

Social Identity as a Useful Perspective for Self-Concept-based Consumer Research

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ABSTRACT

Psychology's study of the self-concept has generated numerous paradigms with different underlying assumptions. In this article it is argued that these assumptions must be considered before a self-concept paradigm can be meaningfully applied to consumer research. The major premise in this article is that the recent work on social identity is a particularly meaningful paradigm to adopt for consumer research that implicates the self. This argument is developed with a conceptual discussion of major self-concept issues, an overview of basic self-concept paradigms in psychology, and a synthesis of possible factors that may be considered in future theories of social-identity-based consumption decision making.
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Self-concept research in consumer behavior has been characterized as fragmented, incoherent, and highly diffuse (Sirgy, 1982). Although most investigators agree that broadly conceived, the term *self* represents the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings that have reference to him- or herself as an object of thought (Rosenberg, 1979), different self-concept paradigms in psychology have distinct definitions of the self-concept with different theoretical premises. Not surprisingly, the as-

sumptions of each self-concept paradigm in psychology lead to different advantages and disadvantages in conceptualizing the self-concept. Therefore, an analysis is undertaken in this article via a framework and conceptual discussion that directs the researcher to critical issues that might impact the choice of a particular approach to the self-concept. The major conclusion from this analysis is that a *social-identification* perspective on the self-concept is a particularly meaningful yet underutilized approach (at least explicitly) in consumer research.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, critical issues regarding the self-concept are identified. These issues are formulated as a set of basic self-concept questions and are presented in the context of a discussion to conceptualize major self-concept concerns. From the discussion of theoretical issues regarding the self-concept, specific aspects that define and differentiate any particular self-concept approach are discussed. The article presents a broad but brief overview of the self-concept's roots in the psychological and consumer behavior literatures. The major conclusion is that recent work in social identification and social identity (Tajfel, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986) is a particularly useful paradigm that can be adopted for consumer research. Its main emphasis involves some aspect of the self-concept. This is illustrated by the presentation of major issues in consumer research that may implicate a social-identity perspective, including possible key factors associated with conceptualizing the self-concept from a social-identity point of view.

CRITICAL SELF-CONCEPT ISSUES

The Self-Concept: What Is It?

At a very basic level, most individuals are aware of how they are differentiated from their surroundings. This notion is commonly referred to as an individual's sense of self. Unfortunately, attempts to operationalize a construct like *sense of self* is problematic. As Toulmin (1986) suggests, "the most that the term 'sense of self' can be for psychology is a shorthand sign, pointing to the whole realm of deliberate and non-deliberate conduct and reflexive experience" (p. 41). Perhaps it is more productive to consider the notion of a *self-concept*, as it is a somewhat less nebulous and manageable starting point. Accordingly, any paradigm that conceptualizes the self-concept must begin by defining it, because the working definition of the self-concept impacts the dimensionality of the construct. A paradigm's self-concept definition also specifies the nature of a potential theory that will operate within that paradigm, that is, whether the theory is broad or narrow in its comprehensiveness in summarizing critical aspects of the sense of self.

The Self-Concept: Where Is It?

For any self-concept paradigm, defining the self-concept begs the question of where the self-concept resides. In other words, does it arise with respect to the individual's experiences?¹ Is it primarily located at the core of more internal, psychological, introspective, and self-directed processes of thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, or is it located at the intersection of the individual's interaction with his or her relevant social milieu? In other words, is it more internal or external to the person? One of the major distinctions that differentiates self-concept paradigms is the extent to which they emphasize the more internal psychological aspects of the self-concept, or the more external, socially situated aspects.²

The Self-Concept: How Does It Change?

If individuals have a sense of self, and if that sense of self can be operationalized as an individual's self-concept, then this suggests that the self-concept must develop at some point in time.³ Whether or not the self-concept develops more internally or externally is an important issue, but also begs the question of how the self-concept changes over time. The fact that a self-concept can be defined, and resides somewhere, suggests that it is dynamic in the sense that it at least has the potential,

¹An issue related to this point is how the paradigm structures critical components of the self-concept. For example, if the paradigm suggests that there are different self-concept components in a multidimensional sense, then are they hierarchical in nature? What form or structure do they take? An interesting and relevant literature to consult for insights on this issue is the work done on the structure of personality (see Rosenberg, 1979; Gara & Rosenberg, 1980).

²This is a critical consideration for the researcher seeking to apply a self-concept paradigm to a problem domain for several reasons. The elaboration of any theoretical construct in psychology results in the need to specify how either it or behavioral manifestations of it can be measured. It is in this spirit that the internal/external focus of a self-concept paradigm importantly sets the stage for which construct validity can be truly assessed. For example, if one's perspective on the self is more internally focused, providing evidence that one's operationalizations map onto an individual's true self-concept will be more difficult because the theory's self-components within that paradigm will be less observable. The researcher working within this type of paradigm must place more faith on the inferences that he or she will try to draw regarding those components. Additionally, the extent to which a self-concept paradigm has more or less of an internal/external emphasis suggests not only how the self-concept might be measured, but also suggests how transient or rigid it might be across situations and across people. For example, if the paradigm's emphasis is on more external and socially situated aspects of the self-concept, one might expect to find more inconsistency as a result of the variation due to the host of potential social situations that might confront an individual (Bem & Allen, 1974). However, if the paradigm's emphasis is on more internal, psychological aspects, one might have a priori expectations that the critical self-components investigated within that paradigm be more consistent in the sense that their nature is less a function of potential situational contingencies.

³This is not the same issue as how it comes into consciousness.

more or less, to be modified.⁴ For reasons that will be discussed later, how a paradigm deals with self-concept change might be very important to the researcher's objectives.

In sum, the underlying paradigmatic assumptions of any self-concept approach in psychology must be explicitly recognized if the researcher is to meaningfully apply the approach to his or her problem domain. Three such critical aspects of self-concept paradigms were identified in the previous section. They are (a) how the paradigm defines the self-concept, including the important self-concept components identified by the paradigm; (b) the extent to which the paradigm focuses on internal or external aspects of the self-concept; and (c) the primary function of the self-concept. The discussion now turns to a discussion of specific self-concept paradigms in psychology on these three aspects.

