

## CONSUMERS' IDENTITY- THE ROLE OF THE 'SELF' CONCEPT IN THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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### ABSTRACT

As Kotler (2008) suggested, the marketplace is the location where goods and services are exchanged, so traders set up the product and buyers browse the merchandise. Consumer attitudes can be influenced by many factors outside the product attributes. Social and cultural environment as well as demographic, psychographic, and geographic conditions can sometimes shape consumer behavior. Consumer attitude, if positive, is an advantage to a marketer. The reaction of buying or refusing a certain product might be influenced by various factors, but marketers have acknowledged the role of personality and how this might influence consumers' behaviors toward a product.

**Keywords:** *Marketplace, Consumer Behavior, Consumers' Identity*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowing an individuals' way of thinking, his tastes and what causes him pleasure is the best way to understand his behavior as a consumer within the marketplace, fact that have determined marketers to develop a highly interest within this area.

Consumer behavior is the study of how a consumer thinks, feels, and selects between competing products. Moreover, the study of attitudes is critical to understanding the motivation and decision strategies employed by consumers. The combination of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors influence how a consumer reacts to a product or service. Marketers develop relative, compelling marketing messages using the same combination of information, and ultimately influence consumer behavior.

### 2. BODY

Consumer attitudes are both an obstacle and an advantage to a marketer. Choosing to discount or ignore consumers' attitudes of a particular product or service — while developing a marketing strategy — guarantees limited success of a campaign. In contrast, perceptive marketers leverage their understanding of attitudes to predict the behavior of consumers. These savvy marketers know exactly how to distinguish the differences between beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors while leveraging all three in the development of marketing strategies [1].

Because of the inner characteristics that constitute an individual's personality are a unique combination of factors, no two individuals are exactly alike. Nevertheless, many individuals may be similar in terms of a single personality characteristic, but not in terms of others. One must keep in mind that most decisions are made unconsciously. Jim Nightingale, states that "we simply decide without thinking much about the decision process". In a controlled environment, such as a classroom, instructors encourage students to weigh pros and cons before making a decision. However in the real world, most of our decisions are made unconsciously in

our mind because it would take too much time to sit down and list the pros and cons of each decision we must make on a daily basis.

Logical decision making is an important part of all science-based professions, where specialists apply their knowledge in a given area to making informed decisions.

When talking about consumers and their personal values, the matter might be approached from various points of view, especially regarding marketers and how they tend to approach consumers' individual characteristics within the market- place in order to take advantage of and increasing their awareness and as a result, sales.

For example, when taking into consideration one's action of purchasing a powerful car, instead of relying on why that person had bought that type of product instead of buying an ordinary car, his motivation should not be treated individually, but combined with information of the person's interests, past experience and knowledge gained related to the automobile area, his lifestyle, income and of course, his expectations from the product. A person with a similar background and knowledge might probably make the same decision while other individuals might judge his choice and find it extravagant or dangerous.

Consumer behavior is an integral part of daily life and this matter has been a subject of great interest for business psychologists and for other professionals concerned by the market environment and consumers' attitudes toward services and products. Competition within the market place is extremely high between suppliers, so marketers are continuously making use of various marketing strategies in order to manipulate the masses.

There have been used four personality theories to describe consumers' behaviors: psychoanalytic theory, social- cultural theory, self- concept theory, and trait theory.

Self - concept theory holds that individuals have a concept of self- based on who they think they are (the actual self) and a concept of who they think they would like to be (the ideal self) [2].

As presented within a research study concerning individuals' personality undertaken by Dolich, it highlighted that over 70 per cent of consumers buy products and access services related to their self- concept [3]. In the same research, analyzing the relationship between consumers and products such as beer, cigarettes and tooth- paste, it was found that respondents tend to prefer brands that they perceive as similar to themselves.

On the other hand, the research undertaken has shown that consumers who buy in accordance with their actual self- concept may be achieving consistency, but may not be enhancing self esteem. Although theories vary on the development of a self- concept, psychologists agree that a person's conception of self displays a high degree of consistency, especially in the short - run.

Being relatively a fixed structure, the one's conception of his self tends to resist change, but ideas formed from a new experience are easily absorbed into the existing organization of the self, particularly the experiences perceived as consistent with the existing structure. In contrast, ideas perceived inconsistent with the present self are either rejected or altered fit into the self, since they pose a threat to the individual [4].

The approach related to the level of self- esteem increased by purchasing products was also supported by Furnham [5], who stated that although consumers buy products that conform to their actual self- image, if they are lower in self- esteem, they are more likely to buy products based on what they would like to be rather than on what they are.

Furthermore, the self- concept theory is thought to be governed by two principles, such as the desire to attain self- consistency and the desire to enhance one's self- esteem. Attaining self-consistency means that individuals act in accordance with their concept of actual self.

