Possible selves Theory: For a better understanding of consumption during liminal periods.

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Abstract:

Increasing our knowledge about the self is crucial for a better understanding of consumer choice. The possible selves theory gives the opportunity to combine what we know about the self, through the malleability self and the concept of time perceptive, to predict how an individual will act in the future.

Keywords: possible selves, future time perspective, consumer behaviour

Track: consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

The relationship between the self and personal goods has been studied for several decades. (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005, Belk, 2013). Our consumer choices reveal a lot about our image of ourselves and what image we would like to communicate to others. Several studies have shown this relationship, in terms of congruency between the self-image and the brand image or product image (Maille &Fleck, 2011, Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, and Sirgy, 2012). But the congruency effect is not enough to explain all consumer choices. We think that the possible selves concept developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) could offer some key insights for a better understanding of some consumption choices during periods of change, by relying on the self-concept and the motivational aspect of the future. In this paper, we will first discuss the self-concept limitations and the various aspects of the future as a source of motivation. We will then present the possible uses of the possible selves concept in marketing before concluding with some recommendations for further research.

1.1 The future perspective in marketing

Following the research by Jacoby, Szybillo and Berning. (1976), further research has been conducted focusing on the time perspective, which is the time where an individual projects himself/herself. Kurt Lewin (1951) was the first to define the perspective-time as "*the totality of the individual's views of his psychological future and psychological past existing as a given time*" (p. 75). Since then, several approaches and definitions have emerged (Lallement & Gourmelen, 2018). Among these, some are specific to the future. We will the use the term of future perspective, characterized by the extension, the valence of the future perspective and the attitude toward the future (De Volder & Lens, 1982 ; Hussman, J. & Shell, 2008). The "future" part of the time-perspective approach has a motivational impact described in Nuttin work (Nuttin, 1984). Nevertheless, the studies rarely investigate the content of the future imagined by individuals while imagination might play a key role in individuals' psychological life (Oettingen, 1997). We suggest that the possible selves theory can give a direct access to this content.

1.2 The possible selves concept

The possible selves are a theoretical framework developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) which integrates the positive and negative valences of the self and all temporal orientations: past, present and future. The possible selves include all images, representations, thoughts of

the self in the future. Markus and Nurius define it as "*Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self.*" (p. 954). The possible selves offer the opportunity to capture the current or working self-concept, which is the dynamic part of the self (Markus & Nurius, 1986, Markus & Kunda, 1986). Moreover, as for the future time perspective, (Nurmi, 1992; 2005), the possible selves evolve during one's entire lifespan (Cross & Markus, 1991). They emerge and disappear depending on the moment in life, contributing to the fluidity and malleability of the self. People through their possible selves interact continuously with their environment. In this context, the possible selves ensure three main functions:

- Establishing a cognitive bridge between the perceived self in the future and motivation in the present. Possible selves are incentive agents, activated by self-representations in the future. (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Diverse motivational theories, such as the regulatory theory, have been developed for explaining how an individual tries to approach or to avoid a particular end state (Higgins, 2002). Nevertheless, this does not explain how motivation is accessible to the self in a cognitive way. Possible selves give direct access to the motivation process by images of end state of the self in the future;

- Contributing to the personal development of individuals: by imagining hoped-for or feared-for selves, people can anticipate their positive or negative emotions and then regulate their behavior. (Markus & Nurius, 1986; VanDellen & Hoyle, 2008);

- Permanently assessing the actual self to a hoped-for self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This is a key element during transformation processes (Schouten, 1991; Castilhos &Fonseca, 2016).

Possible selves are more accessible during period of change, when there is a new definition of the self. People may perceive themselves differently and change their preferences to cope with the stress generated by their new self. Investigating possible selves can help to better understand how people imagine their future.

2. Possible selves in marketing

Possible selves appear in the marketing literature at the beginning of the 90s (Schouten, 1991; Aaker, 1999). Most of research focuses on periods of change. During their lifespan,

individuals will go through several periods of reconstruction for instance graduation, career changes, marriage, divorce, etc. Van Gennep's (l909) conceptualizes the rites of passage that accompany major role transitions as individuals move from birth to death. He argued that the rites of passage consist of three stages: *"(1) separation, (2) transition, a liminal state, in which one passes from one role or state into another one, and (3) reintegration,"*.