SELF-CONCEPT PARADIGMS⁵

1. *The Self as an Object of Introspection.* James (1890) was one of the first psychologists to elaborate on a philosophical distinction between the self as knower, and the self as known. James considered the global sense of self as simultaneously Me and I. He operationalized the self-concept as differentiated aspects of the same entity (person); a discrimination between pure experience (I), and the contents of that experience (Me). James's self-concept definition was multifaceted. He claimed that the empirical self consisted of four components: the spiritual self, material self, social self, and bodily self. This perspective takes a very broad view of the self concept. For James, an individual's self-concept can extend well beyond his psychological faculties and self-perceived physical characteristics. James's conceptual distinction between

⁴This critical theoretical question suggests a way to distinguish paradigms with respect to some key issues. For example, any self-concept paradigm must make an assumption as to the function the self-concept plays. What role does it play and how central is it? For example, how does having a well-defined self-concept help us make our life choices, or enable us to understand our experiences, beliefs and actions in the context of progress toward our goals? Is its primary purpose an interpersonal tool to establish a frame of reference for which we can assess ourselves relative to others? Or is its primary function to help us regulate our behavior, integrate our personality, or process information in our environment? How a paradigm deals with these issues is critical because it will begin to specify which hypothesized behaviors can be expected to occur in a given situation under study. Therefore, critical consideration of whether or not a paradigm emphasizes one function of the self concept to the exclusion of another suggests potential behavioral outcomes, and suggests which paradigm might be more appropriate to a particular research objective. Indeed the major emphasis of some paradigms, is an interest in how the self-concept of the individual can be modified as an intervention to aid in the individual's mental health and intellectual growth.

⁵A detailed discussion of every author's approach to the self-concept is beyond the scope of this article. For a review of over 450 self concept studies, see Wylie (1961), and for a more recent attempt at presenting a synthesis of different approaches see Burns (1979), Epstein and Staub (1980), and Rosenberg (1979). The purpose here is to present various general paradigms and to give a broad-brush overview of the critical premises of some major approaches.

me and mine is intentionally ambiguous: "My children, my fame, my reputation, my home, and the products of my work are emotionally invested by me, and experienced as a part of me" (p. 141).

Interestingly, one of the first attempts to integrate the self-concept in the consumer behavior domain was product symbolism (Levy, 1959; Tucker, 1957). Consumers were thought to have the capacity to define themselves through their consumption episodes and the products that they purchase (see also Katz, 1960; Munson & Spivey, 1981). This closely parallels James's (1890) notion of the material self. Early conceptual frameworks in consumer behavior (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Grubb & Hupp, 1968; Grubb & Stern, 1971) tried to link self-theory as it was developing in the behavioral sciences, to product meanings and brand images. This is an important application, because in the context of consumption behavior, so much of who we are as individuals in terms of our self-esteem and our social status is also tied up in the products that we consume (Levy, 1959).

In more recent work, one especially interesting notion derived from James's material self-concept analysis is Belk's (1988) treatment of possessions as extensions of the self.⁶ Through a rich and descriptive essay, the author asserts that the products we possess are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities. Belk's descriptive essay elaborates on James's conceptualization in an attempt to examine the relationship between possessions and the sense of self. Belk argues that "we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (p. 139). Belk draws upon the diverse literatures of anthropology and philosophy in citing examples of depth interviews of individuals who have reported an extreme feeling of identity invested in certain material objects. The themes observed here seem to suggest that external possessions are a part of the sense of self and have some important implication to an individual's self-concept.⁷

2. *The Self and Behaviorism.* At first, it might seem surprising that reflexive and introspective activities would take so long to become topics of scientific inquiry. However, the same experimental methods and assumptions in the physical sciences could not be easily carried over into the behavioral sciences. Investigators studying physical objects and in-

⁶See also Hill's (1990) discussion of possessions and the homeless.

⁷Although this theoretical perspective may seem perhaps overly broad in that its introspective approach encompasses the self as the sum total of all that a man (woman) can call his (hers), it does provide some important insights. For example, the self-components can uniquely blend in ways that define the individual. The reciprocal influence of these self-components render them conceptually unique but somewhat overlapping. A case in point in the above example, clothing, so much a part of material self, enhances bodily self and satisfies social ends by gaining the attention of others. In this sense, the athletic shoes could also change the wearer's social self, that is, the way the wearer is evaluated and perceived by relevant others. Therefore, this perspective assumes that the self-concept could be located and influenced by the psychological introspection of the individual and the intersection of society and the individual.

ert matter need not concern themselves that the objects under study might be countersuggestible and behave unusually just because they were under observation (Toulmin, 1986). For the research procedures of modern science, the fact that the self-directed aspects of mental life and experience were so inaccessible called the legitimacy of their study into question. As psychology declared its need to place itself respectably alongside other sciences, behaviorism (Hull, 1951; Skinner, 1953, 1978, 1987; Thorndike, 1932; Watson, 1930), with its emphasis on objectively observable phenomena, represented a logical response to criticisms of the behavioral sciences.

For this paradigm, the self is defined as a repertoire of behaviors directed by a history of environmental contingencies. For behaviorism, the sense of self is not an originating agent, it is a locus, a point at which many genetic and environmental conditions come together in a joint effect. This represents a stark contrast to treating the self as an object of introspection.⁸ Although this type of perspective has the explicit ability to account for external factors that impinge on behavior, it regards the *agency* of self as less important. This is a more externally driven focus on the self, with the self-concept located at the intersection of various external contingencies of reinforcement. Therefore, if one could identify and assess the situational contingencies of reinforcement, one could understand how the behaviors of the different selves in the same skin come about. The fact that this paradigm's major focus is the seeking out of positive self-reinforcers and the avoidance of bad self-experiences suggests that the dominant self-motive operating is self-management and self-maintenance.

In a consumer behavior context this can provide interesting insights. For example, the portrayal of an athletic shoe in an advertisement might illustrate its wearer as receiving accolades from significant others or relevant reference groups. The resulting perception of potential external positive reinforcement contingencies could drive the consumer exposed to the ad to purchase the shoe. After purchase, if the utilization of that brand of athletic shoe leads to a high degree of self-gratification, then at some later point in time when similar needs are aroused, the consumer will have an increased tendency to select that athletic shoe for repurchase. Each successive time that the athletic shoe brings self-gratification through positive reinforcement, whether it be from the individual's relevant reference group, or positive associations from advertising, and so on, this will increase the probability that the athletic shoe will be selected to fulfill future needs. Accordingly, to think about be-

⁸The behavioristic exclusion of self-directed processes was opposed by many. Some argued that it was clear that the range of psychological study would be greatly restricted if important internal states and mental events such as purpose, expectations, thoughts, and sensations were completely ignored. In addition, evidence of human behavior began to surface that without recourse to internal processes, could not be explained.

haviors that might be relevant to the self in this behaviorist perspective can be useful.

