Congruency Between Self as Communicated by Product Ensembles and Self as Perceived by Peers – Do the Two Match?

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ABSTRACT

The use of products and brands to communicate aspects of the self has extensively been the subject of research (Escales & Bettman, 2005, Flynn et al., 2011; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Empirical studies have examined the use of products and brands to communicate a range of aspects such as membership of reference groups or communities (White & Dahl, 2007); class, status, and lifestyle (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004); personality differences (Nevia & Pastna, 2014); ethnicity and culture (Jamal & Chapman, 2000). Studies have also addressed the notion of interpreting or decoding consumption symbolism (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk et al. 1982; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Paasovaara et al. 2012). These studies suggest that consumers make judgments or inferences about self-related characteristics of product users from the products that belong to the person. Such studies gather data employing projective techniques by asking participants to make judgments about, for example, the type of people who would use the products presented or described (see Boddy, 2005; Haire, 1950; Fram & Cibotti, 1991; Porr et al., 2011; Steinmann, 2009). In this regard, the decoding literature has studied a number of product categories such as food and grocery (Doherty and Nelson 2010), automobiles and housing (Belk et al., 1982; Desmet et al., 2000; Grubb & Stern, 1971), miscellaneous products (Belk, 2013) and cosmetics (Mick et al., 1992; Tantiseneepong, 2012).

However, there is little specific research on whether senders' intended self-related characteristics match with those received by audiences. Research on product choices in relation to the self has tended to be restricted to researcher-selected products or product categories and specific aspects of the self. Grubb and Stern (1971) had owners of two automobile brands rate perceptions of their selves, of automobile brands, and owners of each brand of automobile. The study finds both consumers and their significant others hold similar stereotypes of owners of automobile brands. Feinberg et al. (1992) asked female subjects to display an outfit that best reflected their personality and then rate their personality on a series of rating scales. An independent group of subjects was presented with the photographs of the chosen outfits and instructed to infer owner personalities utilizing the same rating scales. While the Grubb and Stern (1971) study involved no direct matching of self-related characteristics between consumers and their observers, both product and test item choices in the Feinberg et al. study (1992) were pre-determined by the researcher, thus being a limited investigation of whether senders' intended self-related characteristics match with those received by audiences.

What remains outside the scope of such studies is the identification of consumers' intended self-related characteristics in relation to their product choices, and the investigation of congruency between consumers' intended self-related characteristics and those accorded by audiences. This study addresses this gap. It allows young adult consumers the autonomy to self-select a range of products that communicate self-related characteristics to peer audiences. The study identifies the self-related characteristics that consumers express through their product choices, and further investigates congruency between consumers' product-related self-characteristics and observer selections. More specifically, the study examines the following questions:

1. How successful are young adult consumers in communicating aspects of their selves to peer audiences via their product ensemble choices?
2. Is there evidence of congruency between consumers' ('senders') product ensemble self-related characteristics and observers' (receivers') inferences? If so, to what extent?

COMMUNICATION OF THE SELF

The notion of congruency in an expressive or symbolic context refers to consumers' choices of products and brands that are congruent with and express or symbolize aspects of the self to one's own self and to others. A number of studies provide support for the idea that a person's self is projected onto product choice and that consumers seek products with images congruent with their concept of self (Flynn, 2011; Grubb & Stern, 1971; Phau & Lau, 2001). Central to such choice is the issue of self-presentation or impression management. Impression management refers to the idea that individuals or senders establish and maintain impressions that are congruent with the perceptions they want to convey to their audience (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980, 1985). Senders encode meanings in the choices they make, and rely on receivers to suitably decode the same. Such notions recognize the value of congruency theories originally proposed by Rogers's self-congruency theory (1951), Rokeach' Belief Congruence theory (1960) and Heider's Balance theory (1958). In essence, these theories suggest that consistency in understanding and shared meaning is integral to successful communication within social groups (Hummon & Doreian, 2003; Teichert & Schöntag 2010; Woodside 2004).

