

Building Self-Image Place of the Individual

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The Self is a complex notion, composed of different facets that interact and influence consumer motivations. Possessions, through the concept of the Extended Self, contribute to the construction of the consumer's identity. They symbolize their social status, values, and aspirations. Using the example of housing, it illustrates how living spaces become extensions of individuals, communicating their identity to the external world.

The memo shows that the postmodern identity is always changing and flexible, celebrating diversity and viewing identity as something we talk about. It also explains how objects influence how we see ourselves, emphasizing that in the postmodern era, identity keeps changing and can be many things at once.

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I. Role of Objects in the Construction of Self-Image

A. Notion of Self

As we will see, theorists and practitioners today work with a multifaceted view of the 'self'. It was in 1959 that the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers¹ presented an individual's personality as composed of two entities: the Real Self and the Ideal Self. Since then, other entities have been identified as relevant for defining a personality, notably considering the social context of the individual and the effect of the group on their behaviour.

The Self can be defined as the set of thoughts and feelings that an individual uses when referring to themselves as a subject².

Today, (in marketing) we distinguish:

- The Real Self: This is the consumer's actual personality, who they really are. They may or may not be aware of this true nature. It will motivate the consumption of low-involvement products and will be behind impulse purchases.
- The Ideal Self: This is the ideal person that the consumer would like to become, whether realistic or not. This ideal self can be influenced by surrounding discourses, cultural and familial environments, etc. It will motivate the consumption of aspirational products with strong symbolic power (for the individual themselves).
- The Social Self: This is the individual's personality as perceived by others. The individual has no control over this social self. Like the real self, they may or may not be aware of how others perceive them. It is understood that the social self, being a self-perceived by others, can be

¹ Rogers, C.E. (1959), "A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centred framework", in S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A study of science*, New York: McGraw-Hill

² Rosenberg, M. (1979), *Conceiving the self*, New York: Basic Books

quite different from the real self, as it is semiotically communicated through behaviours, possessions, etc.

- **The Ideal Social Self:** This is the ideal perception that the consumer would like others to have of them. This ideal self may be different from the real self, the ideal self, and the social self. It is highly influenced by the context in which the consumer operates: group membership, group or societal norms, current political correctness (or incorrectness), etc. It will motivate the consumption of products with strong symbolic power (for others), status-related, etc.
- **The Expected Self:** This is, in a more realistic sense, who the consumer would like to be in a defined period (10 or 20 years). Utopia gives way to reality here. It will motivate the consumption of high-involvement products, especially those perceived as an investment for the future (education, buying a house, etc.).

These five facets of the self constantly interact and thus complicate the motivations to consume certain products (or to buy them) as well as the expectations that the consumer may have of them. The more a brand offers the consumer the possibility of simultaneously satisfying these different facets of their personality, the more it will be perceived as relevant and endearing. Pragmatically, this can be translated into a breadth of ranges or products, specific merchandising, etc.

B. Extended Self

1. Definition³ (Belk)

Possessions reflect the identity of the possessor (cf. I.C.), and in turn, these possessions contribute to shaping the identity of the possessor. It is therefore crucial to understand possessions from the perspective of the meaning that the buyer invests in them. The extended self thus corresponds to the 'Self' created by the objects with which an individual surrounds themselves. These objects can be geographical (choice of place of residence, shopping location, etc.), relational (choice of partner, friends, associations one belongs

³ R. Belk (1988), *Possessions and the Extended Self*, JCR, 15 (Sept)

to), immaterial (choice of ideas, ideological stances, etc.), material (objects in the literal sense, including 'home'), services (choice of phone operator, etc.), bodily (piercings, plastic surgery), or even altruistic (gifts). The extended self assumes some congruence between an individual's consumption and their personality, as described below.

2. Example: Living & Extended Self

The choice of habitat, its type, and its layout, while certainly motivated by rational principles (including budgetary constraints), is also subject to emotional influences (see Reason & Sentiments sheet). A dwelling is not just an 'asset', subject to real estate transactions. Bachelard presents the house not as a mere dwelling, but as a dwelling of dreams. Some places become part of oneself and construct the spatial identity of the subject through a play of interactions between the individual and the space.

The interior of the dwelling can merge with the l'intimate⁴. It is structured along two dimensions: the horizontal dimension, presenting rooms from the most intimate (bathroom, bedroom) to the most open (entrance, living room); and the vertical dimension, which represents a symbolic link between heaven and earth, between irrationality (the cellar, a symbol of accumulation, locus of feelings) and rationality (the roof, a symbol of protection).