3. *The Self and the Psychoanalytic Tradition.* The emphasis on behaviors and the self-relevant environmental contingencies that affect them contrasts with the psychoanalytic perspective to the self-concept. In the psychoanalytic tradition, the self-concept is viewed as the result of intrapsychic conflict; the output from a concentration of instinctive, unconscious forces within the individual (Freud, 1923, 1946). The psychoanalytic perspective on the self marked the return of internal psychological processes to the forefront of self-concept investigation. The individual's sense of self was conceptualized as an ever-increasingly complex reservoir of drives, instincts, needs, and impulses; the conscious-planning center for finding outlets for those drives; and the devices that channel them through socially approved outlets. The sense of self determines the content of consciousness and distinguishes reality from imagination. In this paradigm, the self has its origins in bodily experience and comes into contact with the external world as it evolves into a mental agency that mediates internal psychological forces and external reality constraints.

Although the self-construct in the work by Freud was not explicitly acknowledged, Freud's (1923, 1946) concept of the ego, which represented the totality of the organism's sane and rational mental processes, closely corresponded to later notions of what would be called a global self. Although Wylie (1961) points out that the conceptualization in the context of a notion of self was somewhat confusing in that at times the Freudian ego seemed to mean something tangible (e.g., *person*), while at others it seemed to represent something dynamic (e.g., the process involved in attaining psychic balance between id and superego), it helped spur an interest toward acknowledging internal, irrational, and unconscious determinants of human behavior.

Later, Jung (1960) echoed Freud in conceptualizing the ego as the conscious part of personality. However, in Jung's work, the self became the archetype representing man's striving for unity and wholeness, an all-inclusive totality of both unconscious and conscious aspects (Burns, 1979). Neo-Freudian theorists like Adler (1927), Sullivan (1953), and Horney (1945) saw less of a need to emphasize unconscious processes and preferred to emphasize sociocultural situations and interpersonal relationships as significant in the development of the self. In his later writings, Freud (1962) assigned greater importance to ego development and functioning, and the neo-Freudians stressed the importance of the self picture and the ego ideal (Erikson, 1963; Hartmann, 1958). Some recent work in consumer behavior is roughly drawn from this highly internal perspective. For example, Hoch and Lowenstein (1991) examined how consumers maintain self-control in the face of time-inconsis-

tent preferences. In a decision-theoretic framework, these researchers developed a model that explains processes related to how consumer's sudden increases in desire for a product can overshadow long-term consumer preferences. They conceptualized consumer self-control as a struggle between desire and willpower; two intrapsychic forces. They also described two classes of strategies for self-control: strategies that reduce desire, and those that overcome desire through willpower.

This type of perspective is more internally focused than the behaviorist perspective, but less externally focused than the self-concept as an object of introspection. Here, the primary function of the self-concept is the core of personality that controls impulses and drives (Burns, 1979).⁹ Its relevant self-motive, therefore, is self-control, whereby the individual seeks an equilibrium between needs, drives, instincts, and impulses and the expediency and means by which they are satisfied. This paradigm explicitly recognizes that an individual's purchase behavior can be extremely complex. It provides unique insights about the self-concept in a consumer behavior context. This paradigm also highlights insights into the deep motivational wellsprings that might not be obvious to casual observation. As consumers, it is clear that products serve functional purposes. For example, cars provide consumers a means of arriving at desired destinations. However, cars can also communicate psychological meaning as well. In fact, Levy (1959) argued that the consumer is not always functionally oriented and that his/her behavior is significantly affected by the symbols encountered in the identification of goods in the marketplace. For example, if an individual is asked why he or she purchased athletic shoes, he or she may mention the functional qualities, for example, the cost or dependability. At a deeper level, the individual may not be aware that the purchase may have been made to impress others, to feel youthful, or to communicate some important identity. The usefulness of this paradigm is that it recognizes the irrational side of human behavior and can provide insights to such consumption experiences as impulse purchases, novelty items without functional qualities, or extreme luxury items.

4. *The Self and the Cognitive Revolution.* The social-cognition approach views the self as a “conceptual system processing information about the self,” whereby the self can be viewed as either a conceptual or knowledge structure in memory (see Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994, for a review). Conceptualizing the self-concept as the totality of self-referent knowledge in memory has implications for information processing. Re-

⁹A reasonable criticism might be to ask how one measures the id, ego, and superego? From this perspective the paradigms might seem difficult to apply. The point is that its utility depends on what the researcher wants to do with a theory that comes from this perspective. In this sense, the utility of thinking about an id, ego, and superego is better recognized as productive and insightful metaphors for conceptualizing the self-concept and motivations that might drive it.

searchers in consumer behavior have used this social-cognition perspective to study the self-concept. For example, Sirgy (1982) developed self/image product/image congruity theory (see also Dolich, 1969). Sirgy hypothesized that any link between self-image and product attributes would involve two things: (a) The strength of association in memory between a particular image and a particular product, and (b) the consumer's value intensity associated with the self-image level. For example, maximum correspondence would occur in a situation where a product was strongly associated with an image X and the individual highly valued image X as a desired component of his or her self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). Working within this paradigm, Sirgy developed classifications based on cognitive theory's metaphorical conceptualization of a self-image schema (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994). This perspective of the self emphasized how the individual responds to having a self-schema activated in a particular consumption situation. This self-image schema and its correspondence to a product image schema led Sirgy to create a four-point classification that exhausts the universe of his possible self-concept schemas and product image schema linkages. In more recent work, Burnkrant and Rao (1995) studied how activating self-referent knowledge in memory affects persuasion. Two studies found that increasing self-referencing via ad copy content increases message elaboration and can increase persuasion when message arguments are strong. In a similar vein, Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1995) examined how these self-reference effects may be moderated in persuasion situations. They found that when subjects were highly motivated to attend to the ad, an initial (moderate) increase in self-referencing enhanced persuasion, whereas an extreme increase in self-referencing undermined persuasion. When a subject's motivation was low, self-referencing had no impact.

