

A Review on Self-Discrepancy Theory and its Application on Consumer Behavioral Studies

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Abstract:

Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) was created by Higgins, in 1987, and it is still used today, in the marketing literature, to study and analyze consumer psychology and behavior. SDT includes three domains of the self (actual, ideal and own) and two standpoints on the self (own and other). Because the marketing literature tends to focus much more on the relationship between the actual/own and ideal/own, and because here in this context we are limited in time and space, this paper analyzes and comments only this part of the whole theory (conceptual paper). SDT states that a self-discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self, both viewed from the individual's own perspective, can cause a discomfort, which originates from negative emotions, and that the bigger the discrepancy, the bigger the discomfort that the individual will feel. This paper identifies inconsistencies in SDT rationale and logical thinking, arguing that, although natural in everyone, self-discrepancies do not cause negative emotions in everyone, that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-acceptance do not see these differences (between who they are today and who they wish to be) negatively, but positively, as motivating and inspiring, and that, even in case of failure, they do not reduce their self-worth to their mistakes, as they perceive errors, not only as natural and inevitable, but as necessary for growth and learning. This paper additionally concludes that to accept that all self-discrepancies cause harm, discomfort and negative emotions is to also accept that humans are doomed to feel this way for eternity, as the ideal-self state is an ever-changing, never truly reachable concept: ideal self is the way, not the destination. Finally, as humans react differently to achievement and to defeat, psychological consequences like those stated in SDT should not be generalized. Implications on consumer behavior studies are discussed.

Keywords: Self-Discrepancy Theory; Compensatory Consumption; Adaptive Consumption

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction of Paper

Higgins's interesting Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) (1987) is widely used in the marketing literature to study and analyze consumer behavior, therefore, it is important to analyze its premises and rationales. Authors such as Mandel et al. (2017), Lisjak et al. (2015), Kim & Gal (2014) and Liu et al. (2025) have applied this theory to their studies.

There is much to be said about this theory, as it focuses on many points and perspectives within oneself: one's view (own) of one's actual self, ideal self and ought self; and one's view of one's significant other's view (other) on one's actual self, ideal self and ought self. SDT additionally focuses on different types of discomforts which can originate in different types of self-discrepancies. Although it would be interesting, and, most importantly, academically relevant, to highlight all of the possible inconsistencies in SDT rationales, this paper focuses only on one, in regard to the individual's actual self/own and ideal self/own, as marketing studies of consumer behavior tend to focus much more on the individual's relationship with one's self.

As such, this paper introduces the various concepts of Self-Discrepancy Theory, its major hypothesis, and the one inconsistency regarding the relationship between one's actual self and one's ideal self. Following this analysis, this study explains the implications of such theory gaps in its application in the marketing understanding of consumer behavior. This work seeks to contribute to the academic knowledge of consumer behavior and consumer psychology, provide new insights to the marketing discipline, and, ultimately, promote interesting discussion, sparking conversation and dialogue between academics, surrounding this perspective on human behavior.

2. Self-Discrepancy Theory

The concept of self-discrepancy was first introduced by Higgins, in 1987. Self-Discrepancy Theory includes three domains of the self and two standpoints on the self, which, in combination, generate six different self-state representations (Higgins, 1987). These self-state representations can have differences between each other, or discrepancies (the greater the difference, the greater the magnitude of the discrepancy), which can then create discomfort and negative emotions, including dejection-related emotions (e.g., sadness), associated with the absence of positive outcomes, and agitation-related emotions (e.g., fear), associated with the presence of negative outcomes (Higgins, 1987). The likelihood of a discomfort increases

with the presence of a discrepancy (availability) and the ease with which the individual remembers/uses it to process information (accessibility) (Higgins, 1987). The major hypothesis of SDT is that “the greater the magnitude and accessibility of a particular type of self-discrepancy possessed by an individual, the more the individual will suffer the kind of discomfort associated with that type of self-discrepancy” (Higgins, 1987: p. 324).

