THE RED QUEEN IN CONSUMER WONDERLAND: SELF-CONCEPT = SELF-IDENTITY = SELF-IMAGE = IDENTITY, JUST BECAUSE CONSUMER RESEARCHERS SAY SO?

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Introduction

Over the past centuries we have seen a shift from a prominence of product utility to an emphasis on the experiential aspects of consumption. Material goods have similarly undergone a change in this process. At first they served to satisfy basic needs, then they became social difference markers, and in contemporary consumer societies they also function as props in idealized images and dreams. This development has become possible due to the increased readiness of consumers to read meanings into consumer goods that go much beyond the tangible presence of the material objects.

One often-acclaimed capacity of goods is that they support consumers in constructing their identity and in providing them with a sense of who they are (e.g., Kellner, 1992). There is a substantial body of literature that upholds this claim, but in many cases it is not stated very clearly what actually is meant when saying that goods support a person's *identity* or *sense of self*. Often no differences between terms like individuality, identity, self, self-concept, self-identity, etc. are made, and frequently they are used interchangeably. One cannot actually blame consumer researchers for having been negligent as even within disciplines like sociology, social psychology or psychology a similar confusion prevails. For example, Bills (1981) wrote:

> Until a common definition is agreed upon, self-concept researchers will each be like the Red Queen in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1968) who insisted that when she used a word it meant exactly what she intended it to mean (p. 25).

A few years have passed since this comment has been written and it would be wrong to say that in the meantime no progress has been made in arriving at a common definition. However, due to the theoretical nature of the construct and the large number of disciplines that employ it, it will always remain difficult to find a precise and comprehensive definition. Nevertheless, in the following an attempt is made to untangle the various meanings that are attributed to the various terms. This will then provide the groundwork to go into more detail and to describe the multifaceted relationships that exist between consumption, a person's self-concept and identity.

Why isn't there an easy definition?

The words self and identity carry a lot of colloquial meaning and have been a pervasive theme in recent years in modern Western societies. "Finding one's identity", " identity crisis" and "self-actualisation" are only a few of the buzz words that reflect the popularity of the theme. The numerous self-help books, magazine articles and talk shows on issues concerning the self and identity reflect the heightened interest in the topic as well. Despite

their popularity, the terms and their derivations still lack a precise definition. This is not surprising if for instance one takes into account the diverse purposes one can attach to the two concepts and the differences in academic training of those who employ the two terms (Bills, 1981; Kössler, 1989). More precisely speaking, it makes a difference whether a biologist, a psychologist or an anthropologist talks about the self or about identity. Even within one single discipline, the various methodological approaches that bear upon the ontological question influence the definitions of the two concepts and what there is to know about them.

In a recent edited volume by Richard Stevens (1996) with the title *Understanding the Self* this is demonstrated very nicely: Researchers adhering to a social constructionist tradition celebrate the diversity of the self through cultural influence, language and discourse (Bruner, 1990; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In contrast, biological psychologists see the self as a subject of evolutionary processes and accentuate continuity and the universal nature of self (e.g., Baars, 1988). Cognitive experimentalists on the other hand stress the importance of social factors and the cultural context in understanding the self (e.g., Hewstone, 1989). Experientialists do not deny this, however they emphasize the freedom and the capacity everyone has to construct and to create the kind of person they want to be aside from social influences (e.g., May, 1983). Taking a psychodynamic perspective, the self becomes less of an entity that can be assessed primarily through conscious actions. Instead, it is viewed as essentially fragmented, as something that can only be experienced partially and that may altogether just be a defensive illusion (e.g., Frosh, 1989).

Another reason why the two terms self and identity are so difficult to define is given by Baumeister (1986). He reminds us that both terms are concepts or social constructions that refer to something that does not really exist. It is however still useful to employ such concepts since they describe important parts of human experience and behaviour. Individuals make use of them to grasp phenomena that really do exist like inner thoughts, feelings and desires. Nobody however can claim to have ever seen something like an inner self. One can only take the real experienced phenomena as evidence for it. In the consumer literature, there is plenty of evidence for the relevance of self and identity in the life of consumers. In the following section, the existing literature regarding this issue is reviewed. It will be pointed out how the terms self, self-concept, self-image, identity, self-identity and the like are used and often mixed up and used interchangeably.

Do we still need to bother?

As has been pointed out at the beginning, self and identity are popular themes in contemporary Western societies. However, this has not always been so. For the first time,

these themes became popular when Erik Erikson invented the term identity crisis in the 1940s. Following that a large number of studies, books and articles on the self and identity were published, and still half of a century later the topic has not lost its attractiveness. Why this is so becomes obvious if one looks at the historic development of people's understanding of who they are.

In Medieval Europe there was no need for people to loose much thought over issues of identity. A person's identity was simply a given, defined for the individual by the social structure and by the institutions. If born as the son of a miller, one was to become a miller oneself. If born as the son of a shoemaker, one was to become a shoemaker one day. For women life was equally predetermined. Daughters were given away in marriage to men who were chosen by their parents. Or otherwise if no suitable partner could be found, they were sent to a convent to become nuns. The Catholic Church, serving as a guideline for life and furnishing people with meaning, provided the ideological consensus holding everything together. All of this started to change with the event of the Protestant reformation. The new ideas introduced by the reformation began to dissolve the existing ideological consensus. There was no longer only one truth to believe in and only one worldview that could be claimed to be the rightful one. People were given the option to choose.

At about the same time, another event occurred that equally upset the old social order - the rise of the middle class. Social mobility was now no longer a dream. It became possible to actively change one's social status and social rank by one's own efforts and with that one's predestined identity. Thus, social rank was no longer the main determining factor of identity. Instead personal achievement increasingly substituted social rank and by the Romantic era it had succeeded social rank as being the most important component of identity.

The next historic development that had profound effects on identity was the process of industrialisation during the Victorian period. The industrialisation was coupled with increasing urbanisation and as a result social relations became looser and less intimate. Public life, which still had played a considerable role in the Romantic era, lost much of its significance for personal fulfilment. As an alternative source for gratification, people retreated to the private sphere and there external opinions, rules and guidelines were of little notable consequences. Hence, people felt less obligated to follow socially prescribed opinions and convictions and began to freely choose their own values and beliefs. For the project of identity this meant that more and more components of it could be self-determined. In addition to personality issues, now also values, beliefs and the setting of personal priorities became a matter of free choice.

Being able to freely choose one's identity was however by no means only perceived as positive. The possibility of self-crafting an identity was exciting but at the same time also

very frightening. On the one hand, it meant that external constrains were removed and one was free to choose and to go one's own way. On the other hand, this freedom brought about the obligation to make important decisions for oneself (Fromm, 1969/1941). Many experienced this experienced as overwhelming, since it is much easier to be directed by firm guidelines than to figure out for one self what one really wants and to decide upon one's own fate. A symptomatic aspect of the late nineteenth century was that people started to worry about whether they had made the right decisions and whether they were the kind of person they should be. Did they possess the 'right' personality traits, abilities, skills and social manners that were expected of them? How could they gain acceptance of and approval for their chosen identities? As a result of these uncertainties, anxiety about self-image coupled with a strong appetite for self-expression characterised daily life. Obvious signs of the insecurities were an increasing number of people suffering from neurasthenia - which is the loss of a balanced self - and a preoccupation with the selection of socially acceptable clothes (Ewen, 1988; Grodin and Lindlof, 1996).

Entering the 20th century and with that modernity, concerns with identity issues didn't lessen. On the contrary, they intensified. This was due to the effects the new mass media like movie theatres, television and advertising had on identity. The most notable outcome was that individuals started to use the images portrayed in the films, television shows and adverts as models; they became the material out of which people crafted their identities. The attractiveness of the images resulted from the actuality that they offered specific modes of life many people aspired to construct. Thus, the main effect of the new mass media was that it exposed people to ever expanding and changing life-possibilities. It provided them with new ideas of how identities could be constructed and out of which kind of components and combination of components it could possibly be made up of.

In modern consumer societies one does not longer have to decide between dressing to please others or dressing to please oneself; both is possible. Consumers if they wish are also free to use the symbols, signs and images that feed their dreams and fantasies to narcissistically please themselves (Hirschman, 1980). Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen summarised the condition of modern life as follows: Today there is no fashion; there are only fashions. There are no rules, only choices. And today, everyone can be anyone. In conjunction with the hedonistic culture and mass consumption, the mixing of codes is favoured and in the long run, fixed status groups that could once be distinguished by their clothes, leisure activities, consumer goods and body dispositions no longer exists. The modern man thus faces the problem to constantly define and invent himself in trying to make sense out of life in the new urban spaces and within the consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991). An easy way out is to construct one's identity by copying the suggested mass mediated identities in that one purchases the products that were employed

in the creation of such images. As Baumeister points out, this fosters the belief that "identity follows naturally from the possession of items, implying that constructing the self is as easy as choosing what toothpaste or car to buy" (1986, p. 91). de Certeau (1984) offers a less pessimistic view. He argues that today's consumer take the symbols offered to them and subvert them according to their own ideas. The mass media and other "leaders" may diffuse the technology of how to use the sign; they cannot however control its usage (compare also Hirschman, 1986). This implies that the modern individual is highly aware that her identity is self-constructed and that she therefore can modify and re-construct it at will. This means that new components can be added; others can be adjusted, changed or dropped as one chooses. Modern identities are thus much more mobile, multiple, personal and self-reflective. Not only the numbers of the freely chosen components have risen, but also the total number of components that constitute identity. The down side of this development is that the modern individual, in addition to the necessity of choice, now also faces the problem of how to keep identity solid and stable (Baumeister, 1986, Kellner, 1992).

By the end of the 20th century, with the emergence of the post-industrialised society, the period of modernity slowly comes to an end to be gradually replaced by a new era. This new era is most often referred to as late modernity or postmodernity. At the horizon of this new time period we can already see a number of new developments appearing that seem to impact people's understanding of self at large. It is too early to tell exactly what the outcome of these new forces on identity will be since we live in the middle of this transformation period. Within academia at least two positions are advocated. One side maintains that issues around identity are still as acute as ever, just appearing in a different gestalt, but other voices claim that identity is disappearing and hence we do not longer need to worry about it. Poststructualists for instance declare that

> subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society, an overdetermined illusion that one is really a substantial subject, that one really has a fixed identity. […] In postmodern culture the subject has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, [it is] fragmented and disconnected […] The decentred postmodern self no longer possesses the depth, substantiality, and coherence that was the ideal and occasional achievements of the modern self (Kellner, 1992, p. 143-144).