Within the consumer behaviour realm, congruency has been studied either in terms of product image-self image or product image and observer perceptions of product owners (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012; Hosany & Martin 2012; Teichert & Schöntag, 2010). The question of whether there is a discernible pattern of characteristics that are communicated and whether there are boundaries to congruency remains unaddressed. The intent of this study is to expand self-product congruency theory in accordance with Rokeach' Belief Congruence theory (1960) and Heider's Balance theory (1958), which propose that congruency should exist between the three entities - the self, perceived product symbolism, and the 'other' (the audience). Accordingly, our study proposes a model and investigates whether congruency of self-related characteristics associated with products exists between the self and the 'other' (the audience) (see Figure 1) and if so, to what extent.

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on young adult consumers between 18 and 21 years of age, a period most often associated with the transition from adolescence to full-fledged adulthood (Benson, 2014; Erikson, 1968; Johnson et al., 2007; Moschis & Churchill, 1978) and the symbolic use of products to construct and communicate the self (Galican, 2004; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004). The study employed autophotography as a data collection technique (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Noland, 2006; Wang, Burris & Ping, 1996; Ziller, 1990). The method involves giving participants a camera and asking them to take photographs of significant aspects in a given context, for example, as in

Figure 1: Model of Encoding and Decoding Congruency for roduct Meaning in Relation to the Self
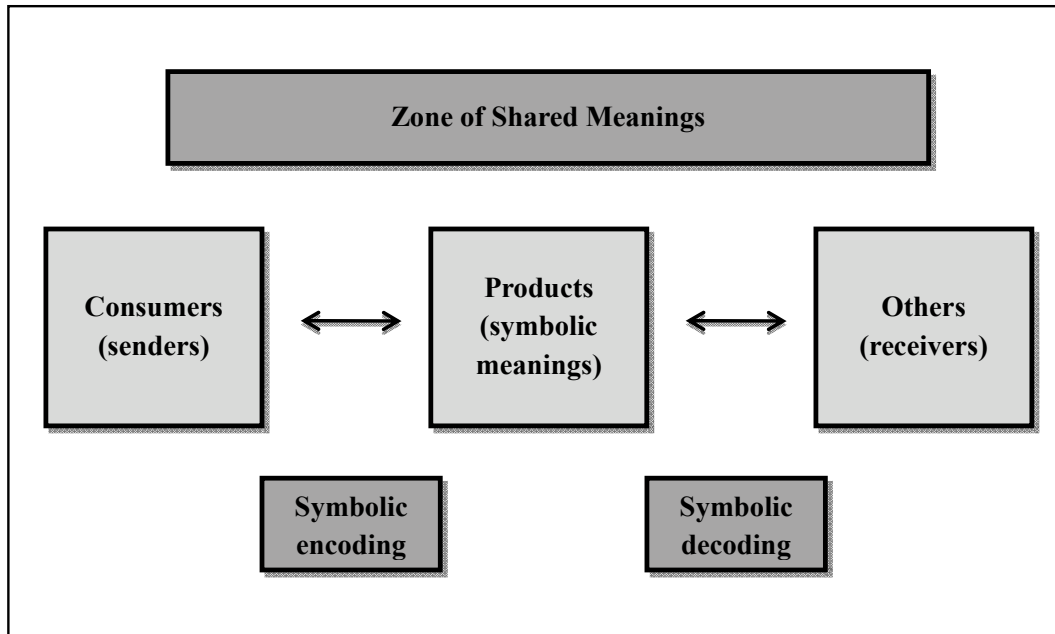
this study, products that express aspects of the self. Auto-photography allows consumers to express themselves fully and meaningfully, and enables a wider and detailed view from a researcher perspective. In Phase One, 28 young adults aged 18 to 21 years were voluntarily directed to photograph products that they considered said something about their self to their peers. Following which, each participant was invited to discuss what each of the photographs communicated about their-selves to their peers. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and content analysed (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Krippendorff 2004) to generate a list of self-related characteristics spoken of by the 28 participants. These characteristics were defined as expressed aspects of the self associated with photographed products.

For the purposes of examining congruency, the photographs of products and brands taken by four of the 28 subjects formed the stimulus material for Phase Two of data gathering. The four individuals were chosen based on their ability to speak of their self-related characteristics in relation to selected products in sufficient depth in order to establish saliency of articulated self-related characteristics (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Wang, Burris & Ping, 1996). The study assumes that if this set of four participants could communicate self-related characteristics in relation to selected products, and was successful in doing so, so would be others. The self-related characteristics listed by all four participants - henceforth referred by pseudonyms of Kate, John, Abby, and Peter - were compiled to construct an initial list of characteristics.