During liminal periods, people can imagine different possible selves to attaint or avoid some specific goals. This could impact their consumption (Nobel & Walker, 1997). It seems that liminal consumption eases the discomforts of liminal phases- the self-transitions. For instance, possible selves can highly be activated during pregnancy and just before becoming a mother. For Van Gennep (1909), motherhood is a crucial step in a woman's life; irreversible and unique at an individual level when the woman must construct a new self, at personal, social and professional levels (Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006; Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). To cope with their new status of mother, some women might use online social networks and buy specific goods (Philipps & Broderick, 2014). Moreover, some specific online social network as Pinterest (Philipps, Miller and Quarrie, 2014) may be used by new mothers, allowing them to dream out loud on the web, "pinning" wish lists goods. For example, the pram consumption can be seen as a vehicle for the construction of motherhood identity (Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006). By providing the right accessories, in the case of the pram, liminal consumption supports the consumer in reconstructing her identity. Baby showers, identified as rites of passage, (Fisher & Grainer, 1993) are also helpful for women in the construction of their new identity.

The passage to the third age is also an important step in human life, most of the time, this is marked by retirement. People must then imagine new possible selves without a professional life. In this context some research has shown (Schau, Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1991) that retirees might live a consumer identity renaissance, focus on their competency and growth potential of privilege consumption to create and enact identity. Past selves may be an inspiration upon which to build new selves adapted to their new status. As a retiree may worry that resources the accumulated are finite and can be depleted, they are very careful to budget and ration their consumption. Moreover, visualization of the future can push people to save enough money for their retirement. Ellen, Joshua and Fitzgerald (2012) found that it is possible to encourage people to save for their future by augmenting current saving efforts with positive visions of the future. In this case, possible selves are perceived as a roadmap.

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that possible selves are sensitive to individual's sociocultural and historical context (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Kitayama &

Markus, 2014). For instance, the individual's sociocultural background might impact the way people cultivate optimism and their will to recover during a health challenge (Bridley, et al., 2017). They found that *"in cultures where the interdependent (vs. independent) self is more highly accessible, individuals adopting a responder (vs. initiator) frame when facing a health challenge were more optimistic about their recovery."* As described in literature, the reference group does impact consumption choices (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). It seems that independent versus interdependent self-construal interact differently in their level of self-brand connections: the negative effect of outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections is stronger for independent consumers than for interdependent consumers.

These few examples show how possible selves can be useful for a better understanding of consumption during liminal periods or when people are facing a new challenge. It could be used for instance:

- During adolescence, a key period where it is possible to test and assess different roles (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006), between childhood and adulthood. Nevertheless, to our knowledge if there is some research dedicated to the passage to adulthood via consumption (Marion, 2003; Gentina, Palan and Fosse-Gomez, 2012), none have used the possible selves concept. During this period, adolescents construct their own identity and are extremely sensitive in their consumption, to integrate or to differentiate themselves from the group. The possible selves concept could be then useful for linking the impact of the positive and negative perceptions that adolescents might have of their themselves and their symbolic consumption;

- When people are making new choices, impacting their daily lives: for instance, to adopt long-term green consumption or move from town to the countryside. By imagining their future possible selves; people might cope better with these new situations.

To describe possible selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) elaborated the "Possible Selves Questionnaire" that listed 150 possibilities for the self. These items derived from six categories: *(a) general descriptors or adjectives inventories, (b) physical descriptors, (c) life-style possibilities, (d) general abilities, (e) possibilities reflecting various occupational alternatives, (f) possibilities directly tied to the opinions of others. In each of the six domains, a third of the possibilities had been judged as positive, a third as negative, and a third as neutral (p.958).* Possible selves can also be accessible through structured interviews (Packard & Conway, 2006). Nevertheless, structured methods do not encourage input from the participants themselves apart from the answers to the predefined questions.

Therefore, narrative methods can lead to greater participant input and potential for dialogue. In this case, researchers ask participants open-ended questions about their possible selves and then analyze these descriptions. (Schouten, 1991 ; Schau et al, 2009 ; Casthilos & Fonseca, 2016). At the very least, it could also be possible to access to individual possible selves by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. In his research about future time perspective, Nuttin (1980) displayed a measurement protocol named the Motivational Induction Method consisting of 40 phrases in the beginning that the respondent must complete. In addition, a complementary method was suggested by Little (1983) aiming to explain intermediary goals. Such methods would help to screen the wide variety and complexity of individuals 'possible selves while enabling to get a big picture of them on a large scale.

Conclusion and research perspectives

Have a better understanding of who we are is a key element for a better understanding of consumption. Since the50' it has been noticed that consumption goes forwards by our primary needs. We think the possible selves concept could offer some rich research perspectives. At a theoretical level, combining this concept with other ones, such as the control theory (Sobh & Martin, 2011), can help improve our knowledge about motivation, self-control and auto-regulation. According to Oyserman (2004), possible selves act as roadmaps finding "*that having an achievement-related focus in self-concept provides some impetus to behavior and outcome change*".

At a methodological level, as we pointed out, combining qualitative and quantitative methods could greatly improve our knowledge about possible selves, and allow us to improve our assessments of possible selves at a large scale.

Lastly, access to the possible selves of customers can help managers to offer them the best suited products and services, adapted to their socio-cultural background and mental frame.

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