A similar view is put forward by Gergen (1991). He argues that the modern belief about the self is not applicable to contemporary life any more since the institutions that it supports do no longer exist. He argues that people today are much less bound to their geographical homes then they have ever been before. This has multiplied their exposure to different worldviews, ways of life, political and religious ideologies, cultures and people from all around the globe. As a result, the self becomes populated and saturated with a varied number of voices, opinions and potentials for being. These invite individuals to play a number of different roles, which make it increasingly difficult to upheld a sense of coherent

identity. According to Gergen, "the fully saturated self becomes no self at all" (p. 7), and hence one's understanding of self dissolves in a world of perceptivity. Adding to the abundance of perspectives to which people are exposed to today, are the new communication technologies. Thanks to satellite, electronic and digitalised transmission technologies, we can now receive news from all corners of the globe within very short time periods. The Internet allows people to communicate with others that sit at a terminal thousands of miles away within seconds. We can "meet" all kinds of people in cyberspace, exchange ideas, inform us about their culture, perspectives and beliefs, or discuss current political or other type of events and learn about the 'native' point of view. According to Gergen (1991), this exposure challenges the validity of a singular perspective and undermines the hegemony of rational choice. As rational choice is the basis on which the modern identity is built, this threatens the very notion of self that has endured during modern periods and hence destabilises the self.

Another effect of mediated communication is that it alters the interaction between individuals and with that the experience of oneself in relation to others. In cyber cafes for example, many people sit next to each other in the same room. However, instead of communicating with one another, they chat with someone sitting at a terminal at the other end of the globe - or maybe just with a person at a computer across the room. In cyberspace, it is possible to pretend to be somebody else, to live out a dream image, to become the person of one's idealised fantasies, or to play around with different images of the self. Thus, people are no longer tied to physical space and the constitution of self quite literally happens on an electronic pathway. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and combined with the plurality of supplied perspectives and choices to a feeling of *decenteredness* (Gergen, 1991; Grodin and Lindlof, 1996). To summarise this genre of arguments, owing to the social processes in a rationalised, bureaucratised, mediatised and consumerised mass society, we can no longer talk about the modern autonomous and self-constituting subject who possesses a stable identity fixed by a cross-time continuity. Identities have become more and more unstable, fragile and fragmented. The multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships pull the individual in numerous directions and thus the very concept of an "authentic self" becomes obsolete and consequently identity is disappearing.

Kellner (1992) opposes this view. He argues that instead of giving up on the concept altogether, one should view contemporary identity as an extension of the multiple and freely chosen identities of modernity. Rather than disappearing, identity still exists, it is just reconstructed and redefined. Kellner criticises that most postmodern theorists like Baudrillard, Lyotard and Foucault have not undertaken a systematic examination of actual texts and practices of popular culture. Upon analysing such texts de facto, Kellner concluded that one finds little support for the predictions made by postmodern theories

like for example the absence of specific contents, values and ideology. His analysis shows that identity in contemporary society can still be interpreted as an ideological construct that reproduces dominant capitalist and masculist values and modes of life. Kellner does not deny that postmodern identities are more multiple, transitory and open, that they are subject to new determinations and forces and that these forces amount to an overwhelming variety of subject positions and possibilities of identity and hence result in highly unstable identities. Kellner describes the postmodern identity as "a freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images, and activities" (p. 158). This however is not an argument to call for the disintegration of identity. While it is true that on the one hand inexorable possibilities exist, on the other hand an abundance of material for restructuring one's identity is also provided. The market becomes the place where all the possible selves can be created with the support of the products provided. This process is facilitated by the fragmentation of signs, which is another characteristic of the postmodern condition (Venkatesh, 1998). The fragmentation of signs is the disconnection of the signifier from the signified. This allows consumer to play with the signifiers and to use them for the purpose of re-signification. Marketable self-images thus can be presented by acquiring consumer products. In other words, under the postmodern condition, the market becomes the place where fragmented selves can be realised (Firat, 1992). A similar view is expressed by Thompson and Tambyah (1998). They expressed that identities in contemporary consumer societies can better be conceptualised "as a constellation of consumption practices that coalesce around an ethos of flexibility manifested through cosmopolitan tastes, adaptability to diversity and the ability to enact a diverse array of identity positions" (p. 58).

The beginning stages of this development were already felt in modernity. The modern self however was still troubled by anxieties over the necessity of choice and the instability this caused. Individuals were concerned with a number of "how-questions": How do I construct identity? How do I gain social recognition and approval? How do I keep my identity solid and stable? The postmodern self in contrast has come to accept the shifting nature of identity and is relatively unconcerned about shifts, transformations, and dramatic changes. The challenge consists of how to avoid commitments and how to keep one's options open (Bauman, 1996). Thus, the construction of identity in Postmodernity is still a not unproblematic task. The difficulties people confront are just of a different nature. The narrative of self for instance needs to be constructed in circumstances in which personal appropriation is influenced by forces that push towards standardisation and homogenisation. This affects the project of identity insofar as it undermines the possibility of differentiation. Television gives rise to homogenisation since millions of people are subjected every day to identical experiences by passively consuming the same television shows. Advertising is another force against which consumers have to assert their identities.

Even though on the one hand advertisements offer a vast number of possibilities for identity, on the other hand they encourage standardisation since their ultimate objective is to sell mass-produced products. Thus, today's individuals are challenged to constitute and reconstitutes their identities in the unordered order of generalised fashion (Baumeister, 1986).

In conclusion, by looking at the historic development of identity formation, it becomes obvious why issues evolving around the self and identity are such pervasive themes today. A few centuries ago a person's understanding of the self was a passive and well defined process based on assigned components or components that could be achieved via a single transformation (Baumeister's type I and II). Today, one's identity is no longer bestowed based on societal values, norms and rules but needs to be self-created and achieved. This process is much more complex and difficult since it demands frequent redefinition and choice (Baumeister's type III, IV and V). Thus, when Erik Erikson invented the term identity crisis in the 1940s, it was overwhelmingly well received since the phenomena already existed but nobody had specified or given it a name yet. More than half a century later, the topic is still high on the agenda, but for different reasons. Above two of the reasons have been explained in more detail, one on pragmatic grounds and one on theoretical grounds. The pragmatic reason is that individuals still struggle over issues of self and identity, even though the specifics of their difficulties have changed. Today, identities are more or less hybrid consumer identities and the commodified consumer can be described as one who creatively uses the resources of the consumer culture to construct his or her identity (Thompson and Tambyah, 1998). The theoretical reason concerns the discussions within academia. There the topic is intensively being deliberated because of the voices that declare that the entire concept of identity is about to vanish into the "postmodern scene" (Kellner, 1992, p. 144). As however has also been pointed out, 'real' life events seem to disprove this thesis. Self and identity still appear to matter and the place where they are realised in a society, which is dominated by the commodity form is the market.

Establishing relevance

Having, doing, and being can be regarded as the three basic modes of living since *being* is not possible without *having* and also not without *doing*. On the most basic level, we need to eat, dress, live and sleep somewhere. Thus, we need to have certain objects that enable us to exist. This does not necessarily imply that all individuals place the same emphasis on each of the three basic modes of existence, but all three are necessary. Exemplary of this are the views of Sartre, Marx and Fromm. For Sartre (1943), the most fundamental of the

three modes is *having*. He believes that one can only know who one is by looking at what one has: "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (p. 145). Marx's focus in contrast is on *doing*. He advocated that people could best actualise their selves by being involved in meaningful work. Since, however, in a capitalistic system workers do not own the products of their labour, they are robbed of their very selves (Marx, 1848/ 1964). Fromm emphasized *being*. For him the only (desired) role of possessions is to facilitate being as a way to provide the means for personal growth and development (Fromm, 1956; 1976). Without elaborating on the three underlying philosophies any further, the important point to note here is that all three writers view having, doing and being as three interrelated facts of life (compare Belk, 1988). They all agree that objects can and are used by individuals to create and to maintain a sense of self, albeit they do not agree on the weight that should be given to each of the three modes.

Empirical evidence for this interrelationship has been provided by a number of studies conducted by marketers and consumer researchers. The results show that objects contribute to and reflect our sense of identity, they aid in the process of identity development and during times of transitions, they help us to present desired self-images in certain situations and to express social relationships. At times they may even contribute to *flow*, an intense experiential state of enjoyment that is intrinsically rewarding and sought simply for the pleasure it brings. Hence, in a consumer society, objects (*having*) seem to be an important source of meaning with which we construct (*doing*) our lives (*being*).

Based on this evidence, Belk (1988) formulated the concept of the extended self. The extended self, simply stated, is the self plus possessions. The term possession in that equation refers not only to material objects but also includes body parts, internal processes, ideas, experiences, persons and places. Empirically it has been shown that the greater the attachment to any of these belongings, the more likely they will be part of the extended self. Not all individuals however are equally likely to incorporate possessions into the extended self. Those who regard possessions as being important for their sense of self are more likely to do so (Sivadas and Venkatesh, 1995).

Likely reasons for attachment are that an object is symbolic of an important person, relationship or event in life that existed, happened or will occur in the past, present or future. This is true for both men and women with the only difference that high attachment objects for men are more likely to reflect accomplishments and mastery and for women social ties. Another characteristic of strong attachment objects is that they are more likely to be associated with positive emotions, individuals are more satisfied with them and are more likely to care for them and to display them (Schultz Kleine, 1998; Schultz, Kleine and Kernan, 1989; Sivadas and Venkatesh, 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Considering that individuals generally exhibit a certain bias towards anything that is related to the self,

the above observation that individuals associate positive emotions with high attachment objects and are more likely to take care of them provides further support for the notion that such objects actually are part of the extended self.

Further evidence that the self is implicated by our possessions is provided by Schultz Kleine, Kleine and Allen (1995), Grayson (1996) and Muniz (1997). They found that individuals utilize certain possessions in narrating their life stories and in defining their identities. Characteristic of such self-defining possessions is that they reflect personal uniqueness and interrelationships with important others. They can however also stand for the kind of person I once was but am no longer, or for the kind of person I am not and don't want to be. The latter category might include objects like unwanted gifts, objects that remind oneself of the prototypical user with whom one doesn't want to be associated, or possessions that remind oneself of an earlier bygone life story. Thus, it can be said that objects that help to define the self are like 'narrative storehouses'; they validate the experiences one has taken part in and they make time more concrete. In accordance with the findings reported above, it was found that affection is only expressed towards those products or brands to which a positive meaningful self-connection exists.

Another well-known study that indicates the importance of possessions in defining identity is Goffman's (1961) book *Asylums*. He showed how people can be stripped of their identities by taking away all or most of their personal belongings and how this identity can be replaced by one that fits the institutionally appropriate one. Sayre and Horne (1996) investigated disaster victims who had lost most of their possessions. They observed that the victims, in an attempt to preserve their identities, initially transferred the symbolic meanings that connected them with the lost objects to human relationships and ideological symbols of completeness. In the process of replacing the destroyed possessions, the shopping experience helped disaster victims to recreate their identities by lending new meaning and by providing the opportunity to build new self-object connections.

In summarizing the results presented up to this point, it can be stated that the essence of possessions that implicate the self resides not in the objects themselves but in the relationships that exists between them and their owners. In other words, the meaning of objects is inherently related to personal perception and interpretation and arises from an interaction between the objects, their owners and the context in which they are used. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have put it, "things tell us who we are, not in words but by embodying our intentions" (p. 91). As our understanding of who we are changes over the lifetime, the intentions that are embodied within our possessions change as well. How this actually manifests itself is explored in the next section.