2.1. The domains of the self

As previously said, Higgins (1987) introduces three domains of the self: the actual self (i.e., who someone, you or someone else, believes you actually are today), the ideal self (i.e., who someone, you or someone else, hopes, believes or wishes you could become) and the ought self (i.e., who someone, you or someone else, considers you should be).

It is known and accepted that humans have goals, desires and wishes for themselves (Rogers, 1961). These personal goals, i.e., who we strive to be, are most related to the purpose each one of us sees in reality (Rogers, 1961). The goals we set for ourselves tell us how we see life, and how we wish to live through it: some people may aspire to be responsible and moral individuals, some may aspire to be self-sufficient, for example, while others may simply wish to enjoy the simple pleasures and relax (Rogers, 1961). In addition to what we wish to be (i.e., our ideal self), there is also our ought self, or who we think we should be (Higgins, 1987; Rogers, 1961). It is important to have an ideal state of oneself, or to have “standards”, as Higgins (1987, p: 321) points out, because it motivates action and creates motivating emotions (James, 1908). Seminal literature suggests that it is normal for humans to have desires and goals – in other words, it is normal to have ambition and to seek our ideal self (James, 1908; Rogers, 1961; Higgins, 1987). Therefore, one could also say that it is normal for our actual self to be different from our ideal self. By stating this, one could additionally say that it is normal for a person to have a self-discrepancy between one’s actual self and one’s ideal self.

If we were to follow Self-Discrepancy Theory’s rationale, we would expect that it would also be normal for everyone to feel a discomfort caused by said discrepancy. More specifically, it would be expected that a difference between one’s own actual self and one’s own ideal self, would cause dejection-related emotions, including sadness, disappointment and dissatisfaction (Higgins, 1987). But is that always the case? James (1908) stated that our self-feeling in life depends on who set ourselves to be. He equaled one’s self-esteem to a function dividing success and pretensions, defending that “To give up pretensions is as

blessed a relief as to get them gratified (...) How pleasant is the day when we give up striving to be young, —or slender! (...) we say, *those* illusions are gone” (James, 1908, p: 311).

Perceived negative self-discrepancies can, then, originate from unrealistic pretensions, or unrealistic expectations about one’s success, from the perspective the individual carries about him/herself. As an individual sets difficult goals for oneself, and, in result, cannot achieve them, he/she will tend to feel worse about his/her own value and worth: as Higgins (1987) says, he/she will feel sad and dissatisfied. Crocker & Park (2004, p: 393) also relate the pursuit of goals to one’s self-esteem, stating: “Success at these goals not only means “I succeeded” but also “I am a success and therefore I feel worthy.” Failure not only means “I failed” but also “I am a failure and therefore I feel worthless.””.

However, Crocker & Park (2004) also mention that not everyone will see themselves as *unworthy* after they have failed at a certain task, as it can depend on various factors, such as: (1) if the individual’s self-worth is contingent on success on the specific domain of the task, and (2) whether he/she views failures as specific (just a task) rather than global (the whole self).

2.2. *An analysis of the ideal self, individual goals and self-esteem*

With the intent of analyzing the notion of the *ideal self*, it would be relevant to note some points. First, there is no ideal self in the timeline of existence – it is not real, absolute or even stagnant. Our ideal self is a psychological concept that we carry about ourselves, in which we imagine a situation where we have achieved all of the goals that we have set out to achieve for ourselves (James, 1908). Indeed, our ideal self is an ever-changing concept – that is why it is called the «ideal». Every time we achieve a goal, we create a new one. Thus, we will never quite fully truly reach our «ideal self», because, even if and when we achieve it, we update it to a new and higher state – what psychology calls the self-regulatory process (Theobald et al., 2025). In this process, depending on the case of success or failure, individuals will self-regulate their goals (Theobald et al., 2025). To accept that a difference, or a discrepancy, between who we are today and who we wish to become can cause negative emotions is to also accept that we will live in discomfort for eternity. Indeed, some people do.