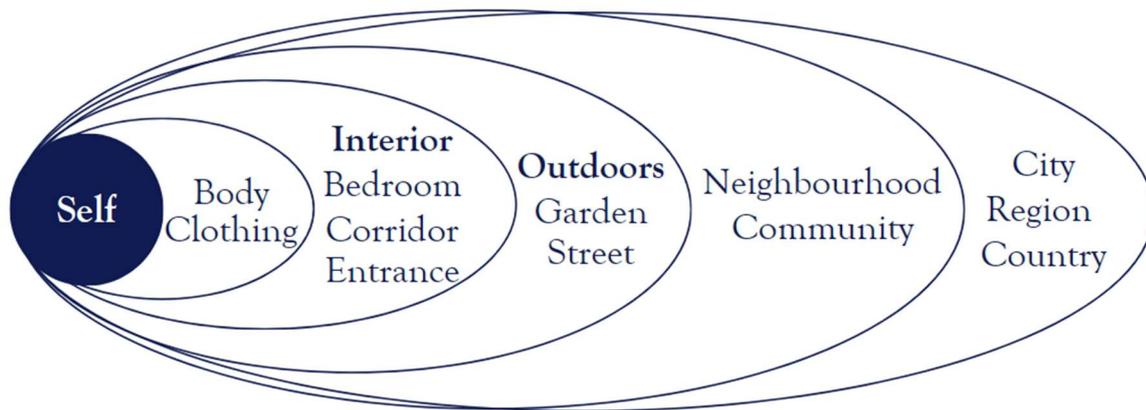
The exterior of the dwelling is also imbued with human symbolism (who among us has not drawn a house in the shape of a person?). Thus, the dwelling and its environment take on an almost human face and are endowed with personalities (congruent with their inhabitants). These personalities can be pronounced, making them attractive or repulsive, welcoming, or unsettling, etc. In fact, the inhabitant projects consciously the same anthropomorphic pattern onto the dwelling, the city, or the country (cf. Halbwachs's work). Thus, in the United States, the 'farmhouse' style of a house is perceived as the friendliest, while the 'colonial' style is perceived as the least (cf. Nasar's work).

From the perspective of the inhabitant-consumer, housing not only serves as shelter. It indeed communicates one's individuality to the surrounding world (within a belonging group), but also ensures a capacity to feel 'at home,' etc. Housing is therefore both a communicative and protective entity: exposing

⁴ Larceneux, F. (2011), "J'habite donc je suis", *Etudes foncières*

oneself while controlling the consequences of this exposure to the external world is the true role of housing.

The following diagram illustrates the role of housing and habitat in general in the construction and expression of the extended self.



Projection Spaces for the Extended Self

C. Possessions & 'Self'

Ownership provides individuals with a sense of security and stability: they feel in control. Moreover, the more control one has over an object, the more it becomes an integral part of us: if it is not *mine*, it is not *me*. In addition to this sense of control, ownership is a means of entering into competition through the accumulation and display of status symbols (cf. René Girard's mimetic desire).

« In a given society, each member must learn to recognize their peers based on their mutual statuses. »

Claude Lévi-Strauss

« Status symbols provide a clue to guess the status of others, thus defining how they should be treated. »

Erving Goffman⁵

⁵ Goffman, E. (1951), "Symbols of Class Status", *British Journal of Sociology*, 2 (Dec), 294-304



Today, these status symbols are evident in what we eat (gourmet vs. low-cost), the choice of transportation (plane vs. hitchhiking), leisure activities, vehicle license plate numbers, the district we live in, vacation destinations chosen, associations or clubs we belong to, but most importantly, in where we live and what type of house we inhabit.

However, beyond this status-related significance (and thus 'Ideal Social Self' or 'Social Self'), possessions also hold meaning for the individual's other selves. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have shown that individuals cherish material objects and possessions (especially in home furnishings) not only for their status properties, but because they are symbols for themselves and their connections with others.

Thus, more generally, possessions make the world more intelligible: more than just messages about us and others, they are the « hardware and software... of an information system » (M. Douglas)⁶. They speak a language we all understand, and to which we pay particular attention, noting its inflections, exclamations, etc.