THE MEANING OF GOODS THROUGHOUT THE LIFE CYCLE

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) assessing the meaning individuals of all ages attribute to their most favoured possession noted that possessions throughout the life cycle "are used as symbols in a self-development process of becoming a unique identity while at the same time connecting with others and participating in one's culture through shared meaning" (p. 359). As explained in chapter three, the formation of identity begins during adolescence with an extended period of exploration. If one asked young people during an early stage of this phase (approx. ages 10 to 12) to describe themselves, they are likely to say something like the following: My name is Peter, I live in a house on Kings' Boulevard, in a room together with my little sister, I have a dog, roller skates, and a CD collection (c.f. Belk, 1988; Montemayor and Eisen, 1977). A great proportion of how these young adolescents see themselves is related to their possessions. A few years later, if asked the same question, they will tell you more about their characteristics and abilities: My name is Peter, I am a good soccer player, I like to play the guitar, I am smart, and I have lots of friends. Consumer goods during this phase also play an important role. The favourite possessions of adolescents at this stage mostly consist of items that reflect their abilities and characteristics, and of commodities that they can manipulate and control (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). For Peter his favourite possessions might be his soccer shoes, his guitar, a reward he received for the best science project from his high school, and the pictures of the past camping trips with his friends. Hence, identity during this life stage is mainly built around potential roles and reflected as such in one's most liked possessions.

During young adulthood a preference shift can be observed. Favoured goods now represent more concrete future plans, and therefore the specific kind of identity a person is striving for (Olson, 1985). If this phase of aspiration is completed, in most cases a person has achieved an identity. This identity is likely to be reflected in the various social roles one plays, e.g. at work, at home raising the children, in the neighbourhood, in clubs or other organizations one belongs to. Consumer goods during this stage are used for the purpose of demonstration. They reflect one's work or role identity and are symbols of one's achievement, and of who one is or wants to represent (Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995).

With increasing age, the importance of social roles declines and individuals begin to re-define their identities. This also becomes obvious in a changed meaning they attribute to goods. Elderly people are more likely to favour possessions that are symbolic of their lived experiences and of their identity over the lifetime. During old age another phenomenon can be observed. Individuals sensing their mortality strive toward preserving their identity beyond the point of death. They begin to hand over photographs, diaries, biographies, furniture, jewellery and other self-signifying belongings to people of a younger generation.

Hence, consumer goods during this phase serve to keep one's identity alive in the memory of other people (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995, Hirschman, 1990; Olson, 1985).

The end of a particular life stage and the beginning of a new one generally is spanned by a transitional phase and often marked by special events and rituals. The purpose of rituals is to facilitate the movement between two stages. It allows individuals to experiment with new social roles, to practice role performance and to gain more confidence. Because of their communicative powers, consumer goods and services are frequently used to support this process. They aid to explore possible future selves and make them more concrete, plausible and real. Examples of this are provided by McAlexander and Schouten (1989) who investigated the functional aspects of haircuts during the phase of role exploration in adolescence. Schouten (1991) showed the role of cosmetic surgery during life transitions, and Friese (1997) the role of wedding dresses in the process of getting married. During less enjoyable life periods, e.g., when getting divorced or when disengaging from a subculture, possessions have also been shown to fulfil an important function, either to reconstruct or to let go of an identity (see McAlexander, 1991; Hughes and Degher, 1998).

In summarizing the above findings, it can be stated that consumer goods contribute quite extensively to our understanding of who we are: They help in the process of exploring and constructing an identity; they can be used for the purpose of demonstrating one's identity or for the purpose of reminding oneself of who one has been during the various stages of one's life. Further, they support the re-formation of one's identity during transitional phases, and before death they aid to achieve immortality by preserving one's identity in the minds of those who live on.

PRODUCT SYMBOLISM

Levy (1959) was among the first who advocated the idea that people buy products not only for their functions but also for their personal and social meanings. According to his view, modern goods are psychological 'things' symbolic of individual attributes, personal goals and social patterns. He predicts that individuals will be especially inclined to purchase an item, if the symbolic meaning it conveys is deemed to be appropriate. This means that a product "joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way consumers think about themselves" (p. 410). Thus, if Levy's prediction is correct, consumers should lean towards those products that symbolically fit their goals, feelings and self-definitions. Essential for such product/self-image matches to occur is that within a particular culture or sub-culture a shared understanding of the symbolic nature and meaning of consumer goods exits. First evidence that such a shared understanding exists has been provided by Levy himself. He

could show that darker colours were generally interpreted by consumers as being symbolic of respectability, lighter colours as being symbolic of softness, youthfulness and femininity, red as a symbol of excitement and provocation, and yellow and brown as a sign of manliness. Since Levy's 1959 article a number of studies have been conducted to further unravel the symbolism that consumers attribute to certain products. The main results of these studies are presented next.

DECODING AND ENCODING OF PRODUCT MEANING

According to results of a study conducted by Belk, Bahn and Mayer (1982), the decoding and encoding of product meaning seems to be part of the socialization process in a consumer culture. Already sixth graders are able to consistently recognize consumption cues and to draw social implications of consumption choices. Considering the variety of products that have been found to elicit shared social meanings, this result is not surprising. Consumers seem to draw inferences about others or convey messages about themselves by using almost any product cue provided. Among the products that have been found to elicit shared social meanings are clothing, homes and cars, eyeglasses, cosmetics, deodorants and other personal care products, style of grooming, choice of alcoholic beverages and recreational drugs, the usage of regular or instant coffee, books and magazines, leisure products and recreational activities, mode of travelling, luggage, retail store patronage, cigarette smoking and the choice of restaurants (e.g., Belk, 1978, 1981; see Belk, Bahn and Mayer, 1982 for a review; Holman, 1980, Kirchler and Piesslinger, 1992).

The kinds of inferences that are drawn based on displayed consumer goods include both sociodemographic characteristics like age, gender and social status and personality characteristics. For example, if a person provides some wealth related consumption cues like taking the plane instead of travelling by bus, he is not only perceived as a person with a higher income, a higher occupational status and a higher education, but also as more likeable, more successful, more interesting, more generous, more responsible, more attractive and more aggressive (Belk, 1978). Other examples of inferred personality characteristics based on product usage are provided by McKeachie (1952) and Calder and Burnkrant (1977). They examined the influence of cosmetics on impression formation. Women wearing lipstick were perceived by men as more frivolous, introspective, anxious, conscientious and interested in the opposite sex than women not wearing lipstick. If a woman was observed to buy Revlon mascara as compared to another brand, other women viewed her as being more popular and competent.

Automobiles and homes were also shown to provide certain cues (Belk, Mayer and Bahn, 1981). Size and newness were used by observers to make inferences of social class,

occupation and personality characteristics of the owner. Large houses and automobiles were taken as an indication that owners were less sociable but more successful; from newness it was inferred that the product owners were younger, less sociable and more successful.

An additional aspect of symbolic product meaning is that they cause others to react toward the owner or user of the product in a particular manner. For instance, individuals wearing high status clothing like a suit and a tie were found to be more successful in getting people to sign a petition than people dressed more casually (Suedfeld, Bochner and Metas, 1971; Darley and Cooper, 1972). Similarly, newer and more expensive cars also elicited more favourable reactions. If stalled at a stoplight, newer and more expensive cars received fewer horn-honking responses than older and less expensive cars (Doob and Gross, 1968).

Hence, the necessary condition allowing consumers to match products with their self-image can be regarded as fulfilled. There is sufficient empirical evidence showing that a general public agreement on the symbolism of products exists and that people react to that symbolism in a consistent manner. Now we can consider the question of whether consumers indeed lean towards those products that provide a symbolical fit with how they see themselves. The short answer to this question is: Yes, consumers do have a preference for those products that are congruent with their self-image. However, as will be shown next, the relationship that exists between a person's self-image and the image of a product is more complex than this.

PRODUCT/SELF-IMAGE CONGRUENCE

… in many ways the car defines much of what is American. It is symbolic of our affluence, our technical leadership, our commitment to freedom and individualism. And what is true for our society is largely true for each of us as individual members of that society. We buy cars that fit with our self-image, that say something about us, that say something to us (Douglas Banik, DMB&B Chicago, in Solomon, 1992, p. 167).

Support for the above assertion has been provided by a number of studies. Birdwell (1968) and Grubb and Hupp (1968) for example found a statistically significant relationship between how car owners perceive themselves and how they view their cars. According to Birdwell, this relationship appears to be most pronounced for owners of prestige and medium-priced cars and lowest for economic compacts. A likely reason for the latter finding might be that financial limitations restrict consumers in buying a car that is truly expressive of them. Grubb and Hupp, in addition to investigating product/self-image congruence also assessed whether stereotypical car and car owner images exist. They found that both VW and Pontiac GTO owners have definite ideas about the kind of image their own car and the respective other car portrays and about the kind of person who drives that car. Moreover, their own self-image closely resembled the stereotypical image that others have about them.

In both of the above studies the focus was on the *global* self-perception of consumers. This approach has been criticized because it does not take into account that the self-concept is a multidimensional construct, disguising the fact that particular aspects of a person's self-concept could actually be more influential in predicting product choice. As a result of this criticism, a number of studies were conducted that explored the relationship between product image and more specific aspects of the self-concept. Dolich (1969), Landon (1974) and Ross (1979) for example investigated whether actual and ideal self-concepts would be more useful in predicting product/ self-image congruence. Dolich and Ross tested whether a match exists between actual and ideal self-image and most and least preferred brands of beer, cigarettes, soap, toothpaste, magazines and automobiles. For all products they found a closer match between actual self-image and the image of the most preferred brand. The least congruence was found between least preferred product brands and ideal self-images. Thus, ideal self-images appeared to be more influential when rejecting a brand or product. Landon measured the influence of actual and ideal self-images on purchase intentions for a variety of products. He however obtained no consistent results. Whether the actual or the ideal self-image was more prominent was dependent on product type and individual differences. For women the ideal self-image was overall more important for expressing purchase intentions than for men, and vice versa men associated their purchase intentions

more strongly with their actual rather than their ideal self-image. Hence, the relationship between self-image and product image is more complex than was initially assumed.

A third aspect of the self-concept that has been investigated within this context is the situated self. The situated self has been defined as the 'meaning self' that a consumer wishes to present to others in a particular situation (Lee, 1990). The situated self is likely to play a more important role for products that are only occasionally consumed and displayed because it can be assumed that individuals are motivated to create the most socially desirable situated self that is available in any given situation due to their general tendency to strive towards self-concept maintenance and enhancement. Empirically this was tested by Turner (1980) and Kleine, Schultz-Kleine and Kernan (1993). Turner found that the situational self-image is more important than the actual self-image in predicting the preference order for beer. Hence, when ordering a drink in a pub or a bar a consumer is more likely to order the kind of drink everybody else is ordering or the one that best suits the momentary occasion and situation. Kleine et al. evoked a very situation dependent social *identity* schema in their subjects by asking them about their *identity* as an athlete. Their results show that individuals view their possessions through the perspective afforded by a particular *identity* rather than through their global self-understanding. Kleine et al. concluded, "we are attracted to products that are consistent with, and that enable the enactment of, the various social *identities* which make up our sense of self" (p. 209, italics added). This conclusion however overlooks that a fairly strong self-image/product image congruence has been found for automobiles. Automobiles have to be used by most people across a variety of situations. The average consumer does not have one car to pick up his girl-friend for a date, another car to drive to work, a third car to visit his parents and a fourth to meet his friends at the sports club. Cars are also less interchangeable and bought less frequently than athletic clothing. Therefore, situational self-images are likely to be less important for car, housing or other more expensive purchases and more important when buying consumer products that are used within a specific context. A person's global sense of self is likely to be of greater relevance when purchasing goods that are used across a variety of contexts. The significance of actual and ideal self-images on product choice is more difficult to determine since gender and other personal difference variables seem to exert an influence. Overall it can however be concluded that consuming behaviour has a lot to do with how consumers perceive themselves. In reviewing the literature Belk, Bahn and Mayer (1982) and Sirgy (1982) reported that a perceived product/self-image match, frequently also leading to purchase intentions, has been found for quite a large number of products. These include healthcare-, grooming- and cleaning products, beer, leisure products and activities, clothing and accessories, food products, cigarettes, home appliances, magazines, homes and home furnishing.