Social cognition's view of the self can potentially locate the self-concept internally or externally, depending on how the researcher operationalizes a particular self-schema, or content of the activated self. Therefore, conceptualizing the self-concept from this perspective leaves a broad interpretation as to what self-schemas might be relevant to a consumer's self-concept. For example, Markus and Nurius (1986) argued for consideration of various possible selves and to take into account the motivational aspects of specific hopes, fears, and fantasies that the individual has about him or herself (see also Hart, Fegley, & Brengelman, 1993; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Higgins (1987) has suggested a distinction between ought selves and ideal selves, in that people have various self-guides as to how they would like to be and how they think they ought to be according to either their own or other people's standards and expectations (Landon, 1974). Other researchers have suggested conceptualizations of good and bad selves, hoped-for selves, and not-me selves (Gergen, 1967; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Jones &

Pittman, 1982; McGuire, 1984; Sullivan, 1953; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). In addition, Triandis (1989) distinguishes between public, private, and collective aspects of self.

5. *The Self, Perception, and Awareness.* The fundamental thesis of the phenomenological approach is that no one can ever observe a real self directly. The sense of self can only be inferred, but more importantly, must be viewed through someone's perception. Therein lies the conceptual contribution of the phenomenological view of the self-concept and its explicit recognition of the difference between two distinct frames of reference: The objective observer and the thinking, perceiving, and behaving individual. Snygg and Combs (1949) argue that this distinction is a critical component of understanding behavior because the realities derived from these two points of view are nonidentical and are often completely contradictory: "From the phenomenological point of view his (the individual) behavior is always insightful, that is to say, it is always relevant to the situation as he interprets it at the moment" (Snygg & Combs, 1949, p. 405).

The concept of self is captured within the individual's phenomenological field or simply the world of naive, immediate experience in which each person lives, that is, the everyday situation of self and surroundings the person takes to be real (Combs & Soper, 1957). At the most basic level, the field consists of focus and margin, where one level may shade the other so that the focus may be large and relatively indistinct or small and highly differentiated.¹⁰ Snygg and Combs (1949) suggested that the self-concept consists of aspects that are vital or are truly important to the person. The self-concept is embedded in the sense of self that includes all those perceptions the person holds about him- or herself. In turn, the sense of self is embedded within the individual's total perceptual or phenomenological field.

The major proposition of the phenomenological approach to the self is that behavior is not only influenced by past and current experiences, but by the personal meanings each individual attaches to his or her perception of those experiences (Wylie, 1961). The basic tenet was that because the self is unobservable, it is derived from perceptions based on inference and interpretations of observed behavior. Therefore, perceptions from the external world are the basic content from which the self-concept is developed and maintained. From this perspective, the self-concept's primary function is to act as a selective filter, the permeability of which is determined by individual developmental history and the nature of the environment relative to the person (Burns, 1979). Perceptions are selective and are often biased as a result of distortions engen-

¹⁰See the early work by Lewin (1936), Raimy (1948), Snygg and Combs (1949), and Rogers' self-theory (1951) as precursors to this approach.

dered by motives, goals, attitudes, and defense mechanisms (Bruner & Goodman, 1947; Judson & Cofer, 1956; Vincake, 1952).

This perspective locates the self-concept somewhere in the middle of the continuum of an internal psychological view and an external, socially situated view. It accounts for the perception of the external world but it might be considered somewhat more internal because of the focus on the perception of reality. Some research in consumer behavior has drawn (at least implicitly) from this self-concept paradigm. In a discussion on the symbolic consumption in personal rites of passage and identity reconstruction, Schouten (1991) examined the consumption of plastic surgery in the context of everyday life to determine the motives and self-concept dynamics underlying this symbolic consumer behavior. Emergent themes regarding body image and symbolic self-completion are developed through an extensive literature review and demonstrated empirically through ethnographic interview data. Schouten's point here is that through consumption behaviors like identity reconstruction through plastic surgery, individuals try to develop and maintain a stable and harmonious self-concept.

6. *The Self, Social Relationships, and Social Identity.* The relationship between an individual and his fellow man spurred interest in a perspective that viewed the self-concept from a broader, sociological viewpoint. The symbolic interactionist paradigm considers whether human behavior is guided more by private consistency or public displays, and considers society and the self-concept as an important, single unit of analysis. Cooley's (1902) view of self and society as being twin-born was described in his "looking-glass self," which reasoned that one's self-concept is critically influenced by what important others think of him or her. Cooley defined the self-concept as a reflexive mirror born out of the interaction of the individual with his or her relevant social milieu. For Cooley, the primary components of the self-concept were various social selves with a driving motive of self-assessment. The critical premise of this paradigm is that people see themselves through the eyes of others and form self-concepts via the reactions of others.

Within the symbolic interaction tradition, Goffman (1959, 1961, 1967) was perhaps one of the first scholars to use the term *social identity* as distinguished from personal identity and ego identity. His dramaturgical analysis begins by describing the entrance of a stranger and the process of interpreting appearances that enable us to anticipate his or her category and attributes, that is, his or her social identity. Other theorists, like Berger and Luckmann (1966, 1971), conceptualized identity as a social meaning constructed like other meanings, but with the uniquely existential dimension of being anchored in an individual's body (Weigert, 1983). In a more positivist framework, Burke (1980) conceptualized identity as the subjective component of a role. In his analysis,

interrelated multiple role identities constitute an individual's self-concept.

Later, the tradition of what has been coined impression management theory was also born out of the symbolic interactionist paradigm (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971, 1973; Schlenker, 1980). Leaving aside motivations behind impression-management related behaviors, these perspectives share in common the focus on the social construction of identities of selves in social interactions where people categorize and act in ways toward each other based on their understanding of social roles, rules, and symbols (Backman, 1988; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stone, 1962). Surprisingly, very little published consumer research has drawn from this perspective. In one example, Solomon (1983) argued that the subjective experience imparted by the consumption of many products substantially contributes to the consumer's structuring of social reality, self-concept, and behavior. The consumer is thought to often rely on the social meanings inherent in products as a guide to the performance of social roles, especially when role demands are novel. Solomon integrated concepts adapted from symbolic interactionism and suggested that although traditional research in marketing viewed products as a post hoc response to underlying needs and wishes, an alternative view would suggest that there are conditions under which products serve as symbolic a priori stimuli to behavior.