As a matter of fact, a consumer may see himself as a self- controlled individual and decides that for his health and wellbeing he must consume just organic food. In the same time, the individual acknowledged the threat the modern world is facing regarding energy usage and pollution and buys an eco- friendly car. But deep inside, sometimes he might feel that he would like to be more carefree and drive a powerful small sport car after he enjoyed a delicious meat meal with his friends. The second assumption regarding how the individual would act in order to achieve self- esteem might be related to social comparison and to the fact that individuals understand themselves in comparison with the others. Individuals consume to distinguish themselves from the others or to show their membership within a group, establishing their group belonging and identity in this way. So, it might be stated that individuals decide who they are and who they would like to be by the process of "compare and contrast within the social environment" [6].

Considering an article posted on Brand Republic related to women and the usage of make- up, especially the usage of lipstick and mascara, it was highlighted that despite the tough times the economy is facing, cosmetics have kept their position as the fastest growing beauty

categories. More than that, according to Mintel, in the United Kingdom this market has been growing in value by 35 per cent between 2003 and 2007 [7]. Considering gender differences, gender have also been shown to be an important factor in the formation of self-concept. Early research inspired by the differences in self-concept across culture suggested that men tend to be more independent while women tend to be more interdependent.

However, more recent research has shown that, while men and women do not differ between independence and interdependence generally, they do differ in the distinction between relational and collective interdependence. Men tend to conceive of themselves in terms of collective interdependence while women conceive of themselves in terms of relational interdependence. In other words, women identify more with dyadic (one-on-one) relationships or small cliques whereas men define themselves more often within the context of larger groups.

Relating these facts with women' desire to enhance their beauty and to increase self- esteem, it might be a reliable proof that perceiving cosmetics as helping themselves having a good appearance, cosmetics can boost women's confidence and self- esteem for relatively little outlay. To conclude, the more satisfied women are, the more their self- esteem increases and they continue to purchase. Taking into consideration the results highlighted in the article, it might be considered that self- esteem is related to various personality characteristics and to gender, gender being a powerful factors in influencing consumers' behavior. But historically, self- esteem derives from a series of self- estimates and the evaluation of the self linked to the reflected appraisals of others [7]. "Self-esteem" as depicted by the word itself, refers to one's views about himself and his place in the whole scheme that is life. The concept is closely related to the concepts of self-worth and competence, so self-worth is all about seeing oneself in the whole context of reality, keeping in mind the basic human values.

A number of studies have shown that consumers' attitudes toward products vary depending on the situation, and differences in attitudes by situation might indicate strengths and weaknesses of brands. On the other hand, consumers' psychological condition and willingness to purchase is essential, so it might be stated that there is a two - way interdependence between products and consumers, each influencing and being influenced by the other. People view themselves in a particular and subjective manner, fact that might ease individuals to be able to have multiple identities in accordance to the situations they are facing in certain moments [8].

There is no one actual identity [10]. Taking into consideration this theory which states that consumers have various 'role identities', it might be added that each identity may be accessing different products, fact that marketers have acknowledged and seek to take advantage of it.

In term of consumer behavior, this idea that an individual embodies a number of different 'selves'

suggests that marketers should target their products to consumers within the context of a particular 'self' and in certain cases, a choice of different products for different selves [11].

Considering the various 'role identities' someone is taking on, such as the role as a daughter, working woman or as a member of a charity, one of the roles is dominant in a specific situation, affecting the style of dress and behavior of the individual. In different contexts, the working woman might select a different self- image to guide her attitudes toward a product. For instance, going to a party thrown by their work colleagues, she might access a more expensive wine to use as a gift, instead of an ordinary one she might use to drink at lunch within her privacy.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

People communicate with other people through what they buy and make use of, in this way consumption being a powerful tool to establish who you are in front of the others and products being most likely to be viewed as symbols [12]. In the market-environment, this trend has been noticed and was carefully looked into especially in the recent years, in the way that companies and brands started more and more to make use of the consumers' ideal self. Also, research has shown that consumers who buy in accordance with their actual self- concept may be achieving consistency, but may not be enhancing self - esteem.

Worldviews about the self in relation to others differs across and within cultures show that in Western cultures "the normative imperative is to become independent from others and to discover and express one's attributes. Relationships, memberships, groups, and their needs and goals, tend to be secondary to the self.

When assessing self-concept, one's positioning among peers is important because of the competitive nature of society, where people view themselves as better or worse than peers. On the other hand, in Asian cultures, an interdependent view of the self is more prevalent. Interpersonal relationships are more central than one's individual accomplishments [13]. Great emphasis is placed on these relationships, and the self is seen primarily as an integral part of society.

To conclude, part of the philosophy of a competitive, free market system is that efficiency is gained when individual participants act in their own self interest. Milton Friedman called this cooperation without coercion [14]. So, by advancing one's own good, one advances the good of society as a whole.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith said, "By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends

to promote it." This is sometimes referred to as the "Invisible Hand," which theoretically assets with the efficient allocation of resources in a free market system [15].

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