ADAPTING OR MATCHING?

Some authors doubt the often-suggested cause and effect relationship that the self-concept influences purchase decisions. They argue that another explanation for the detected relationship between self-image and product image might be that consumers adapt their self-image to the product image after having purchased an item. One could however hold against this kind of reasoning that in a number of studies a link between product/self-image congruence and purchase intention has been reported. On theoretical grounds, arguments for either position can be found namely by drawing on the self-congruity theory developed by Sirgy (1986) and the self-concept theory of behaviour and marketing research formulated by Grubb and Grathwohl (1967).

Sirgy developed his theory to explain self-concept processes like self-evaluation, self-perception, self-concept change, self-generalisation, etc. All of these processes are motivated by the first order principle to maintain and to enhance the self-concept. Self-congruity is reached if a match between an observed self-image outcome (e.g., a compliment for a new outfit) and a self-expectancy is perceived (the anticipation that one looks good in the new outfit). If the comparison is guided by the self-consistency motive, then a simple comparison between self-image outcome and self-expectancy occurs. If however the comparison is driven by the self-esteem motive, then the relative goodness of fit between the two is compared. A better than expected outcome leads to self-enhancement and a worse than expected outcome to self-debilitation. Self-expectancy thus serves as a reference value against which the observed self-image outcome is compared.

The above used example implies that a self-concept maintenance or enhancement has taken place via interaction processes - the consumer has received a compliment from another person. The same outcome may however also result from intra-action processes (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). Instead of receiving a compliment, the consumer might also see a mirror image of himself in a shop window, or he might sit in a café contemplating about the reaction of his girl friend to his new outfit. If he is satisfied with what he sees in the shop window or if he imagines his girl friend to be happy with his choice of clothing, this might also result in self-esteem enhancement. Interaction processes however seem far more important than intra-action processes for maintaining or enhancing a particular self-image (or *an identity*) as has been shown by Kleine et al. (1993). They found that the salience of a particular *identity* derives from social rather then internal psychological factors like connections to friends and family and media exposure. In other words, a particular *identity* is likely to be more central to the existence of a person; the more external connections exist that support that *identity*. Based on these findings, Kleine et al. concluded that simply having possessions is not enough; what matters is the reaction of other people to the use and display of these possessions.

With the above theoretical positions in mind, we can now turn back to the issue of whether it seems more likely that products are purchased to match an already achieved self-image or whether consumers adapt their self-image to fit a product image after they have purchased an item. The suggested answer is that both explanations can be correct depending on the underlying motivation that is driving a purchase. If purchase decisions are based on the self-consistency motive, then consumers might be more likely to purchase products that are congruent with their self-image. If self-esteem enhancement is the main motivating factor, then consumers might be more likely to purchase products that reflect an ideal image of themselves, hence an image they yet have to adapt to. This aim however can only be achieved if the desired ideal state is within a reasonable distance from the consumer's actual state; otherwise the adaptation process is likely to fail. If a consumer's self-perception is too far away from a product image then a) it will be difficult for the consumer to identify with the product via intra-action processes, and b) also interaction processes will not lead to the desired ends in that other people's reactions are likely to miss the mark. It is easy to see how such attempts to achieve an ideal state can be potentially harmful to an individual. This problematic aspect of consuming behaviour is further explored in chapter five. For the moment, the interim conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that ordinary consumption is more likely to be based on the desire to purchase goods that match one's self-image, since the process of adapting one's self-image to a desired product image is not as easy to achieve and more likely to result in failure.

UNDERLYING COGNITIVE PROCESSES

Another question that can also be answered by knowing something about the functions of the self-concept is the issue of how and why product/self-image congruence can be achieved. As has been shown in chapter three, individuals experience greater levels of motivation and involvement if self-knowledge has been activated. Reasons for this are that self-relevant stimuli are processed in greater depth and faster than non self-relevant stimuli and they are experienced as central foci. Further, we know that important self-schemas are kept immediately accessible, and that a person's self-concept functions as a semantic filter through which all information from the outside is perceived as being the point of orientation for an individual's every behaviour. Thus, if we come across a product that symbolically matches either our global self-concept or a particular self-schema, we are more likely to notice it and to be drawn to it. Due to the self-serving bias that guides our action, we are also more likely to evaluate the product favourably in comparison to other products or brands. Thus, when a purchase decision needs to be made, the product chosen will most likely be the one, which is closest to our own self-perception.

This tendency to lean toward products that match our self-image is regarded by Burroughs (1996) as a potential motivating factor of impulse buying. He argues that if consumers come across a product that matches their self-image, they will feel an instant and compelling desire to own the product. The desire is instant because the stimulus provided by the product is connected to the self-concept, and experienced as compelling since self-relevant stimuli are mostly emotionally loaded. The desire to own the product may at times be irresistible since the self-schema that has been activated by the product is so dominating that other concerns are either overridden or cannot be activated before the decision to purchase the item has already been made. According to Burroughs, an additional factor that contributes to the difficulty in resisting the urge is the kind of information processing strategy that is preferably used by people in such a situation. It has been shown that individuals are more likely to use a holistic processing mode, as compared to analytic evaluation strategies, when the focus is on symbolic rather than on tangible attributes of a product, when right brain activities like emotions are activated and when a product is considered spontaneously (Baumgartner, 1993).[1] Hence, when mapping complex symbolic product meanings onto the self, a fair assumption seems to be that consumers use a holistic processing strategy. This on the one hand allows them to spontaneously arrive at a decision but it also precludes them assessing a product on more analytical grounds.

Based on this chain of arguments, impulse purchases could be defined as a match between the symbolic meanings of a particular product and a consumer's self-concept or desired self (Burroughs, 1996). Evidence for this type of impulse purchase has been provided by Walker (1992). She reported that acquisitions that were experienced by consumers as 'really me' purchases were elicited by products that evoked a sense of self, were highly involving and likely bought on impulse. However, not all 'really me' purchases might be impulse purchases and not all impulse purchases are 'really me' purchases. In the following a few explanations and scenarios are given that show why not all products that elicit a self-relevant stimulus are bought on impulse.

The critical element in Burroughs' model seems to be a person's ability to resist the urge to buy, once a product has been spotted that matches the person's self-image. Since people differ in their ability to resist impulses, this might be a likely explanation for why not all products that match a person's self-image are bought impulsively. We also know that not all individuals are equally likely to employ holistic and analytic information processing

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[1] If consumers employ a holistic processing strategy, they form a global impression of a product as a unitary whole. If information is processed in an analytical fashion, consumers view a product as a composite of individual components.

strategies. Baumgartner (1993) found that verbalisers[2] when left to follow their own natural inclination are more likely to use analytic processing strategies than visualisers. Hence, if verbalisers encounter a self-relevant product stimulus they might not consider a product holistically and therefore are better able to resist the urge to buy the product on impulse.

Even if somebody has been classified as being a visualiser and as being very impulsive, this does not necessarily imply that this person, let's call him consumer X, buys all self-relevant products on impulse. He may for example have developed certain strategies to overcome spontaneous buying urges as is demonstrated in the following scenario: During lunch break consumer X walks by a clothing store and sees a suit that really appeals to him. It matches his office clerk *identity*. He feels very tempted to buy the suit, goes inside the store and tries it on. It fits well and consumer X also likes his image in the mirror. However, he does not buy the suit immediately since in the past it has happened to him that he had bought a jacket rather spontaneously and a week later he saw the same jacket in another store for 20% less. Based on this experience he developed a rule to first look around in a few other stores to compare prices and other offers. So he leaves the store without buying anything and returns to work. It still might be the case that consumer X returns the next week to buy the suit that caught his attention because of the perceived self-image match. Then however it is no longer an impulse purchase but a purchase based on careful considerations initiated by a spontaneous liking.

Circumstances might also prevent a consumer from engaging in a spontaneous purchase, for example if some time elapses between making the purchase decision and the act of purchasing because one has to wait in line at the cash register. During this time other self-schemata and considerations are likely to come to the fore. One might for instance start to contemplate one's financial or need situation, whether the quality of the product is satisfactory, whether it is good value for money, and so on. Before it is one's turn to pay, the first spontaneous decision to buy the product may have been overruled by other considerations and one may decide after all to put the product back on the shelf and to leave the store. Hence, not all products that match our self-image necessarily trigger an impulse purchase. They may simply just attract our attention and help us in making a decision. If for instance we have a choice between two or three brands of a product that cost approximately the same and are satisfactory with regard to our requirements for quality and performance, it is then very likely that we choose that product which is most harmonious to our own self-image.

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[2] Verbalizers are people who show a preference for engaging in and enjoying thinking.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous sections it has been demonstrated that a shared symbolic meaning of consumer goods exists and that consumers use this knowledge a) to evaluate others on the basis of the kind of products they use and display, and b) to portray desired images. In addition, the existing symbolic classifications of products allow consumers to match product images with particular parts of their self-concept. One hoped for effect is that consumer goods, due to their communicative powers, will aid in maintaining and enhancing the self-concept.

Thus, in a consumer society material goods appear to exert an influence on all facets of being. For many who live in such a society it is probably unimaginable *not* to buy goods that in addition to being functional also provide a desired image; or *not* to wear the right clothing for particular occasions, or *not* to judge and evaluate other people based on the kind of products they display. One might call this type of behaviour materialistic even though many individuals seem to be reluctant to admit to it, as is evident in the tendency to consistently underreport levels of materialism (see below). Having a materialistic orientation, albeit a fact of life, is regarded as not being socially desirable. A reason for this might be the strong polarization that exists. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the term materialism refers to people whose way of life, opinions or tendency are based *entirely* upon material interests; their devotion to material needs and desires take precedence over spiritual matters. This definition does not take into account that more moderate levels of materialism - which nonetheless reflect the same underlying orientation - also exist.