In Phase Two, photographs selected by these four participants (senders) were presented as a photo collage to respondents (receivers) who comprised undergraduate students aged 18 to 21 years, from two universities in a large city in New Zealand. Data was collected using an online survey. Respondents were invited on a voluntary basis to view the four sets of photographs and subsequently directed to a list of characteristics and asked to select those that they associated with the photographs viewed. The extent to which respondents were able to successfully select the characteristics the four individuals intended to communicate was tested using probability theory (Black, 2009; Miller et al., 2010).

For Kate, the photo collage included a bag (Louis Vuitton), fruit, a pair of jeans (Ksubi), a pair of sunglasses (Gucci), perfumes (Lancome and Christian Dior) and a car (VW Golf). On interview, Kate revealed 15 characteristics of her self that her selection of possessions represented. For John, the photo collage included dance sports gear (dress, shirt, dance shoes, dance jacket), necklaces (with Maori symbols), a t-shirt (with Maori symbol), a bag (Billabong), a belt (QuickSilver), shorts (Mossimo), shampoo, deodorant, asthma and hay fever pills, scuba tank for diving, a fishing rod, vodka (Smirnoff) and beer (Tui), an iPod, computer and a mobile phone. John expressed 16 characteristics of his self in his selection of possessions. For Abby, the photo collage included a health care book, a pair of running shoes (Nike), alcohol (Lindauer and Malibu), cellphones, a high-waisted skirt, a wall planner, a pair of sunglasses, an iPod, flyers, strawberries, and perfume (Yves Saint Laurent Baby Doll). Abby expressed 14 characteristics of her self in her selection of possessions. For Peter, the photo collage included perfume (Ralph Lauren), a t-shirt (Ralph Lauren), a belt (Bob Marley), a guitar, two cars (Holden Commodore and Honda), a school rugby jersey, the New Zealand flag, and alcohol (42 below). Peter expressed 16 characteristics of his self in his selection of possessions.

Compilation of the Master List of Self-Related Characteristics

The characteristics for each of the four senders were compiled into a master list of 40 self-related characteristics. Ten further items that did not feature on any of the lists of selected profiles were included in the master list. The rationale for inclusion of these items was to make the checklist task more challenging for respondents (i.e., to select from a list of 50 which included ten items that described none of the four profiles), and thus enhance the robustness of the statistical testing. The additional ten items included were: does not like to waste money; humble; is rebellious; likes to spend time on their own; lacks self-confidence; physically big; likes to cooperate with others; sincere and caring of others; undisciplined and self-indulgent; unsympathetic and unfeeling. The final master list of characteristics for the rating task by respondents was thus produced (See Table 1 below).

TABLE 1: RESULTS
Table 1.1: List of Self-Related Characteristics

Aims High	Has a sense of humour	Pacific Islander
Busy	Has had a good upbringing	Physically big
Cares about their family	Humble	Politically aware and believes in democratic socialism
Cares about personal grooming	Intelligent and clever	
Catholic	Interested in the Arts	Relaxed and Easy going
Confident	Is rebellious	Respects culture and people
Cool	Lacks self-confidence	Sincere and caring of others
Different from others	Likes music	Sociable and likes to have fun
Does not like to waste money	Likes the best and posh	Soft and cuddly
Dominant and determined personality	Likes to cooperate with others	Talented
Enjoys drinking	Likes to fit in	Techno-smart
Enjoys the outdoors	Likes to spend time on their own	Trendy and fashion conscious
Healthy, Fit and active (physically)	Lively and outgoing	Trend setter
Free spirited	Loves Rugby	Undisciplined and self-indulgent
Friendly	Loves what they are studying	University student
From New Zealand	Maori	Unsympathetic and unfeeling
Happy	Organized	Well-off financially

Table 1.2: Characteristics of Senders Correctly Identified (Hits) by 50 percent More of Receivers