But just like the majority of things in life, success and failure are not felt in the same way by everyone: success, on the one hand, can make people feel excited and proud of themselves, making some people want to achieve something even higher or better, and some people satisfied with what they have right now, wishing to maintain it; failure, on the other hand, can

make people feel frustrated and disappointed, making some people want to give up pursuing a certain dream, and other people want to try even harder (Theobald et al., 2025).

Self-Discrepancy Theory states that having a self-discrepancy between one's actual self and one's ideal self, from the perspective of oneself, causes a discomfort which then creates negative emotions, but that is just not always the case, and it is ungeneralizable. To generalize something like this is an incomplete analysis of our complex human cognitive reality. Not everyone feels sad that their actual self is different from their ideal self, not everyone feels negatively about a self-discrepancy – that depends on the individual perspective each one of us carries in life, and on the expectations, or pretensions, we keep setting up for ourselves. Indeed, Crocker & Park (2004) argue that, because the costs of the pursuit of self-esteem (setting up specific goals associated with one's own worth) tend to outweigh the benefits, as the emotional implications of failures are stronger than the ones felt in the case of success, individuals can limit their aspirations, as a way to protect their own peace.

It becomes very important to understand that self-esteem is an emotion in which humans understand that they themselves have meaning, are worthy, are strong and capable, and, because of it, also understand, and ultimately accept, that errors, mistakes and setbacks are a normal part of life – additionally, that they (the mistakes) are, in the end, the best resources one could ever use to truly learn and be better. Neglecting them, denying their existence, trying our hardest to delete them from existence will lead us to a very sad life. Understanding that we have not yet achieved our ideal self is not a bad thing whatsoever – well, depending on the perspective you carry in life, as we have seen. If you understand that development and growth take effort and time, if you understand that it is *because* they take time and effort that they carry so much value, you will never be sad that you have not yet met your goals, or that you have not yet achieved your «ideal self». A true self-loving individual, understanding that he/she has value, also understands what he/she is worthy, no matter what happens. A true self-loving individual does not limit him/herself to his/her mistakes and does not think that all he/she is worth is his/her errors. This way of thinking regards itself to a low self-esteem minded individual, where there is no self-worthiness, only self-deprecation.

And as such, self-discrepancy, natural in everyone, as “people tend to set goals for continuous improvement” (Theobald et al., 2025: p. 2), can be felt in two ways: positive and negative. Some people may interpret having a self-discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self as a good thing. It is good that an individual sets goals for him or herself, goals which are superior from him or her, goals which he or she has to work hard to achieve. It is good that an individual does not see him or her as his or her ideal self – it shows ambition, a

notion of needed development, a need to be better, do be different, to not be stagnant. It shows modesty: “I am not perfect, but I want to improve”. From another perspective, some people may experience this situation and feel sad, depressed or unmotivated, because, maybe, (1) they failed to achieve a certain goal after having set unrealistic goals or (2) they do not understand the infinite and never-achieving conceptualization of the ideal self.

The reasons that lie behind setting up unrealistic goals for oneself and feeling sad and depressed after not having achieved them are multiple and very complex. Self-efficacy, a construct known in Bandura’s seminal work (1991), is most relevant in human self-regulatory processes, and relates to the individual’s belief in his/her own efficacy to achieve his/her own goals and desires. Low self-efficacy, in Bandura’s theory (1991), can result from past failures. Self-efficacy is closely related to self-esteem, as it is also widely accepted that the more self-efficacy a person has, the more self-esteem that person also has (i.e., the more he/she values him/herself) (Chen et al., 2004). Nevertheless, these constructs should be seen as different, as they differ with respect to their relative emphasis on motivational components (self-efficacy) versus affective components (self-esteem) (Chen et al., 2004).