Summary

The first section of this article identified major theoretical questions regarding the self-concept. These theoretical questions distinguish different approaches to self-concept investigation. They specify paradigmatic assumptions that have implications for any researcher's theory that can be formulated within a particular approach. The previous section also identified and assessed the assumptions of broad self-concept paradigms in psychology and identified some examples of relevant consumer research literature. The results of this discussion are summarized in Table 1.

The self-concept is a rich area studied by numerous investigators with different orientations. Each perspective assumes different self-concept definitions, primary functions, and motives of the self-concept. In addition, each approach can be oriented along dimensions such as its tendency to emphasize either an internal, psychological view of the self or an external, socially situated view of the self. Consequently, each approach has its own assumptions as to what is emphasized with regard to studying the self, how it is organized in the individual, and how it might manifest differences in behavior. Each of these aspects reflect the critical questions that were outlined earlier. If aspects emphasized by each paradigm are conceptually relevant to the researcher's specific objective, his or her explicit awareness of how each paradigm deals with

Table 1. Self-Concept Paradigms.

Paradigm/ Author	Definition of Self-Concept	Components of the Self-Concept	Primary Function of Self Concept	Relevant Major Self-Motive(s)	Behavior/Outcome	Critical Premise(s) of the Paradigm	Aspects of the Paradigm
<i>1. The self as an object of introspection</i>							
James (1890)	Global Self: Pure experience (I) content of that experience (Me). Self is the sum total of all that a man/woman can call his/hers	Spiritual self Material self Social self Bodily self	Self-completion: identifies the self and self-defining goals	Self-feeling self-seeking and self-preservation	Individual will seek to maximize the four self-component synergies	We have many self-experiences that differ in their importance and centrality; degree of importance is determined by the intensity of the affective relationship to a self component.	Multi-faceted All encompassing theory Structured as a very macro theory; very broad interpretations Rooted in philosophical premises
Allport (1955)	All the regions of our life that we regard as intimately and essentially ours	The proprium: Consists of seven aspects of the self	Ego enhancement Propriate Striving	Self-enhancement Self-extension Self-identity through time	Motivated behavior to enhance the self image	The seven aspects of the proprium of an individual are what makes him different from all other individuals	Nonhomunculus perspective Macro theory: Does not lay out specifics
Cattell (1950)	Self as a keystone in personality	Felt Self Contemplated Self Structural Self	Integrates personality	Self-consistency	Protect and or maintain stable self concept	Self comprises both real and ideal aspects, wishes and thoughts, is inferred by behavior and reported by introspection	Very broad theory

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Table 1. *Continued.*

Paradigm/ Author	Definition of Self-Concept	Components of the Self-Concept	Primary Function of Self Concept	Relevant Major Self-Motive(s)	Behavior/Outcome	Critical Premise(s) of the Paradigm	Aspects of the Paradigm
<i>2. The self and behaviorism</i>							
Skinner (1953, 1978, 1987)	The self is de- fined as a rep- ertoire of be- haviors	A reactive self: Be- havioral environ- mental responses	Organizer of self-knowl- edge	Self-management Self-governing Self-maintenance	Seek out positive self reinforces, avoid bad self ex- periences	A person (sense of self) is not an originating agent; he is a lo- cus, a point at which many ge- netic and envi- ronmental condi- tions come together in a joint effect	Accounts for en- vironmental factors that im- pinge on behav- ior Does not empha- size the deter- minism of the organism Does not distin- guish between internal and external as- pects of self
See also: Thorndike (1932) Hull (1951) Wat- son (1930)	directed by an outgrowth of environmental contingencies						
<i>3. The self and psychotherapy</i>							
Freud (1923) Freud (1946)	The self as a set of processes such as per- ceiving, think- ing; that de- termines the content of con- sciousness and distinguishes reality from imagination	Ego and superego	Core of person- ality that con- trols impulses and drives	Self-control	Behavior is strongly influenced by mo- tives and fanta- sies deep within the individual's private world	The self has its ori- gins in bodily ex- perience and only slowly comes into con- tact with the ex- ternal world as it evolves into a mental agency that mediates between internal forces and exter- nal reality	Recognized the irrational side of human be- havior No clear indica- tion of mea- surement of id, ego, or super- ego; interesting metaphors to conceptualize the self

Jung (1960)	The self as an all inclusive totality of both unconscious and conscious aspects	Self persona anima animus shadow	Self as an equilibrium between conscious and unconscious levels; an organizer of experience	Self-development	Self archetype represents man's striving for unity and wholeness	The ego, or global self was the complex of representations which constitutes the centrum of the person's field of consciousness and appears to possess a high degree of continuity	Recognized both irrational and rational aspects of the individual Macro theory; difficult to nail down hypotheses at the operational level Not really interested in the self per se, just the effects of its intra-psychic conflict resolution
	See also Adler (1927), Sullivan (1953), and Horney (1945)						
<i>4. The self as information processor</i>							
Sarbin (1952), Mischel (1977), Kihlstrom and Kleine 1994	The self as a conceptual system processing information about the self. This perspective treats the self as a conceptual or knowledge structure in memory.	Various self schemas	Interpret, organize self-related data	None	Processing of self-related information	Behavioral changes are a function of the effects of certain self-schemas being activated in a particular situation	Interesting metaphor Focused hypotheses and easy to lead to testable propositions Not concerned with how the self-concept develops Can operationalize any relevant self-schema

Table continued on following page

Table 1. *Continued.*

Paradigm/ Author	Definition of Self-Concept	Components of the Self-Concept	Primary Function of Self Concept	Relevant Major Self-Motive(s)	Behavior/Outcome	Critical Premise(s) of the Paradigm	Aspects of the Paradigm
	See also Kihlstrom (1994) for review						Accounts for cognitive capacity limitations to abundant environmental stimuli
<i>5. The phenomenological self</i>							
Rogers (1951), Lewin (1936), Raimy (1948), Snygg and Combs (1949)	The self as a selective filter derived from perceptions from the external and internal world	The phenomenological field	Selective filter that interprets a situation at the moment of behavior	Self-perception and Self-reference Self-maintenance	Behavior is driven by the private personal world of the individual Objective is to maintain consistency and congruency between self and experiences	Behavior is not only influenced by past and current experiences but by the personal meanings each individual attaches to his or her perception of those experiences	Concerned with the individual's perception of reality not reality itself Puts the theory closer to the behavior
<i>6. The self and social relationships</i>							
Cooley (1902)	Self as a reflective mirror born out of the interaction with the individual's social milieu	Social self	Moderator of social interaction	Self assessment	Behaviors are driven by external demands	We primarily see ourselves through the eyes of others and form our concepts of ourselves from the reaction of others	More external viewpoint Accounts for developmental aspects of the self Can account for cultural differences