What philosophers have to say on the issue

Most philosophers of the past share the view that the self cannot be known directly. For example, Descartes' famous sentence "cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) implies that knowledge of the self can only be inferred from empirical evidence (René Descartes, 1596-1650). David Hume (1711-1776) developed more radical ideas stating that one cannot even form a clear idea of what the self is. It is something one cannot perceive, imagine, visualise, grasp or otherwise hold. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) shared this view, he however added some valuable ideas that made the concept of self more conceivable. According to Kant, the self is a perceiver, not the perceived - similar to a camera that can take pictures of other objects and events but not of itself. Self-awareness however is still possible. The self can catch itself in the act of doing something. This implies that the self cannot be known in isolation, it can only be known in relation to the world. For example, imagine a person in a clothing store browsing. This person is momentarily not self-conscious. She is only attending to the shelves, maybe paying attention to some special

offers. At some point during this activity she passes a mirror and becomes aware of herself-browsing-through-the-store. She has caught herself in the action. This of course can also come about through other means than seeing oneself in the mirror. The point is that we often engage in activities without self-consciousness and that through a thought that occurs to us or through some other event in our immediate surrounding, we become self-conscious and aware of our own selves.

Not being able to know the self directly does however not negate that a real and pure self exists. Kant called the real and pure self the *noumenal self* as compared to the *phenomenal self*. The phenomenal self is the self as it appears in conscious experience. In later essays on the self one finds that other authors have made similar distinctions between the various forms of the self. James (1890/1950) and Mead (1934) for example distinguished between the I and the Me self and the subjective and the objective self.

Wilhem Dilthey (1833-1911) takes the idea of the self as derived from experience a bit further. For him experience is not instantaneous but is a set of events, which are spread out across time and united by a common meaning. This has two implications. The first implication is that the self cannot exist in isolation since for meaning to evolve; a person needs to engage in a contextual network of relationships. A second implication is that self (or the sense of self) can be spread out across time. One can experience oneself as the same person today as the person who existed last week or who will exist tomorrow. This is based on the following logic: If a) an experience is spread out across time and if b) the self is derived from experience, then the self also can be spread out across time. This provides the basis for a concept whose time should come half a century later - the concept of identity.

Self and identity: one and the same or two different constructs?

The viewpoint of the early philosophers, i.e., that the self can never be known directly, is commonly agreed upon today. Smothermond (1980) for example wrote:

> Before I write anything about the Self, let me say that it can't be done. By its very nature, the Self cannot be described. It is, in fact, all that is not describable. Whatever you think it is you can be sure of one thing: that is what it is not (p. 54).

Therefore, one can only conceive the "real" self by making inferences from one's actions and experiences. This is the only way how to gain an understanding of who we are and hence to develop a sense of self. In the literature, this *sense of self* has either been termed self-concept or identity. The self thus is different from both the self-concept and identity since the self can never be know directly, but both of the latter are by definition those parts of the self that can be know directly and hence are accessible through a person's consciousness. The next obvious question is how to differentiate between the two

constructs self-concept and identity. A convincing assumption is made by Döbert, Habermas and Nunner-Winkler (1987). They suggest that the self-concept is a psychological construct and identity a sociological one. The aim of self-concept research generally is to find out more about the psychological mechanisms that motivate and drive our behaviour. This type of research can be divided into three major areas: (1) research on the cognitive representation of self, (2) research on public impression, evaluation apprehension and the need for approval, and (3) research on the affective, evaluative aspects of self, e.g. self-esteem research (Deusinger, 1986). Papers and articles on identity in contrast deal with more global issues like the value structure of individuals and their commitments, memberships and orientation in the social system. Thus, one could also say that scholars who are concerned with identity view the issue from a macro (= sociological) perspective and those concerned with the self-concept take a micro (= psychological) perspective.

Looking at the academic training of people who either write about the self-concept or about identity, it is fair to say that psychologists and social-psychologists mostly refer in their research to the construct of the self-concept, whereas sociologists, anthropologists, or philosophers refer to the construct of identity. The distinction between the two constructs along the subject lines sociology and psychology however is not clear-cut. Social issues are equally intertwined with the construct of self-concept as issues of psychology with the construct of identity. To give an example, before a person can acquire a sense of identity, certain cognitive abilities have to develop first. Hence, one has to venture into the area of psychology if one wants to learn something about how identity is formed. The same is true - in the opposite direction - for the self-concept. The self-concept develops through the process of socialisation, interaction and social comparison with other people (Deusinger, 1986). Hence, psychologists equally make use of the knowledge gained in the neighbouring field. In conclusion it can be said that the difference between the two constructs, self-concept and identity, rests on the disciplinary divide between psychology and sociology. The lack of clarity that often exists is partly due to these unavoidable overlaps. However, another source for the existing confusion is the careless utilisation of terminology. As reported, at times the terms 'self-concept', 'identity' and their derivatives are used interchangeably as synonyms. Nonetheless, in the following an attempt is made to find a way through this jungle of terminologies and to offer a clear definition for both constructs.

The Self-concept

Scholars advanced the first ideas about the self-concept in the late 19th century until about the middle of this century. These early ideas were however only sparsely subjected to

empirical tests. Hence, the main contribution of these early thinkers consists of having provided the groundwork by formulating a theoretical framework. After the 1950s, the self-concept disappeared from the research scene to appear again about 25 years later in the 1980s, the boom period of self-concept research. During the 1980s, lots of empirical research was conducted testing the early theories. Based on the results of this research, scholars gained a much deeper understanding of the self-concept and were able to clarify and refine the construct in more detail.

EARLY THEORIES

William James was one of the first psychologists who wrote about the self at length. He however does not specifically use the term self-concept. As it is difficult to determine ex post whether he would have used the term 'self-concept' if he lived today, the following description of his theory is based on the terms James originally has used.

James (1890/1950) distinguished between those parts of the self that can and cannot be known directly, the I-self and the Me-self. The I-self is the self-as-subject or knower, the processor of information, the active observer with executive functions, the creator of the Me-self. In comparison the Me-self is an empirical aggregate of things that can be known objectively. Hence, it is the sum of what one knows about one's self. Following James, this totality can be subdivided into various domains, the *spiritual self*, the *material self*, and the *social self*. The spiritual self is comprised of one's emotions and desires. The material self has been described by James as

> the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down" (James, 1950, chapter 10).

Thus, the material self is an extended self, including all those things a person calls *me* and *mine*. The social self in comparison relates to one's social roles and includes the views others have. And as there are many different groups of people to whom individuals show different sides of themselves, every individual has a number of social selves. All of these potential Me-selves, including the material and the spiritual self, contribute to a person's overall sense of self-worth. Hence, the self-as-known as James understood it describes a concept of self that is both differentiated and forming a unity.

Cooley (1902) and Sullivan (1953) also do not specifically use the term self-concept. They talked about the self as arising from social interaction. According to Cooley the self is a social construction consisting of the regards and valuation of significant others toward the

own self. In other words, individuals perceive themselves as other perceive them; their selves are like a *looking glass self*. Mead (1934, 1956) extended upon this concept by adding that people over time adopt the attitudes others have about themselves. They learn to anticipate other people's reaction and to perceive the world as they do. Eventually, their estimates of how other people might react to their behaviour and how they might be judged are incorporated in form of the *generalised other*. This generalised other serves as a source of internal regulation for the individuals so that external guidance is no longer necessary.

The views of Lecky (1945), Snygg and Combs (1949), and Rogers (1951) are also very similar and are therefore considered together. Lecky defined the self-concept as the nucleus of one's personality, which is an "organisation of values that are consistent with another" (1945, p.160). This organisation is dynamic and continuously assimilates new ideas, and moderates or rejects old ideas. According to Snygg and Combs (1949), the self-concept consists of those parts "which the individual has differentiated as definite and fairly stable characteristics of himself" (p. 112). This includes changeable as well as stable parts. Rogers in comparison defined the self-concept as an organised but dynamic system made up of consistent conceptual patterns of perceived characteristics and values. All four scholars agree that the function of the self-concept is to serve as a point of orientation for the individual's every behaviour and as a semantic filter through which information from the outside world is perceived. This serves to maintain and to enhance as well as to protect the unity of self. Protecting the organisation and unity of self is understood as a basic need and a major motive for human behaviour. If either of the two is endangered, feelings of distress and anxiety are experienced.

Epstein (1973) summarises the early ideas of the self-concept as follows: The self-concept, as part of a broader conceptual system, is comprised of internally consistent, hierarchically organised concepts, which are dynamic and open to change. It evolves from experience, especially from social interactions with significant others, and contains a number of different empirical or Me-selves. For every individual it is important to maintain the organisation and unity of the self-concept. Otherwise, anxieties are experienced and self-defending mechanisms are triggered. The function of the self-concept is firstly to organise one's experience in a way that actions and reactions can be predicted, and secondly to fulfil one's needs while avoiding disapproval and negative emotional states.

Based on his overview of the various notions of what the self-concept is and what it looks like, Epstein submitted the idea that the self-concept should be understood as a self-theory, or expressed in form of a riddle:

> What is it that consists of concepts that are hierarchically organized and internally consistent; that assimilates knowledge, yet, itself, is an object of knowledge; that is dynamic, but must maintain a degree

of stability; that is unified and differentiated at the same time; that is necessary for solving problems in the real world; and that is subject to sudden collapse, producing total disorganization when this occurs?

The answer is:

It is a theory that the individual has unwittingly constructed about himself as an experiencing, functioning individual, and it is part of a broader theory, which he holds with respect to his entire range of significant experience (Epstein, 1973, p. 407).

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS AND EMPIRICAL VALIDATIONS

Many of the above mentioned characteristics are reflected in more recent writings and have been validated by empirical research. Below some of the contemporary perspectives as well as the relevant empirical findings are summarised.

Structure

With regard to the organisation or cognitive representation of the self, today a number of alternative models exist. In the early writings it is assumed that the self-concept is a hierarchical category structure comprised of traits, values and memories of specific behaviours. Many still adhere to this view. Other perspectives are that the self-concept is a "node among many in an associative memory network", or "a system of self-schemas or generalisations about the self derived from past social experiences" (Markus and Wurf, 1987, p. 301).[3]

Content

Today's perspective is similar to James' understanding that the self-concept is comprised of a number of different selves. However, in addition to James' notion of the material, the social and the spiritual self, a few others have been identified like for example the personal self, the adaptive self, or the self-non-self (L'Ecuyer, 1981). Since all of these represent different sides of the self, they generally are referred to as self-representations. Those subject to conscious reflection have been named self-conceptions. Some authors also use the term *identities*, which is not to be confused with the macro construct of 'identity'. The term *identities* is most often used when referring to certain role identities like a person's athlete self, work self or home maker self. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, in the following the word 'identity' is only employed when talking about the macro concept and the words 'self-representation' or 'self-conception' only when the micro concept is implied. Since however in the next chapter in cannot be completed avoided to use the term *identities*, italic characters are used to separate it from the macro concept of identity.

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[3] For a review of the literature see Marsh and Hattie (1996).

