consider segmenting their markets on the basis of consumer self-concepts as well as on demographic factors. Further, they must develop and direct their marketing strategy to meet the needs of these specific self-concept segments. Management would be wise to recognize that the success or failure of a product may depend upon the symbolic meaning established for that product. Significant marketing effort should be employed to ensure that the relevant segments of the market properly classify the product which in turn will tend to bring about desired consumer behavior.

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## MARKETING MEMO

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### *The Role of Marketing . . .*

Marketing is the backbone of the private enterprise system. The competitive forces in the free market permit the nation's productive capacity to adapt to changing and expanding consumer requirements. It is in the marketplace that the customer exercises his economic sovereignty, the alternative being an increase in government control. Unquestionably, technological breakthroughs in design and production are essential to the system; nevertheless, it is only through competitive marketing that goods and services are provided in wider selections, in ever more suitable quality, and at prices and financing means that make them available to large masses of people whenever desired.

—William J. E. Crissy and Ferdinand Mauser, "Careers in Marketing: Public Service and Private Rewards," *Sales Management*, Vol. 98 (March 15, 1967), pp. 55-60, at pp. 55, 57.

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