Mead (1934)	Self as an object that arises out of social interaction; an outgrowth of people's reactions of appropriate behavior	Social selves		Self-regulation	Social concerns derived from appropriate behavior	The self is not there from birth, rather, it develops in the social matrix	De-emphasizes internal aspects of the self-concept
Goffman (1959)	The self as the enacted role for a particular audience	Short term self roles		Self-presentation		The self creates or tries to create, consciously or unconsciously, the response of the social surround that in turn is constitutive of that self	Does not address whether or not there really is a self concept activated in an individual at any real point in time
	See Schlenker (1980) (1982) (1985)	Strategic self	Self monitoring	Impression management			
Hogg (1996); Hogg and Abrams (1988); Tajfel (1978, 1982); Tajfel and Turner (1979)	The self as a universe of potential different identities that may guide behavior	Multiplicative self that consists of a set of social identities		Identity maintenance and congruence	Behavior is driven by which identity is activated in a particular situation	A person has a universe of potential identities that they may draw upon to guide their judgments.	Emphasizes the self as very "strategic" in terms of flexibility to respond differently to different social audiences Incorporates both molar and molecular aspects for any theory based on it.

them should play a significant role in the choice of a particular approach. In the next section, the perspective of a social-identity-oriented self-concept has some very useful aspects that combine advantages associated with the earlier paradigms discussed in this article. The argument will be made that a social-identification perspective (emerging from Paradigm 6 described above) in self-concept research is a particularly meaningful yet underutilized paradigm to adopt in *consumer* research that has self-concept as its emphasis.

SOCIAL IDENTITY: A RECENT AND USEFUL APPROACH THAT SPANS PARADIGMS

Social Identification Processes

To socially identify implies a psychological connection with some other person or group (Deaux, 1997). This notion of identification has developed in a wide variety of different research traditions. For example, psychoanalytic models define *identification* as a process by which the individual develops ties with another person or group. Freud (1955) stated that identification can “arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person” (p. 137). Early in life, identification is considered an unconscious process of imitating referent others who serve as models for beliefs, values, and behaviors. In later stages of maturation, the identification process involves conscious choice and discrimination among possible identities (Higgins, Loeb, & Moretti, 1995). For example, Kelman’s (1958, 1961, 1974) typology of social influence uses the term *identification* to describe situations where an individual willingly adopts an attitudinal position recommended by some referent other. The motivation for adopting the position is that it establishes or maintains a positive self-defining relationship with the referent other. Conceptually similar to the French and Raven (1959) idea of referent power, this type of social relationship may take the form of the target desiring to adopt the role of the referent other. It may also take the form of a reciprocal role relationship in which the target desires to participate in activities vis-a-vis the referent other (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Identification processes are invoked only in the context of the role relationship with the referent other that is the basis of the identification. Therefore, once the relationship no longer becomes important to the individual, identification ceases to exist. Foote (1951) expanded this analysis beyond dyads when he interpreted human motivation as a consequence of identification with an important reference group. He conceptualized identification as the “appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities” (p. 14).

Sociological Models

Whereas psychological development theories of identification focus on members of the family unit as identification targets, sociological models emphasize a broader set of social categories that are subsets of the social system (Stryker & Statham, 1985). These categories are large and the members are not necessarily known to one another; yet every occupant of a particular role category shares behavior and expectations with other occupants of the category. In this way, roles exist in the broader social system and the outcome of conscious role selection is a defined position relative to others. These models conceptualize identification as an interdependent process, whereby the relationships are carried out via cooperating participants (Deaux, 1997). Symbolic interaction models like the ones described earlier (Mead, 1934) including Stryker's (1980) identity theory and the role-identity model of McCall and Simmons (1978) offer a similar perspective on social identification. These models posit that social interaction operates through the enactment of roles that the individual chooses to play (Deaux, 1997). However, these theories not only take into account standard roles like mother and child (Stryker & Statham, 1985; Thoits & Virshup, 1995), but also identities not so readily defined in terms of specific systems (e.g., mentor and student).

Social Identity Theory

In another developing research stream, social psychology has expanded its conceptualization of the self-concept to capture aspects of intergroup and intragroup processes that are linked to important, collective social identities (Hogg, 1996; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel's (1959) work has generated empirical findings suggesting that an individual can define him- or herself in various ways. Accordingly, membership within a self-inclusive social category provides a category-congruent self-definition that constitutes an element of the self-concept (see also Turner, 1982; Turner & Giles, 1981). In an elaboration of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) presumes a process of self-definition impacted by specific membership groups. The essence of self-definition is "that part of the individual's self concept which derives from knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Social identity theory explicitly recognizes the importance of considering both basic motivational and cognitive processes in order to account for intergroup perceptions and behavior. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) put it, "social categorization entails much more than cognitive classification of events, objects or people. It is a process impregnated by values, culture and social representations" (p. 114). Social identity the-

ory was originally developed to capture aspects of intergroup categorization and group dynamics associated with large-scale social identities such as races, nations, and so forth.

Social-Categorization Theory

Later, Turner (1985) and his colleagues developed social categorization theory to conceptualize aspects of intragroup dynamics related to more minimal groups. These groups are primarily characterized by frequent face-to-face interaction among all members. Self-categorization essentially expands the operation of the categorization process as the cognitive basis of intragroup behavior. This theory suggests that people can categorize themselves and others at a number of different levels of abstraction that can define one's social identity. For self-categorization theory, the depersonalization of self-perception is the basic process underlying group phenomena. This includes various elements of collective behavior, shared group attitudes, and mutual influence processes (Turner, 1985, pp 99–100). Therefore, self-categorizations are defined as cognitive groupings of oneself and some class of stimuli as the same, in contrast to other classes of stimuli that are different¹¹ (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The definition of social identity by Tajfel makes it possible to conceptualize a social identity without reference to an out-group. In contrast, however, Turner's definition requires a we–they distinction (Deaux, 1997). In any event, social identity and self-categorization theory emphasize the independence and, in the case of social categorization, the possibility of competition between in-group and out-groups in the identification process. This perspective provides a meaningful conceptualization that consumer researchers can adopt in their research that implicates the self-concept. However, adopting such a viewpoint will involve the consideration of some key issues.