Kate	John	Abby	Peter
Aims High (56.5%)	Cares about personal grooming (59.6%)	Busy (56.9%)	Healthy, fit and active (73.9%)
Cares about personal grooming (79.1%)	Cool (55.2%)	Cares about personal grooming (63.0%)	From New Zealand (67.8%)
Confident (76.1%)	Enjoys drinking (85. 2%)	Confident (56.5%)	
Enjoys the outdoors (57.4%)	Healthy, fit and active (76.9%)	Enjoys drinking (79.6%)	Likes music (66.1%)
Healthy, fit and active (56.1%)	Lively and outgoing (61.7%)	Healthy, fit and active (59.1%)	
Likes the best and posh (65.2%)		Lively and outgoing (53.5%)	Loves Rugby (74.8%)
Sociable and likes to have fun (66.9%)		Sociable and likes to have fun (62.6%)	
Trendy and fashion conscious (74.8%)		University student (53.5%)	

Table 1.3: Characteristics Incorrectly Attributed (False Hits) to Senders by 50% or More of Receivers

Kate	John	Abby	Peter
Cool (64.8%)	Busy (65.2%)	Cool (51.7%)	Cool (50.9%)
Well-off financially (73.8%);	Confident (69.1%)	Likes music (57.8%)	Confident (50.4%)
	Enjoys the outdoors (73.0%)	Likes to keep in touch with friends (59.6%)	Enjoys drinking (80.9%)
	Free-spirited (56.1%)		Physically big (67.8%)
	From New Zealand (59.6%)		
	Sociable and likes to have fun (57.8%)		

Table 1.4 : Common Characteristics Selected by 50% or More of Receivers

Characteristic	Kate	John	Abby	Peter
Cares about personal grooming	√	√	√	?
Healthy, fit and active	√	√	√	√
Sociable and likes to have fun	√	X	√	?
Cool	X	√	X	X
Confident	√	X	√	X
Enjoys drinking	-	√	√	X

√ = self-stated and identified
? = self-stated but not identified
X = not self-stated but chosen
- = neither self-stated nor identified

Table 1.5: Self-Stated Characteristics Decoded by Fewer than 50% of Receivers

Kate	John	Abby	Peter
Different from others Dominant and determined personality Free spirited Happy Has had a good upbringing Trend setter University student	Cares about their family Different from others Dominant and determined personality Enjoys the outdoors Has a sense of humour Interested in the Arts Likes the best and posh Likes to fit in Maori Respects culture and people Techno-smart	Different from others Intelligent and clever Loves what they are studying Organized Politically aware and believes in democratic socialism Trendy and fashion conscious	Aims high Cares about their family Cares about personal grooming Catholic Dominant and determined personality Friendly Pacific Islander Relaxed and easy going Sociable and likes to have fun Soft and cuddly Talented Well-off financially

RESULTS

All senders and receivers were residents of a large city in New Zealand and between 18 to 21 years of age. A total of 230 receivers completed the Phase Two survey. The hypergeometric distribution was used as the basis for calculating probabilities. The receiver task of selecting 14 (or 15 or 16) characteristics of the sender from a checklist of 50 items is equivalent to the task of selecting a sample from a population, without replacement (Miller et al., 2010). The probability of selecting the correct 14 (or 15 or 16) items out of a population of 50 is modelled by the hypergeometric distribution (Black, 2009; Miller et al., 2010). For the task of correctly identifying 15 items out of 50, a receiver could choose up to 7 items purely by chance, with a likelihood greater than five percent. But the probability of selecting 8 or more items correctly is only p=0.019. In other words, any receiver who selects 8 or more of Kate's characteristics has successfully decoded the sender message at levels beyond chance occurrence; thus 8 is the *critical value* in this test of probability (Miller et al., 2010).

The same process was applied to calculate the critical value for the remaining three senders. John used 16 descriptors to describe himself. After viewing John's profile as presented in the collage of photographs, receivers were asked to choose exactly 16 items from the checklist of 50. The critical value for this task is 8 (p=0.047). Abby used 14 characteristics to describe herself. After viewing Abby's profile as presented in the collage of photographs, receivers were asked to choose exactly 14 items from the checklist of 50. The critical value for this task is 7 (p=0.031). Peter used 16 characteristics to describe himself. After viewing Peter's profile as presented in the collage of photographs, receivers were asked to choose exactly 16 items from the checklist of 50. The critical value for this task is 8 (p=0.047).

Table 1.2 lists the characteristics of senders correctly identified ('hits') by 50% or more of receivers. Table 1.3 shows characteristics incorrectly attributed to senders by 50% or more of receivers ('false hits'). In other words, it displays those characteristics that senders did not use to describe themselves, yet are attributed to senders by receivers. Table 1.4 shows common characteristics (hits and false hits) selected by 50% or more receivers across senders. Table 1.5 shows self-attributed characteristics of senders not selected by 50% or more receivers.