Example: Decor as a Symbol of Self

The arrangement of living spaces, the style of a house/apartment, and the landscape they integrate into are part of a system of symbols. We can speak of the semiotics of habitat: each component has a personal or social, dynamic meaning. Individuals instinctively understand these meanings and come to desire certain possessions because they are necessary for communication. To be without these is to be excluded from communication.

The language of interior decoration is particularly effective in expressing the Self, whatever it may be. Even personalities devoid of Ideal (Social) or Expected Self, meaning the most selfless individuals, require a minimum of identity equipment. For instance, one of Pope John Paul I's first actions as Pontiff was to have his personal bed sent from Venice, which unfortunately did not arrive before his sudden death. Without our familiar landmarks, we are indeed disoriented. This is what guides wallpaper sellers to offer almost infinite colour ranges: nobody settles for plain pink; everyone wants to express their identity (or transcribe it through) in the wall dressing of their house/apartment.

The living environment we create is, in fact, an extension of ourselves, serving to say who we are (Real Self) and playing a role as a model of who we want to become (Expected or Ideal Self). However, studies

⁶ Douglas, M. & Isherwood, B. (1979), *The World of Goods*, Basic Books



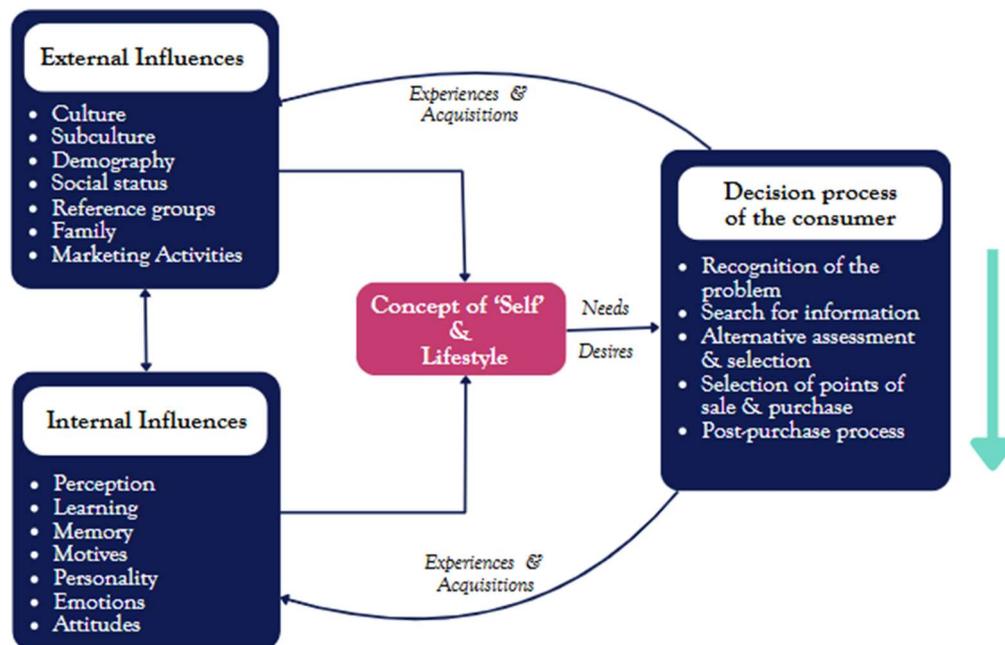
have shown that what we prefer and consider relevant to describe ourselves is influenced by our cultural environment⁷. For example, gender stereotypes persist with people paying attention to different things in a similar environment and attach value to possessions for distinct reasons. Men and children are primarily concerned with utilitarian objects and everyday tools, while women and grandparents value objects of contemplation and those inherited from the past. Furthermore, it has also been shown that transgenerational transmission in housing and interior design occurs from mothers to daughters and rarely from mothers to sons.

A criticism that could be made of this study is its age (1979). However, an article published in February 2013 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*⁸ corroborates these results more than 30 years later: in addition to showing that owning an object increases its perceived value to the consumer, Dommer and Swaminathan demonstrate differences in the 'locus' of this value. Men are thus more inclined to consider the potential for status distinction and self-identification of their home furnishings (with the aim of "existing" within their reference group), while women attach more importance to the signs of social integration of these same objects (with the aim of showing their belonging to a reference group, including family, vs. other surrounding groups).

Thus, possession, through a process of identity congruence, increases the value given by consumers to products (especially in the home furnishing and equipment sectors), companies could implement actions creating a sense of ownership even before the actual purchase (in situ trials, etc.). And address women through strategies emphasizing comparisons between belonging groups (rather than intragroup, which is more relevant for men).