DEVELOPING A THEORY OF SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION'S IMPACT ON CONSUMPTION DECISIONS: SOME KEY FACTORS AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Definition of Social Identity

Socialization within a culture causes a person to become aware of an infinite number of social categories in the external environment. Some of these potential bases for self-definition are more permanent (e.g.,

¹¹The cognitive aspects of identification can be considered from two perspectives: The process of categorization itself, and an analysis of the beliefs associated with a self designated category (Deaux, 1997). Turner (1982, 1984) increases the weight given to cognitive aspects of identification. He frames his basic premise as “a cognitive elaboration of the nature of social identity as a higher order level of abstraction in the perception of self and others” (1984, p. 42).

mother, daughter, friend), whereas others may be more transitory (e.g., Republican, athlete, graduate student) Any potential social-identity-based theory of consumption decision making starts with the idea that consumers may perceive themselves in terms of these various levels of abstraction (Tajfel, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986) and at any given point in time will have available a subset of social categories that can become a part of their working or spontaneous self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986; McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979). In this way, such a perspective borrows a bit from social cognition's view of the self, but with more specificity as to what is meant by the various types of selves that may become activated in a particular situation. Additionally, a social-category point of view also has the advantage that it takes into account the developmental importance of the various identities that may guide consumer decisions. Social categories are cognitive structures whose meaning comes about over time through socialization and many of the other processes described in paradigms discussed earlier. In this way, a consumer may adopt a social category as one of her social identities in order to think about various actions or judgments. For clarity of exposition, the term *social category* refers to the infinite number of potential social constructions that may come from culture, society, marketers, peer groups, and so on. The term *social identity* refers to the actuated perspective or frame of reference that a consumer possesses as part of the repertoire of who they are or want to appear to be. Therefore, such a perspective has the potential to describe a theory that is both molecular and molar. Additionally, such a theory can encompass various kinds of motives that would lead a consumer to adopt a social identity either for impression-management purposes, or intrapsychic motivations. Therefore, the next section describes several key issues that may play an important role in formulating a social identity-based theory of consumption.

Salience and Activation

Social categories are internal mental representations that can become a basic part of how consumers view themselves. For example, a consumer may see herself as a democrat, a professor, tomboy, or working mother. However, no matter how extensive the knowledge about them, social identities can have little impact on consumer attitudes, judgments, and behaviors unless social identity information is accessed. A theory of consumption decision making that involves social identity might use the term *salience* to refer simply to the extent that a social identity is an activated conceptual structure in the consumer's working self-concept. If a social identity is salient, it can bring to mind attitudes and behaviors consistent with the social identity (e.g., the social identity *Democrat* might be linked to perceptions of favorableness toward government-sponsored social programs). Consider an African American

consumer in a grocery store full of Caucasian consumers. His ethnic identity might be salient. If the same African American consumer were in a grocery store full of African American women, his gender (male) identity might be more salient (see McGuire et. al, 1979). The salience of his social identity might trigger attitudes useful for consumer decision making (Forehand & Deshpande, 2001). For example, if standing in front of the grocery-store magazine rack, the African American consumer might be more likely to peruse Ebony magazine in the first case and GQ in the second. In these cases, the consumer perceives a stronger link between the social identity (e.g., ethnic identity vs. gender identity) and the object (Ebony vs. GQ). According to such an analysis, the salience of a social identity may moderate the relationship between evaluative content linked to a social identity and judgments made on the basis of it.

Self-Importance

Not all social identities are alike. Consider the following example. Two consumers, Alan and Rich, both consider themselves athletes. Alan is a former high-school track star who has moved on to other things. He is now a weekend-warrior type, playing the occasional game of tennis to stay in shape. In general, he tries to eat healthy. Rich, on the other hand, is also a former high-school track star, but is a former Olympic silver medal winner in the 100-meter dash. He is a fierce competitor who anxiously awaits the opportunity to reclaim his prior days of glory. Both of these consumers probably possess *athlete* as part of their sense of who they are. But because of past experience and future aspirations, Rich's social identity as an athlete might carry more personal consumer value to him. The fact that this identity is much more engulfing to Rich may lead to a higher likelihood that many of Rich's attitudes, judgments, and consumer decisions will be based on the *athlete* aspect of his social identity. Additionally, holding all else constant, Rich is probably more likely to be more favorable toward an object (e.g., Nike brand shoes vs. Keds) that is linked to his athlete identity. Therefore, even if a social identity is salient, it might not affect a consumption decision or judgment. The consumer must identify with that social identity (i.e., the social identity must be self-important; cf. Madrigal, 2001). A consumer may be drawn to a social identity for various motivations. At one extreme, the self-importance of a social identity may manifest itself as an impression-motivated and temporary public standpoint (Schlenker, 1985). At another extreme, the social identity may serve as a phenomenological lens that deeply engulfs the individual as a powerful basis for self-definition (as it does for Rich in the example above).

Relevance

Even if a social identity is salient and self-important to the consumer, it might not be a basis for a consumer decision. The social identity must be relevant to the object that is to be evaluated or the judgment that is to be made. The object-relevance of a social identity increases the likelihood that the judgment will be thought of in terms of the social identity. For example, a consumer who perceives herself as a working mother may be more favorable to an automobile that emphasizes safety and practicality. As another example, an attitude toward affirmative action may be more relevant to a consumer's ethnic social identity if the person perceives affirmative action as a means of achieving an important identity-based goal such as insuring equitable employment (Kravitz, 1995). The perception of relevance may be momentarily heightened if the person is concerned about his or her immediate, upcoming opportunities on the job market. Therefore, active goals and current concerns may impact the relevance of the consumer judgment to the social identity and thereby motivate the consumer to consider the judgment in relationship to some social identity.