The rationale that relates self-esteem to the pursuit of goals is that a self-loving individual knows exactly what he/she needs to do to increase and decrease his/her self-esteem, as that seems to be the ultimate human goal, the “higher order goal”: “people differ in what they believe they must be or do to be a worthy and valuable person, and therefore in what types of events produce a boost or a drop in their self-esteem” (Crocker & Park, 2004, p: 393). Just as James (1908) said, Crocker & Pack (2004) agree, that is it exactly the things which we base our self-worth that increase our self-esteem – but it is important to note: individuals are not completely out of control when it comes to this: we know what is unrealistic and unachievable, and, by contrast, what is not; we know what matters and what does not; we care about the domains which we relate to our self-worth and do not care as much about the others. And that is not random, it is a choice (James 1908), guided by self-esteem (Crocker & Pack, 2004).

2.3. Self-discrepancy theory inconsistency

Just so, all of these seminal works allow us to comment on this SDT inconsistency: *not all individuals feel negatively about the self-discrepancies between their own actual self and their own ideal self.*

To summarize, one's ideal self is created by oneself, it is in the individual's control to increase, decrease or maintain (self-regulatory process), and, ultimately, it is in congruence with what the individual believes makes him/herself worthy or a person with value. The goals created by the individuals are in the individual's control to increase, decrease or maintain; it is the individual's choice to keep seeking a specific success at a specific task; it is the individual's choice to keep seeking a specific task in which he/she has failed. Not everyone associates their failures in performances as failures in one's own self. Not everyone keeps seeking a specific pursuit if the act of seeking it keeps making him/her feel unworthy – some people choose peace (James, 1908; Crocker & Pack, 2004).

We are not all the same.

3. Implications for Consumer Behavioral Studies

Self-Discrepancy Theory is well known in the Marketing doctrine, working as a baseline for human psychology, and, naturally, consumer psychology. It is still used today to analyze and explain consumer behavior (Mandel et al., 2017; Lisjak et al., 2015; Kim & Gal, 2014; Liu et al., 2025).

Mandel et al. (2017) introduced the Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model, in which they analyze how self-discrepancies can increase or decrease consumer behavior, i.e., how self-discrepancies guide consumer behavior and how consumers consume in order to resolve their self-discrepancies. On another light, Lisjak et al. (2015) studied an interesting part of compensatory consumption, stating that, sometimes, focusing too much on a self-discrepancy can cause ill effects, and that compensatory consumption can be ineffective as it can trigger ruminative thinking of a threat the consumer might feel like they have. In this perspective, compensatory consumer behavior can actually strengthen a self-discrepancy, instead of reducing it (Lisjak et al., 2015). Finally, Liu et al. (2025) separate compensatory consumption from adaptive consumption (Kim & Gal, 2014), arguing that consumers engage in compensatory consumption to escape their self-discrepancies (Mandel et al., 2017), and in adaptive consumption to resolve them (Kim & Gal, 2014), and studied the moderating effects of self-efficacy.

As seen, this theory is used as a baseline for thought, logic and rationale in marketing's literature studies. Because of this, it is important to understand how the inconsistency we have identified applies to some of the theories that marketing academics have created, to understand consumer behavior through the psychology theory of Self-Discrepancy.

3.1. Compensatory Versus Adaptive Consumption

As said before, marketing theories on consumer behavior focus much more on self-discrepancies between the self (own/own), more specifically, between the actual/own and the ideal/own. Both compensatory consumption (Mandel et al., 2017) and adaptive consumption (Kim & Gal, 2014) rationales explain that individuals engage in consumption as a way to deal with their self-discrepancies.

The term Compensatory Consumption was first introduced in the 60s, used to suggest that low-income families or consumers would engage in specific consumption behaviors to compensate for inner feelings of disadvantage, or non-rational forces (Koles et al., 2017). Gould (1993) reported that discrepancies between individuals' ideal and actual self-views can originate compensatory practices. Then, it became academically accepted that such practices could include consumption (Koles et al., 2017).