Returning to the topic of interest here, the contents of the self-concept can further be described by differentiating between various types of self-conception, for example by taking into account past, present or future experiences (Nuttin, 1984), or by looking at positive and negative views that one holds about oneself. Wurf and Markus (1986) suggest that all individuals have both positive and negative self-conceptions, even if they have an overall high self-esteem. The negative self-conceptions may be important to initiate change and to cope with the contradictions of life. Self-conceptions can also be distinguished by whether or not they are actually achieved, or whether they are possible selves or hoped-for-ideals. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), those self-conceptions that present hoped-for-ideals serve as incentives for behaviour by providing images of potential future selves. In addition, these images provide an interpretative and evaluative framework for one's actual self because they allow for a comparison between one's current state and possible future outcomes, which may either be desirable or undesirable.

Higgins (1987) points towards three further types of self-conception, one's actual self, one's ideal self and one's ought self. The actual self is comprised of a set of attributes a person believes to possess. The ideal self is a reflection of those attributes a person would like to possess. And the ought-self is a conglomeration of attributes someone (self or other) believes the person should or ought to possess, like rules, duties, or obligations. As first has been pointed out by Rogers (1951) and later shown empirically by Higgins, Klein and Strauman (1985, 1986), all of these three self-conceptions are interrelated and effect each other. If individuals perceive a large difference between any two of the three types of self-conception, this discrepancy is associated with feelings of discomfort. For instance, an actual/ideal self-discrepancy is associated with depression, and an actual/ought self-discrepancy with anxiety.

Not all of these self-representation types are equally important for the self-concept, and only those which are essential for defining the self need to be accessible at all times. They are referred to as core conceptions (Gergen, 1968). The more peripheral ones are only activated if the demand of a specific situation requires it. Thus, a person's self-concept at a particular moment in time is comprised of the core conceptions and of a few of the peripheral conceptions. This is termed the working self-concept and described by Markus and Wurf (1987) as a "particular configuration of representations drawn from the self-concept that regulates the individual's on-going actions and reactions" (p. 314). It is "a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge" (p. 306), which influences all aspects of judgement, memory and overt behaviour.

Functions

From results of empirical research it can be inferred that the self-concept, and particularly the working self-concept, is a motivational force for all human activity that regulates and guides behaviour on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Processes which are mediated on the intrapersonal level are information processing, affect regulation and motivation, and on the interpersonal level social perception, social comparison, partner choice, interaction strategies and reaction to feedback (Markus and Wurf, 1987).

Information Processing. Below a summary of the empirical findings concerning the effects of the self-concept on the processing of information is given:

- Self-relevant stimuli are perceived with a heightened sensitivity (Bargh, 1982; Nuttin 1985)

- Highly self-descriptive material is most efficiently, i.e., more quickly and confidentially, processed (e.g. Mueller, 1982)

- Self-relevant stimuli show enhanced recall and recognition, which means that one remembers much better aspects of one's own behaviour relative to other people's behaviour or non-social information (e.g., Nasby, 1985)

- The likelihood to make confident behavioural predictions, attributions and inferences is higher in self-relevant domains (Anderson, 1984)

- Individuals resist information that is incongruent with their self-structure (e.g. Tesser and Campbell, 1983).

Thus, individuals show a particular sensitivity to self-relevant information and a privilege towards processing this information. This is one of the mechanism that protects individuals from a threat to their self-concept. Another mechanisms is affect regulation.

Affect regulation can be defined as defending oneself against negative emotional states. A negative emotional state can for example arise from receiving information that challenges one's current conception of self, e.g. one is told that one is not as athletic as one thought, or that one is not competent to do one's job. This constitutes a threat to one's self structure and thus disturbs the affective state. If such a situation occurs, individuals seek to engage in behaviours that reaffirm the self, for example by recruiting those conceptions into the working self-concept that verify one's current conception (Markus and Kunda, 1986), or by interacting with others that are supportive of one's own view of the self (Swann and Hill, 1982).

But even if one's self-concept is not threatened, there is a general tendency to maintain and to promote the self. For instance, people try to present themselves in a way as to maximise

"social rewards" (Schlenker, 1975). In addition, they choose those activities and seek those kinds of information that have a high probability of yielding positive feedback. (e.g., Tesser and Campbell, 1982). Further, it has been shown that selective social comparison serves to provide people with a heightened sense of self. Wills (1981) for example showed that individuals make use of downward comparison as a way to enhance self-evaluation and subjective well-being. A similar behaviour is to judge others on dimensions that are personally relevant and important, and to select interaction partners on the basis of whether they fit one's own self-conception and whether they are likely to validate it (Lewicki, 1983, 1984; Schlenker, 1984).

On an intrapersonal level, self-enhancement is achieved by regarding negative self-attributes as peripheral and of a momentary nature and positive self-attributes as belonging to one's core self-concept and as an enduring characteristic of oneself (Harter, 1988, 1996). This is based on the empirical observation that individuals tend to judge positive self-attributes like being friendly, nice, smart, curious etc. as forming the most important aspects of their personality, whereas negative self-attributes like being lazy, nervous, inconsiderate, shy etc. are seen as least important. Furthermore, positive self-attributes are more likely to be described as personality characteristics and negative self-attributes as occasional behaviour.

In addition to these preventive strategies, researchers have also observed a number of protective actions people engage in, in case they do receive negative feedback. For example, individuals take more responsibilities for their successes than for their failures (Harter, 1988), and they attribute successes to their own capabilities and failures to outer circumstances (e.g. Lewicki, 1983; Miller and Ross, 1975). If a positive self-evaluation is threatened in a competitive situation, Tesser (1980) shows that people either attempt to alter the relations they have to the competitor, or they try to alter or hinder the good performance of the other person, or they lower the extent to which they perceive the threatened dimension of the self is critical to their overall self-worth. Thus, outcomes are interpreted and dealt with in such a way as not to jeopardise a positive view of self. If this is not sufficient to re-balance the self-concept, other possible reactions are to bolster one's self in another domain or to momentarily reduce self-awareness. Experimental studies conducted by Steele (1988) show that it is only necessary to generally affirm one's self-integrity without specifically having to address the discrepancy induced by negative feedback. For example, if one points out to a smoker that smoking causes serious illness and also damages the health of other people, maybe the health of his family, the smoker may feel very bad about this particular part of himself. However, instead of giving up his habit of smoking, he might attempt to reaffirm his self-integrity by spending extra time with his children, thus bolstering another part of himself - his image of being a good

parent. The discrepancy still persists, but it now becomes tolerable because his self-concept is now valued in a new context and he has affirmed the more global sense of being an adequate person. Therefore, the simple fact that an inconsistency exists is not sufficient to motivate individuals to either change their behaviour or to change their attitudes and beliefs. This thesis was supported by all of Steele's experiments. Instead of changing their beliefs or behaviours, subjects eliminated the negative affect posed by the induced self-threat by means of affirming central and more valued aspects of their selves. This confirms the assumption that the protection of the integrity of the self is more important than directly addressing a particular discrepancy. The only exception is if people are highly focused on just one characteristic so that they can only achieve a sense of adequacy in one domain of life (e.g. athletes). Then they have no alternative but to address the self-threat directly.

Another way of minimising a perceived discrepancy is by reducing self-awareness (Hull and Young, 1983; Jones and Berglas, 1978). This likewise leads to an elimination of the unpleasant affect resulting from an induced inconsistency. This soothing away of a perceived dissonance can for example be achieved through drug or alcohol use. The motive to engage in such self-defeating actions is based on the same reasons as in the above depicted situation, the avoidance of self-esteem loss and the maintenance of one's global conception of self-adequacy. Under certain circumstances this motive can even induce people to confirm negative self-characteristics. Sometimes this is the only way of predicting and gaining better control over the risk that these characteristics pose and therefore this may outweigh their intimidation to positive self-regard (Steele, 1988). In other words, the affirmation of a particular self-conception must support one's adequacy at least as much as the threat threatens it.

Considering the wide variety of mechanisms that protect and enhance a person's self-concept, a likely conclusion is that self-worth must take on very important functions for the existence of human beings. Reasons for this are given by Greenwald (1988). He points at the evidence that is given by numerous studies of social behaviour and social cognition that all show that self-esteem maintenance is an operative motive behind many of our behaviours. The two most widely known social psychological experiments in this area are Asch's conformity experiment and Milgram's obedience experiment. Other studies focused on the existence of inflated self-images and demonstrated the pervasiveness of cognitive biases that sustain such images. In summarising the main results, Greenwald concludes that all of these studies have established the knowledge that the building and maintenance of self-worth are primary social motives. He further argues that evolution favors a positive self-concept since it is necessary to warrant human adaptive success. A high self-esteem for example is associated with persistence in problem solving. This is likely to offer a strong

adaptive advantage in a world where most problems can either be solved by skill or by perseverance. Furthermore, people with a positive attitude toward themselves are psychological more stable and are more likely to be motivated to protect and to foster the self. In addition, there are some suggestive results demonstrating that positive self-attitudes are associated with superior functioning of the body's immune system. Thus, a positive self-concept and overall high self-esteem increase the chances of adaptive success, and with that one's chance of survival.

Motivation. A further important function of the self-concept is to move individuals to action. This is achieved via goals and aspirations. Goals and aspirations are implicated in the self-concept in the form of possible or desired selves, which are assumed to be the cognitive components of motivation. Possible selves are defined by Markus and Nurius (1986) as self-conceptions that represent a person's potential; they are images a person has about actually having achieved a goal. Schlenker (1985) identified desired selves as an important subgroup of possible selves. Desired selves are both positive and realistic and are presumed to mediate behaviour by providing a cognitive structure and relevant standards of behaviour. Empirically it could be shown that possible selves are systematically affiliated with a person's current self-conception (Wurf and Markus, 1986), that they mediate feelings about the current self, and that they regulate effort and task persistence (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Another approach relating motivation, self-concept and behaviour is provided by Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) theory of symbolic self-completion. This theory explains the underlying mechanism of how the self-concept, or more precisely stated, certain sub-domains of it, moves individuals to act in a particular direction. It is based on Lewin's (1926) proposition that the human organism is energised in a goal directed sense and as soon as a psychological need or a quasi need (i.e. an intention) arises, a tension system comes into being. This motivates an individual to specify goals for satisfying this need. The induced tension state prevails until an appropriate outlet can be found. It is however not necessary that the outlet is related to the objective completion of the task, i.e. the original goal. Most important is to arrive at a state of psychological completion. Thus, tension reduction can also be achieved through the attainment of a substitute goal. In an experiment conducted by Mahler 1933), subjects were given a French text, which they were asked to translate into German. Then this task was interrupted and after a while people were presented with the option of either resuming the translation of the first text or to translate a more difficult second text. This resulted in a considerable reduction in resumption of the original task. Hence, the inner goal of the subjects was not overly connected with the details of the task. Expressed differently, the external goal of reaching the solution or finishing the translation was not the basis for the individuals' motivation.

Instead it was more important for the subjects to show that they had linguistic competencies. Satisfying this inner personal goal was sufficient to reduce the tension state and therefore it was no longer necessary to complete the original task. It is however necessary to be socially recognised for one's achievement, independent of whether the "real" goal or a substitute goal is attained. It is essential to have a way of gaining a sense of having completed the task, because only this satisfies the underlying psychological need (Mahler, 1933).

