

Research Review

# The Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model: How self-discrepancies drive consumer behavior

Naomi Mandel <sup>a,\*</sup>, Derek D. Rucker <sup>b</sup>, Jonathan Levav <sup>c</sup>, Adam D. Galinsky <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Arizona State University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Northwestern University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Stanford University, United States

<sup>d</sup> Columbia University, United States

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## Abstract

Consumer goods and services have psychological value that can equal or exceed their functional value. A burgeoning literature demonstrates that one source of value emerges from the capacity for products to serve as a psychological salve that reduces various forms of distress across numerous domains. This review systematically organizes and integrates the literature on the use of consumer behavior as a means to regulate self-discrepancies, or the incongruities between how one currently perceives oneself and how one desires to view oneself (Higgins, 1987). We introduce a Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model to explain the psychological consequences of self-discrepancies on consumer behavior. This model delineates five distinct strategies by which consumers cope with self-discrepancies: *direct resolution*, *symbolic self-completion*, *dissociation*, *escapism*, and *fluid compensation*. Finally, the authors raise critical questions to guide future research endeavors. Overall, the present review provides both a primer on compensatory consumer behavior and sets an agenda for future research.

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**Keywords:** Self concept; Social comparison; Materialism; Conspicuous consumption; Self regulation; Self discrepancy

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\* Corresponding author at: W. P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, PO Box 874106, Tempe, AZ 85287-4016, United States.

E-mail address: [Naomi.Mandel@asu.edu](mailto:Naomi.Mandel@asu.edu) (N. Mandel).

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Consumption provides significant psychological value beyond the mere functional utility offered by products and services (Ariely & Norton, 2009; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Indeed, a pure functionalist account cannot explain consumers' purchases of items such as \$250 blue jeans and \$15,000 watches. Previous research has established a variety of deeper psychological motives for consumption, such as status signaling (Veblen, 1899), experiential pleasure (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), and extensions of the self (Belk, 1988). In this review article, we focus on understanding how consumption helps people cope with self-discrepancies.

A self-discrepancy is an incongruity between how one currently perceives oneself and how one desires to view oneself (Higgins, 1987). For example, an individual can experience a discrepancy between his or her desired ambition (e.g., to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company) and realized position (e.g., currently a manager at a small regional company). Discrepancies can occur in domains as varied as one's intelligence, sense of power, or belongingness in a social group. In this review, we present a theoretical model — the Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model — to understand why a self-discrepancy triggers a motivation to reduce that discrepancy, and how this motivation leads to an identifiable set of consumer behaviors. We introduce the term *compensatory consumer behavior* to indicate any purchase, use, or consumption of products or services motivated by a desire to offset or reduce a self-discrepancy (Gronmo, 1997; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Woodruffe, 1997). Moreover, we discuss how self-discrepancies can both increase and decrease consumption behavior.

In this review, we offer an integrative model to identify the sequence of steps through which self-discrepancies produce downstream consequences on consumption. Whereas prior work has reviewed the relationship between self-discrepancies and behavior broadly (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), we emphasize — and identify for the first time — five distinct strategies that consumers use to cope with self-discrepancies. We begin by providing an overview of our model. Next, we review evidence suggesting that different sources of self-discrepancy affect consumer behavior. Subsequently we discuss the cognitive, affective, and physiological consequences of self-discrepancies that give rise to a motivation to reduce the self-discrepancy. At the heart of our review, we introduce, define, and provide evidence for five conceptually distinct strategies by which people use consumer behavior to cope with self-discrepancies. We next present evidence that consumption can alleviate or reduce the negative psychological consequences of self-discrepancies. With past research

integrated into our model, we introduce future research questions. Finally, we discuss the relationship between our model and other models of psychological compensation. Ultimately, this review is intended to serve as both a primer for those interested in understanding the basic relationship between psychological self-discrepancies and consumer behavior, as well as a catalyst for future research.

## Overview of the Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model

The human psyche attempts to maintain stable levels of psychological assets related to the self, such as self-esteem, belongingness, feelings of power, and feelings of control over one's environment (Crocker & Park, 2004; Kay, Wheeler, & Smeesters, 2008; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). As part of this self-regulation process, individuals monitor the distance between their present state (or actual self) and a goal state (or ideal self; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1987).

The potential for compensatory consumer behavior begins when a person perceives a self-discrepancy, or an inconsistency between one's ideal and actual self (Higgins, 1987). For example, a person who fails an important test might view himself as unintelligent, and thus experience a self-discrepancy between how he currently sees himself (i.e., unintelligent) and how he wants to see himself (i.e., intelligent). Typically, an event occurs that either triggers a self-discrepancy (such as scoring poorly on a test) or that makes an existing self-discrepancy more salient (such as being reminded about a recent failure). For instance, exposure to idealized (vs. average-looking) advertising models can increase the discrepancy between participants' ideal and actual self-ratings (Sobol & Darke, 2014), social exclusion can increase the distance between one's actual and desired level of belongingness (Lee & Shrum, 2012), and having fewer job offers than one's peers can make one feel less competent than expected in one's career (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982). In our framework, we refer to such events as *sources of self-discrepancy*. Many previous researchers on this topic have not interpreted their findings explicitly in terms of self-discrepancy; in doing so, we synthesize and unify previously distinct findings (MacInnis, 2011).

Self-discrepancies have several important features. First, they can arise in a variety of domains (i.e., skill sets or areas of value), such as intelligence, sense of power, or affiliation. Second, self-discrepancies are typically psychologically aversive (Higgins, 1987; Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). Third, due to the aversive nature of self-discrepancies, people are motivated to engage in self-regulation efforts to

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