Mandel et al. (2017) analyzed how a self-discrepancy can trigger an emotional desire to reduce a self-discrepancy, which can then originate a set of identifiable consumer behaviors. They introduce five coping strategies when a consumer is faced with a self-discrepancy: direct resolution, symbolic-self completion, dissociation, escapism and fluid compensation (Mandel et al., 2017). In direct resolution, consumers purchase goods that directly resolve a self-discrepancy (Mandel et al., 2017). In symbolic-self completion, consumers engage in consumption that signals mastery in a certain domain regarded as relevant for self-worth, therefore reducing a discrepancy (Mandel et al., 2017). In dissociation, individuals will engage in behaviors which separate themselves from products/services which are related to a self-discrepancy (Mandel et al., 2017). In escapism, consumers will distance themselves from products/services which remind them of a self-discrepancy, as a form of denial (Mandel et al., 2017). Finally, in fluid compensation, consumers will purchase goods which reduce another self-discrepancy that they have, motivated by one they seemingly cannot reduce (Mandel et al., 2017).

As seen, and just like we have noted in the SDT inconsistency, individuals act differently in the same situations, because the emotions that they feel, and the perspective that they carry, also differ interpersonally. Kim & Gal (2014) argued that individuals who have more self-acceptance will tend to engage in behaviors which actually resolve a self-discrepancy (direct resolution and symbolic-self completion), while others with less self-acceptance will tend to engage in behaviors which do not (dissociation and escapism). These authors define an

individual's self-acceptance as "the detachment of one's self-worth from one's self-assessment" (Kim & Gal, 2014: p. 527), meaning that individuals accept and value who they are no matter what happens.

This perspective that the self is not perfect but nevertheless is worthy, this willingness to solve a discrepancy that the individual believes is solvable, this realistic view on life, compared to the ideology that the individual's worth is reduced by one's mistakes, is exactly what is missing from Self-Discrepancy Theory. Higgins (1987) states that everyone feels negatively about a self-discrepancy, and that only high achievers keep trying to resolve it, while low achievers tend to give up more easily. While the second part of that statement is correct, the first indeed is not: Higgins (1987) fails to see that it is exactly because individuals have low self-worth that they feel negative about a self-discrepancy, and that they cannot seem to resolve it: they do not believe it is resolvable. High-achievers, or individuals with higher levels of self-worth/esteem/acceptance, do not feel bad, sad, scared or frustrated about a self-discrepancy, but inspired and motivated. That discrepancy, that difference, is made up of some people's goals, dreams and desires in life (good). While for some other individuals it is made up of their insecurities, fears and threats (bad). Just so, the implications of the SDT inconsistency between one's actual self and one's ideal self in consumer behavior studies include the notion that, although the big majority of humans have self-discrepancies between their actual self and their ideal self (because most of us have dreams and goals), not everyone feels negatively about them (individuals with high self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-acceptance do not), and, as so, not everyone has to "compensate" through consumption.

Some individuals want to be more intelligent, or well-read, believe they can be, and, as such, they buy a book (direct resolution) (Mandel, et al., 2017). Discrepancy solved (for the moment). Some individuals feel insecure that they are not intelligent, believe that they could never be intelligent even if they tried, and, therefore, buy a car to make themselves feel better (fluid compensation, compensatory consumption) (Mandel, et al., 2017). Discrepancy not solved. Seeing life with rose glasses helps deal with its challenges in such a way individuals can even start to enjoy it. For the human in the consumer: discrepancies will always come back, may we welcome them as good things, as our goals and desires – the mark we would like to leave in this life. For the academics and researchers: consumers who buy books because they want to read are just buying books, let us pay more attention to the ones who are actually trying to cure an internal wound through the things they acquire.

We only try to solve the problems we believe are solvable.

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