Wicklund and Gollwitzer built on this research. They view inner goals as self-defining goals, which are constructed by a person "as a lasting, personal entity, to be relied on as a potential source of action and thinking" (p.31). These goals are based on particular self-definitions, which can either be rather universal (e.g., being intelligent or being a civilised person) or quite narrow (e.g., being a jogger, being a good cook or being a gardener). In the process of achieving a self-defining goal, individuals employ numerous symbols. Sirgy (1982) for example notes that it is within the nature of human beings to search for objects and relationships that symbolise and reinforce important notions of the self or the ideal self. These symbols signal to others the attainment of a particular self-definition. In the process of self-symbolising, it is also possible to substitute one symbol for another. Being able to substitute symbols has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side it means that people are not forced to give up in the pursuit of completing a self-definition if a particular mode of self-symbolising proofs to be unsuccessful, but on the negative side it means that individuals can manifest impatience. Instead of making a strategic choice individuals can adopt the most accessible and quickest mode of self-symbolising. This interferes with the building of competency, since achieving competency usually is a long term endeavour. If it is however possible to attain one's self-definition via a short cut, many people will prefer to do so (compare also Wicklund and Vandekerckhove, 1998).

Central to Wicklund's and Gollwitzer's theory of symbolic self-completion is the assumption that individuals are committed to a particular self-definition. Otherwise, individuals would not be motivated to strive for achieving this self-definition and would not engage in self-symbolising actions. According to Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982), to be committed "is to be predisposed to focus on a self-definition when disrupted in pursuing certain classes of activities" (p. 207). This definition expresses implicitly the moment of when an individual will engage in a self-symbolising activity. It will occur every time when an individual experiences a disruption in the pursuit of a particular self-definition. As a result of this disruption a self-reflexive mode will be induced. Thus, the individual's attention is directed towards the self, or in the terminology of James, the I-self is observing and reflecting upon a particular side of the Me-self. This mode can be brought about if a)

one realises or is made aware of the fact that the currently chosen route of self-symbolising does not work, if b) one is directly evaluated by others, if c) one admits to faults or engages in self-criticisms, or if d) one has to compare the completeness of one's self-definition against that of another person. The disrupted individual will then start a process of self-evaluation. If the result is negative, the tension state, which was built up in the process of pursuing the disrupted activity, will produce "a strong behavioural orientation in the direction of furthering completeness" (p.56). Under experimental conditions, Wicklund and Gollwitzer have shown that individuals react to such a situation by increasingly engaging in self-definitional activities like self-description, attempted influence, prestige affiliation and the employment of durable symbols. Durable goods have the effect of generating a social reality, independent of whether the self-symbolising individual is present or whether he is engaged in efforts to register the desired qualities on other people. Durable goods indicate to others that the individual possesses the characteristics that are needed for completeness.

Summary. From the knowledge accumulated until today, it can be inferred that the self-concept is a multidimensional, diverse, complex and dynamic structure, which is active, forceful, capable of change, and has motivational consequences (L'Ecuyer, 1981; Markus and Wurf, 1987, Steele, 1988). The self-concept is not fixed or static and can be divided into two major areas, the core self-concept and the working self-concept. Furthermore, it is generally agreed upon that the representations of what an individual thinks, feels and believes about him self are among the post powerful regulators of an individual's behaviour (e.g., Jordan and Merrifield, 1981; Markus and Wurf, 1987). This is not to deny that other factors like one's culture, social environment, need and tension states, and not self-relevant cognition are insignificant, however they often just play an accompanying or secondary role. Apart from motivating behaviour, other important functions of the self-concept are to maintain and to enhance the self. This is aided by reflecting ongoing behaviour, by interpreting and organising self-relevant information, actions and experiences, and by furnishing individuals with scripts, incentives, standards and rules. The mechanism used in this process can be described as selective attention, selective memory, selective interpretation and a bias towards seeking confirmatory feedback.

A comprehensive definition of the self-concept is offered by Greenwald (1988), compare also **Figure 1**: "The (adult) self is a complex, person-specific, central, attitudinal schema. In this description, the self is characterised as *complex* because it incorporates a great variety of knowledge; as *person-specific* because it is an idiosyncratic knowledge structure, as central because it is the major structure of personality; as *attitudinal* because it is invested with the affect that is associated with one's sense of self-worth; and, most importantly, the self is identified as a *schema* because it is an organised structure of knowledge." (p. 30, emphasis as in original).

Figure 1: ***Schematic presentation of the self-concept***
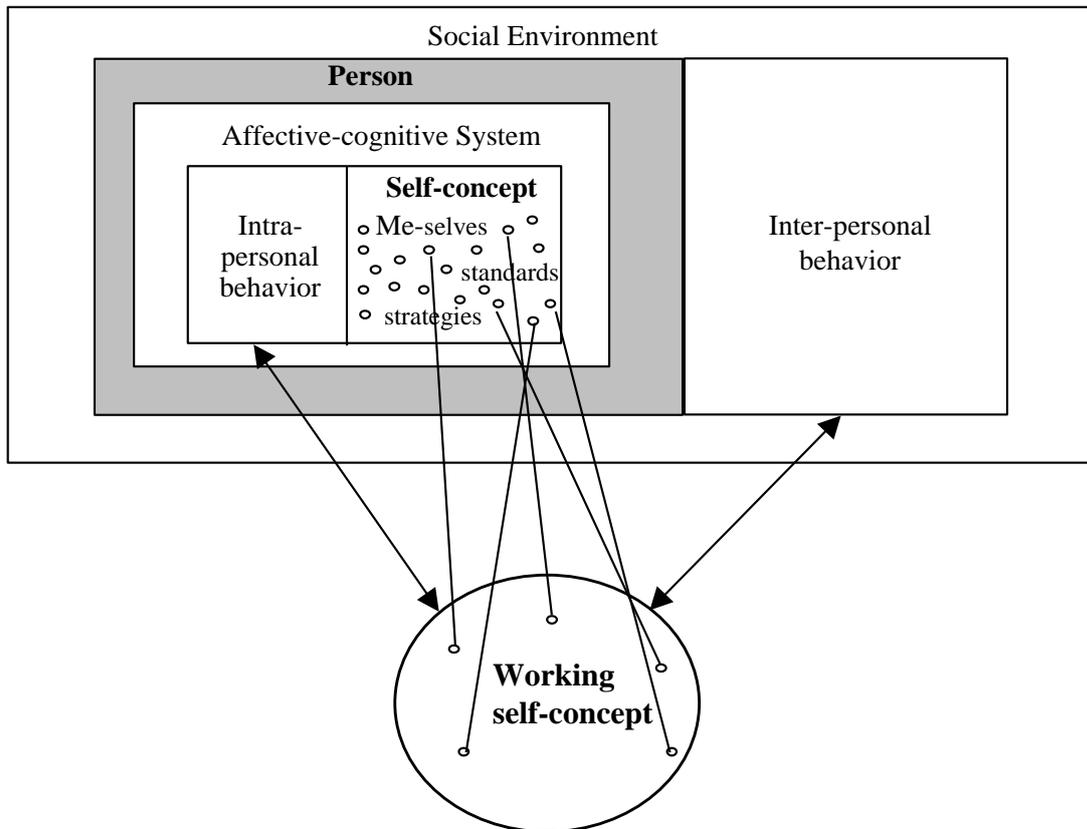
<div align="right">Source: Markus and Wurf (1987, p. 315)</div>

Based on the findings that a person's self-concept functions as a semantic filter for all incoming information, that important self-schemas are kept immediately accessible, that self-relevant stimuli are processed in greater depth and faster than non self-relevant stimuli, that individuals experience greater levels of motivation and involvement if self-knowledge is activated, that the enhancement and the protection of the self-concept is a priority task (and so on), the behavioural implications of the self-concept can be summarised in one sentence: The self-concept is the point of orientation for an individual's every behaviour.

Identity

The word identity is derived from the Latin word *idem* referring to sameness, distinctiveness and continuity. Sameness and distinctiveness implies that one is able to recognise something and to establish its unmistakeability. As a way of illustrating this, let's imagine the following situation. Little Peter is sitting outside in the summer at the breakfast table and five wasps fly by and land on the table. He starts to count them, one, two, three, four, five, which is an easy and quick task for him. After counting the wasps, Peter wants to

give the wasps names and for that he needs to be able to distinguish one wasp from the other. Suddenly, the wasps fly away and a minute or so later some other (or the same?) wasps land on the breakfast table. For Peter it is impossible to tell whether they are the same wasps he previously has counted or whether they are different ones. Thus, in order to establish the identity of something, be it an object, an animal or a person, one needs more specific parameters and characteristics. If for instance a car is stolen and a few days later a car of the same model, colour and make is found, one can make sure that it is really the stolen car by comparing the chassis number with the number in the documents. A similar situation exists when crossing the boarder to enter another country. The task of the boarder police is to establish whether the person wanting to enter the country is identical to the one whose name and characteristics are mentioned in the passport. The general procedure to establish identity in that case is to compare the picture in the passport with the face of the person who is in possession of the passport. From the above, it can be derived that an essential criterion for identity is that a person or object to be identified possesses attributes that can be used for *differentiation*.

Another characteristic of identity that is implied by the Latin word *idem* is continuity. How this relates to identity can again best be illustrated with the help of an example. Let's consider a person called Judy. Her husband and children live in your neighbourhood since several years. One day you hear a rumour that Judy has decided to change her name to "Bellflower the Lovely". A few weeks later she gives up her occupation, leaves her spouse, children and friends, moves to a different country, and takes on another religious faith. Not surprisingly your reaction to this type of situation would be to say that Judy has completely changed her identity. The reason for this is that we witnessed a break in Judy's life and it became difficult for us, if not impossible, to detect continuity between the kind of person Judy used to be and the person she became. There were no obvious links anymore that would connect Judy's old life with her new life. Hence, the existence of a continuous thread that connects all of a person's past and present experiences in a meaningful way seems to be essential in order to speak about a person having the same identity over time. This example shows the second fundamental criterion of identity - *continuity over time* (Baumeister, 1986, Erikson, 1968; Lash, 1984).[4] It is based on the assumption that something can be perceived as being the same today as it has been last week and as it will be tomorrow. In other words, one must be able to tie all the various perceptions together to form a coherent and meaningful story.

Up to this point, the discussion was only related to the objective process of finding out whether something is different from something else or whether it is the same. No

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[4] compare also Dilthey's notion on the self described on page 23.

differentiation has yet been made between the identity of things and the identity of persons. If we asked Judy, or now 'Bellflower the Lovely', to talk about her personal identity, it is likely that she would apply the two criteria of differentiation and continuity over time. But, in doing so she would refer to her own subjective experiences. Her personal understanding of who she is, thus, is different from the objective process of establishing her identity. Therefore, it is necessary to make a distinction between these two types of identity. One might refer to the first type as object-identity since it can objectively be determined, and to the second type as subject-identity since it is based on the subjective experiences of a person and hence can only be applied to human beings (Kössler, 1989; Schneider, 1989). Since the present examination is about consumers and how their understandings of themselves relate to consumer behaviour, in the following emphasis is given to the subjective experiences of individuals and with that to subject-identity. For ease of reading only the generic term identity will be used.