⁷ Rochberg-Halton, E. (1979), *Cultural Signs and Urban Adaptation: The Meaning of Cherished Household Possessions*, PhD dissertation, Department of Behavioural Science, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago

⁸ Dommer S.L. & Swaminathan, V. (2013), « Explaining the Endowment Effect Through Ownership: The Role of Identity, Gender, and Self-Treat », *Journal of Consumer Research*



D. Brand Personality & Consumer Personality

From Self to Personality

The various notions of the Self are directly utilized in marketing through psychographic segmentation of the market, which aims to divide it into groups of individuals exhibiting common personality traits (e.g., propensity for innovation, materialism, self-awareness, need for reflection, etc.).

The term "personality," from the Latin "persona" (itself derived from ancient Greek *προσωπων*), originally referred to the different masks worn by actors in Greek theatre. It thus serves as the interface between the actor, their role, and the audience. Applied to modern consumer behavioural theory, it refers to the different 'masks' worn by consumers based on circumstances and the image they wish to convey. Different audience, different mask. This multidimensionality of personality is compatible with mental health, through the notion of identity fragmentation recognized by postmodern theory (see relevant sheet).

The concept of personality considers a dynamic of evolution, particularly when confronted with consumption. Indeed, consumers go through various pivotal stages in their lives that will modify the masks worn (following modifications of the Self): marriage (or first moving in together as a couple), birth of a child, death of a loved one, divorce or separation, radical career change, etc. With these changes in personality may come changes in purchasing behaviour: types of stores frequented, expected relationship



with sales force, expected level of technical competence of the store visited, products chosen, etc. It is therefore important, especially for a retailer, to be able to stay within the consumption tunnel of its loyal consumers, lest they turn to a competing brand.

From the Principle of Congruence

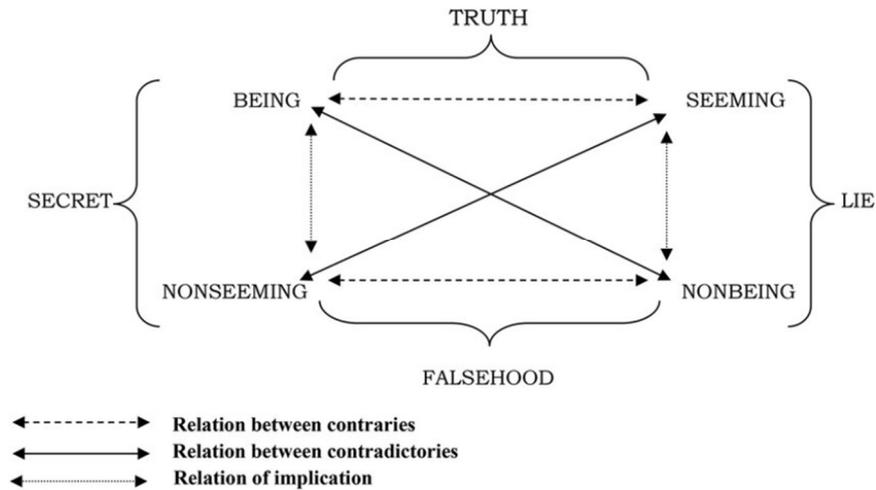
The concept of Self is correlated with that of brand image. Grubb and Grathwohl used this theory to hypothesize that the consumption of symbolic products would be motivated by the protection and enhancement of the self as perceived by the consumer. The congruence between brand image and self-image would explain why individuals develop attitudes and intentions towards brands that correspond to certain characteristics of their self-conception, making them more inclined to consume those brands.

Beyond congruence between brand image and self-image, consumers will also consume products perceived (by themselves) as congruent with their self, thus becoming the Extended Self: the individual is what they have and possess (Belk).

II. Postmodern Identity: Brief Reminder

The identity of the postmodern consumer is situated in a perpetually changing appearance. Only the various appearances are to be considered: the essence is either radically denied or considered non-relevant (see the truth semiotic square below). It corresponds to an empty place, at most a rhetorical construction generated to legitimize such or such discursive position of the subject. The various appearances dialogue with each other in a play of mirrors and quotations (Semprini): diversity is highly valued, placed at the very centre of identity.

Thus, identity is nothing but appearance in narrative rhetoric, an unstable and ever-evolving discursive construction (Semprini). We truly deal with an identity that is within multiplicity.



Greimas' semiotic square - Veridiction.

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