Diagnosticity

Even if a social identity is salient, self-important, and object relevant, it might not be the basis by which a consumer makes a decision, judgment, or an evaluation of a product. A theory of social identity-based consumption decision making might employ the term *evaluatively diagnostic* to refer to the extent to which the evaluative content of the social identity has sufficient clarity and specificity to inform the consumer's evaluation of the object and guide a behavioral response in some particular situation. In other words, does the social identity point a person in a meaningful direction with regard to making that judgment? For example, suppose a consumer is evaluating a consideration set of shoe brands. Hence, a judgment is called for. Further suppose that the person's social identity (e.g., Urban Youth) is highly salient at the time an attitude is generated (e.g., the person is watching a program on Black Entertainment Television®). Even if the consumer is evaluating a set of brands (e.g., Skecher's, FUBU©) that is clearly relevant to her self-important social identity, she may not be clear on which brand best embodies her Urban Youth identity. In the current terminology, her social identity in this case would be evaluatively nondiagnostic relative to evaluating the brands of shoes (cf. Feldman & Lynch, 1988). Her social identity as an Urban Youth and the fact that there is no clear identity-related norm (Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000) provides her with an inadequate basis to respond to the object (i.e., in this example, choose among the two brands).

Controlled versus Automatic Activation of a Social Category

Social categories must become activated before the evaluative content linked to them can impact consumption decisions. A future research question that arises is the difference between two conceptual variables of salience and self-importance. How distinguishable are these constructs? By conceptualizing self-importance as being made up of private and public self-motivations, the meaningfulness of this distinction is clearer. Salience and self-importance are not always indistinguishable concepts (Forehand & Deshpande, in press). The salience and self-importance of social identities should (*ceteris paribus*) tend to be more correlated for people who are more intrapsychically drawn to that category. Activation of a social identity for these people might tend to be more automatic (Bargh, 1994). The same should not be as true for those people who are drawn to an identity for impression-management concerns. Salience of a social category might not be as correlated with self-importance. This is particularly likely across different social contexts that may imply different role-appropriate (see Solomon, 1983) attitudes and behaviors. When self-importance of a social category is driven by public self-concerns, the process of social category activation might be more controlled and more responsive to cues in the social environment. This is an important feature of a possible social identity theory of consumption because it offers further insight into when consumer judgments are likely to be guided by social identity.

Iterative Processes of Social Validation

As an object, object of thought, or judgment becomes more relevant to social identity, then the evaluative content linked to that identity is more likely to impact a generated attitude toward the object. So, in any theory of social-identity-based consumption, object relevance through feedback seeking is a critical process outcome. Here, an intrapsychic versus impression-management distinction of a social identity's self-importance is again useful. Consider the following example. Think about a person who identifies with a social category based on public self-concerns (e.g. an adolescent female pledging a sorority). When the person first adopts that identity, she may be unsure of how to respond to an object that is ambiguously relevant to that identity (e.g., attitudes toward community involvement). External feedback from others becomes important at least initially. The subsequent reinforcement from others will help her validate her claim to occupy that identity. Later on, after recruiting a social identity-based attitude enough times, she may come to internalize that identity (and that judgment or attitude) as part of her private self-concept. But at least initially, she will be more susceptible to the presence, feedback, and reactions of others. In fact, she

should be more likely to proactively seek such feedback if given an opportunity to do so. Contrast this example with the person who truly identifies with a particular social category at the intrapsychic level. For example, consider an elderly aristocrat gentlemen's attitude toward his smoking jacket and pipe. He likes his smoking jacket and his pipe. It represents a deeply committed aspect of self-definition. In this case, his attitude toward these items is favorable even when he is sitting alone in the private sanctity of his favorite lounge chair. He has in a sense tuned out the social matrix in forming his attitude toward these props. Hence, the object relevance and self-meaning of these items should be less contingent on situational factors.

Introspective Self-Perceptions

Bem (1967) argued that individuals come to know their own attitudes and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and the circumstances in which the behavior occurs. Most important among those circumstances are the apparent controlling variables of that behavior. When self-importance of a social identity is driven by private self-motivations, behavior is likely to be attributed to some aspect of the person's inner state. Consider the political identity of George Stephanopoulos vs. another consumer. They might both be Democrats. That identity might be equally strong for both consumers. But Mr. Stephanopoulos might intrapsychically identify with that identity. For him, it may represent a very powerful basis for self-definition. In other words, he might have internalized the values (Rokeach, 1973) linked to that identity. However, for the other consumer, the desirability of the identity may be purely based on impression-management concerns (Schlenker, 1985). In other words, the other consumer might express identity-relevant attitudes just so that he or she can manage a Democratic impression to important audiences. In the example, the other consumer is likely to be aware that their expression of identity relevant attitudes are being driven by identity-analytic concerns (Schlenker, 1982), that is, external role-inducing forces. Conversely, social identity-based judgments that are intrapsychically driven are more likely to be internally attributed. This has powerful implications for interventions derived from a theory of social identity-based consumer judgments. For example, suppose that a kid decides to smoke marijuana because members of some peer group (which represents an important social identity) are also smoking marijuana. How should that be thought of? Some models of judgment and decision making that do not adequately distinguish between intrapsychic and impression-management components may erroneously assume that this type of social influence is normative. A fundamental point is then missed in that this behavior is misidentified. More importantly, attempting to

modify those kinds of behaviors might be misguided. Interventions based on conceptualizations that do not explicitly consider that the judgment is based on identity-relevant concerns might not be as successful.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to expand researchers view of the self-concept by explicitly considering the various ways that psychology has conceptualized it. Several difficult conceptual issues associated with conceptualizing the self-concept were brought up. Those issues included how to define the self-concept, formulating where it resides and determining its functions and how it changes over time. With respect to these issues, various self-concept paradigms in psychology were briefly discussed. The key assumptions of these paradigms were brought to the forefront in order to establish a concise dialogue that could be useful in helping researchers think about choosing a particular paradigm for use in their research. From this analysis, it was argued that a social identity perspective for consumer research is both a useful and underutilized perspective in consumer behavior. Such a perspective has aspects that nicely span the various self-concept paradigms in psychology. Therefore, several key factors that may be important in a theory of social identity-based consumption decision making were described. These factors included the salience, self-importance, relevance, and diagnosticity of a social identity to a particular judgment. Additionally, several other future issues associated with adopting such an approach were also described. Hopefully, with a keen eye toward some of the major issues discussed here, a social-identity approach to consumption decision making and consumer judgments will lead to fruitful future research in consumer behavior that involves the self-concept.

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