DEFINING IDENTITY

Identity has been defined in various ways. The divers definitions often do not differ radically, they generally just emphasise different aspects of identity depending on the researcher's aim, educational background, point of view etc. Thus, putting together a definition of identity by adding up those aspects that are mentioned most often is not difficult. It however becomes more problematic if one also considers the definitions of those authors that seem to describe identity - judged by the content of their writings - but borrow the terminology used by self-concept researchers. Unfortunately, only a few authors explicitly compare their way of using and defining identity to the terminology other authors have employed. Erikson (1976) for example notes that his definition of identity matches Hartman's concept of self-representation and Mead's way of employing the term self-concept. Since in retrospection it cannot easily be determined what exactly an author was referring to. Therefore, in the following only those definitions have been taken into account that explicitly refer to identity or their derivatives like I-identity, ego-identity and self-identity.

Starting with Giddens (1991), he writes that self-identity is "*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography*" (p.53, italics as original). Similarly, Gentry, Baker and Kraft (1995) state that identity is a function of how a person is viewed by him- or herself in relation to past experiences, to others and to the future. In both definitions, the criterion of continuity over time is implicit in the reflexive interpretation of the agent.

Blasi (1988) in contrast offers a very global description of identity It is "a conscious and preconscious experience of oneself as a differentiated individual, enjoying a sense of

fundamental unity." Further, he refers to identity as "a special mode of experiencing oneself-as-subject", but also emphasise the importance of personal history: "The attempt to integrate the various components of one's personality and to find a principle order whereby past, present and future form a coherent biography defines a mode of unity in experiencing oneself" (p. 233).

A similar view is advanced by Schultz Kleine, Kleine and Allen, (1995): "Identity is reflected in one's life narrative or life story, capturing various roles including past, present and anticipated future selves. Life narrative describes the path of identity development, it defines who I am, who I have been and who I am becoming."

Weigert (1988) stresses the point that identity, in addition to being historically derived, is a particular human experience: "In the modern context, …, we find the construct *identity* working as a competing catch-all scientific and folk term to refer to what we take to be a unique human experience of self as self-consciously known" (p. 263). Based on work with other authors he wrote: "Identity, …, we see as directly historical: derived form the past and institutionalised or enacted in the present. […] We may define identity as a *typified self situated in a network of social relationships*" (p, 265, italics as in original). The explicit point of this definition is to point out the significance of the social environment in experiencing identity. This is also emphasised by Markus and Wurf (1987) and Dittmar (1992). According to Markus and Wurf, "identity is an image of the self that one tries to convey to others; it exists both as a cognitive structure in the mind of the person trying to convey it…. and as an entity in the world,… (this) situated identity is a joint construction of the person, the audience and the situation" (p. 325). Dittmar understands identity as consisting of the personal and social characteristics of individuals as they are understood by themselves and others.

Lash (1984) also regards social roles, social reference groups and the presentation of self or as he calls it the "deliberate management of impressions" (p. 32) as significant in defining identity. His perspective however is quite different from the views presented above. Lash argues that in light of the fragmentation of modern life, life-history and cross-time continuity are no longer significant for defining identity today. For Lash, a selfhood that implies "personal history, friends, family (and) a sense of place" is a phenomenon of the past (p. 15). Further, he believes that identity nowadays is much more fluid and that the formerly existing association between identity and continuity of personality is eliminated, or at least substantially weakened. "In its new (psycho-social) meaning, the term registers the waning of the old sense of a life as a life-history or narrative. […] Both (person and things) have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity" (p. 32). Lash's opinion, a postmodern view of identity, presents a radical departure from the perspectives given above. The pros and cons of this type of view are discussed in more detail below.

In summarising all of the above presented definitions, excluding Lash's perspective due to its controversial nature, it can be concluded that identity can be regarded as a person's theory of self, which is defined on the basis of a) historically and biographically derived components, b) a person's social roles and relations, and c) the criteria continuity over time and differentiation.

On a more general level, many authors refer to identity as being a self-theory. For example Berzonsky (1988) states that identity is "a self-generated theory about the self" (p. 244). Conceptualising identity in such a way can be meaningful. The problematic aspect however it that it further contributes to the blending of the two terms 'self-concept' and 'identity', as this metaphor was originally applied to the self-concept. Notwithstanding, a number of authors have also applied this metaphor to describe identity. Therefore, in the following an attempt is made to distinguish between *identity as self-theory* and *self-concept as self-theory*.

The suggestion put forward here is based on Epstein's statement that the self-concept is 'part of a broader theory that encompasses an entire range of significant experiences' (1973, p. 407). Epstein did not elaborate on what he exactly meant with this *broader theory* of which the self-concept is a part. A possible explanation is that this broader theory is a person's identity since identity, as previously discussed, encompasses an entire range of significant experiences. Identity therefore could be taken as being the macro theory of self. The self-concept in comparison could be understood as the self-theory of the momentarily experiencing and functioning individual, thus as the micro theory of self. In other words, the previously made distinction between the two constructs self-concept and identity, one being the micro and the other the macro perspective, also upholds here.

Based on this differentiation, it can be stated that identity is reflected in a person's life narrative or life-story, capturing various roles that embody past, present and anticipated future understandings of the self. In contrast, self-concept also provides us with a sense of who and what we are, but it is an organising construct through which one's everyday activity is understood.

Functional aspects of identity

Besides serving an academic purpose, the construct of identity also fulfils a number of important functions in 'real life'. Erikson (1968) for example sees the function of identity in maintaining continuity with the past, in providing meaning for the present and in giving direction for the future. These functions are further detailed and complemented by Baumeister (1986). Having a good understanding of who we are implies that we have aligned ourselves with certain values and that we are committed to specific personal goals. This gives directions to our lives, allows us to make purposive and consistent choices and provides us with meaning. Hence, one further function of identity is to provide us with a

structure of values and priorities. In addition, Baumeister's regards a firm sense of identity as furnishing people with a feeling of individual potentiality and fulfilment. It provides individuals with a secure feeling that they actually possess the necessary abilities to reach personal goals and through that attain personal fulfilment. It helps individuals to overcome obstacles and supports them in striving for alternative goals in situations where the original goal cannot be obtained. Hence, identity provides people with a sense of inner strength and resilience. A further function of identity is that it establishes and influences the relationships we have to other persons because social roles and statuses belong invariably to our self-theories. Our sex, profession and marital status for instance will determine how we interact with others and how they interact with us. This interpersonal aspect of identity is often referred to as a person's social identity (e.g., Weigert, 1988).

Marcia (1988) does not directly talk about functional aspects of identity, but similar to the other authors, she regards identity as providing structure and purposefulness. According to her conception, the structure of identity consists of the organised composite of one's commitments (goals), which are composed of one's needs, abilities, values, personal history and plans. They enable persons to remodel the world in their own terms and to bestow it with meaning. Expressed negatively, people without a firm sense of identity are without directions in life, are characterised by a sense of inner emptiness and are vulnerable to be claimed by others. Furthermore, they have difficulties in adopting a self-determining perspective, are more likely to draw on other-directed problem-solving strategies and avoid confronting personal problems. In comparison, having achieved identity has the advantage of offering personal answers to questions like: How shall I relate to others? What shall I strive for? And how will I make the basic decisions needed to guide my Life? (Baumeister, 1986; Berzonsky, 1988).

One obtains yet another perspective of the functional aspects of identity, if one applies the metaphor of identity as self-theory. Berzonsky (1988) explains that self-theories like scientific theories need to fulfil the prerequisites of believability and usefulness. Believability means that a theory needs to be logically coherent and empirically valid; usefulness refers to a theory providing explanations and interpretations. In order for this to be fulfilled theories contain major postulates about the world, the nature of self and their interaction. This allows scientists who have constructed a scientific theory - or more generally speaking, all individuals who have constructed a theory of self - to organise the complexities of life, to guide behaviour, and to offer explanations and interpretations in order to better understand the world they live in.

In summary, it can be concluded that the functions of identity are to secure a continuity with the past, to give a sense of inner strength, potentiality and personal fulfilment, to

provide structure, to regulate and guide social relations, and thus to make life meaningful in the present and to offer directions for the future.

Identity components

According to Baumeister (1986), identity components are the units of self-definition, or simply the answer to the question: Who am I? An answer to this question is likely to be based on more than one of the following: one's geographical home, ancestral family, marital status, profession, social rank, gender, achievements, moral values, or religion. These can be understood as identity components, which are partly assigned and partly acquired in the process of self-definition. Baumeister details five possible ways of attaining identity components. Type I components are assigned and fairly unproblematic. They are passively assigned to a person's identity like family lineage and gender. Type II components need to be achieved by one well defined event. This event changes in a single transformation once and for all who a person is. An obvious example for this is motherhood, it is either achieved or not. The components on the next level (type III) also need to be achieved, but in contrast to type II components they are characterised by a continual process of re-definition. They are based on comparison and competition. For example being the best student in class does not mean that one is always the best student in class, or being rich is never a finite component since one can always earn more and most likely they are always people who are even richer. Type IV and V components are based on an act of choice rather than on achievement and therefore are the most difficult components to add to one's self-definition. Type IV components allow choices but do not require them. Examples are choosing a new religion or deciding to stay with the religion one is born into, or to choose to become a member of a political party or to decide not to. Type V components on the other hand require choice. They do not allow a passive option. Individuals are forced to make a decision between incompatible alternatives. Getting married or choosing a profession are good illustrations of this process. There might for instance be a number of professions that one finds interesting and one could imagine that a few of them might be suitable for one self. Each of them will probably have a number of advantages and disadvantages. One day a choice has to be made, but there are no rules and with that no adequate and satisfactory guidelines for making that choice. Individuals are supposed to have developed internal or meta-criteria on which to base choices, and it is expected of them that they know what is right or wrong. Therefore, type V components are the most problematic elements of a person's self-definition.

Blasi (1988) talks about identity components as well, however he distinguishes between a set of attitudes and a set of concrete contents. His understanding of a set of concrete contents matches the meaning of Baumeister's identity components. Both agree that the number of possible identity components/contents may be indefinite and that the various

thinkable combinations of these are different for most people. This accounts for the fact that people "dramatically differ from each other on the basis of their identities" (Blasi, 1988, p. 234). Attitude components on the other hand can be associated with the various stages of identity development. They give information about where an individual is at with regard to having achieved identity and contain among other elements one's choices and commitments. At this point, it may not yet be comprehensible why choices and commitments are signs for certain developmental stages and why they are important parts of modern identity. Therefore, for the moment it should just be noted that identity is comprised of certain units, which in the following will be referred to as *contents*, since that seems to best describe what they are.

From the above and in close accordance with Baumeister (1986) the subsequent model of identity is proposed: Identity is based on the two defining criteria, differentiation and continuity over time. It is composed of various contents that are passively assigned, achieved or chosen. The contents include historically and biographically derived components as well as a person's social roles and relations. The functions of identity are to provide an organisational system for a person's values and priorities, to guide social interactions, to direct behaviour, to explain and to offer interpretations that make life meaningful, and to provide inner strength and a well-defined sense of potentiality. In its entirety, identity can be defined as being the macro theory that a person has about his or her own self.

Conclusion

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