As seen in Table 1.2, receivers correctly identify 8 out of 15 self-attributed characteristics for Kate, 5 out of 16 for John, 8 out of 14 for Abby, and 4 out of 16 for Peter. Senders are able to successfully communicate some self-related characteristics via their product

ensemble choices. An explanation for the successful communication of the selected self-related characteristics in Table 1.2 lies in the socially observable nature of these self-related characteristics. This suggests that self-related characteristics of these consumers that are externally oriented and socially observable had a better chance of being correctly decoded.

Table 1.3 shows characteristics not self-articulated by senders, yet identified by receivers from a master list of characteristics. In other words, receivers attribute these characteristics to senders from the photographs of products they see, even though senders do not use these characteristics to describe themselves. Even though senders do not consciously intend to communicate these aspects, or do not consider the selected self-related characteristics as salient to them, yet receivers attribute these characteristics to the sender based upon the products and brands displayed. In this, product ensembles have communicated more meaning than senders intended.

Table 1.4 shows commonly identified characteristics across senders. These young adults were more successful in communicating to others that they *care about personal grooming,* are *healthy, fit and active, sociable and like to have fun, cool, confident,* and *enjoy drinking.* Even though only one sender uses the word *cool,* and only two senders articulate that they are *confident,* yet both these words feature as common characteristics, picked up by 50% or more of receivers across all four senders. Conversely, some self-attributed characteristics of senders are decoded by fewer than 50% of receivers (see Table 1.5). Self-stated characteristics not decoded by receivers include 7 items for Kate; 11 for John; 6 for Abby; and 12 for Peter.

Two characteristics - *different from others* and *dominant and determined personality* - commonly expressed by three participants are not picked up at all. Other characteristics, such as *free spirited, happy, has a sense of humour, respects culture and people, politically aware and believes in democratic socialism, soft and cuddly, talented* are not perceived by receivers. This is likely owing to the internally-oriented, personal nature of these characteristics. This means even though consumers may assign internally-oriented characteristics to their selves and assume these are communicated to others, yet these very characteristics, if not sufficiently socially observable, are not readily decoded by an audience of peers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that young adult consumers are able to successfully communicate some characteristics of their selves. The study further suggests, self-related characteristics that

are successfully communicated tend to be socially-oriented and so-cially observable. On the other hand, young adult consumers are not especially successful in communicating self-related characteristics when these are personal, inwardly-oriented, or not socially observ-able. This means there is limited absolute congruency between self-related characteristics as communicated by consumers through their choice of products, and the self-related characteristics decoded by an audience of peers. Several reasons could explain this. As Arnould et al. (2006), Berger and Ward (2010) and Ratneshwar et al. (1997) suggest, both senders and receivers bring their physical, cultural and social operant resources such as specialised cultural capital, skills, and goals to encode and decode marketplace information. Such re-sources could account for differences not only in product choices but also in the messages being communicated and those being received.

The study makes a specific theoretical contribution. Typically, studies either examine the use of products to communicate aspects of respondent's self, or focus on examining the 'decoding' of mean-ing. The question of whether there is a match between intended self-related characteristics and those received by audiences has not been sufficiently examined so far. In this study, both aspects are examined as parts of a whole process. In doing so, this study is the first known study to investigate congruency of a range of self-related aspects in relation to self-selected product-ensembles between consumers (senders) and their peers (receivers).

The study extends congruency theory by including the self, the product, and the other within a single theoretical framework (see Figure 1). The theoretical model and findings suggest further av-enues for future research, for example, auxiliary examination of spe-cific aspects and processes associated with congruency of meaning. Also, whether senders and receivers select certain types of operant resources to communicate or decode self-related characteristics.

It may be worthwhile for marketing practitioners to investigate the symbolic aspects that most closely align with their products and brands, and establish shared meanings via various communication and promotional strategies. The study has a few limitations. The findings of the study are limited in scope to the sample of partici-pants in this study at a specific time-period. Future research could examine the generalizability of the study findings to different age groups and in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Second, the study does not include the physical appearance of participants. It could be possible that physically discernible aspects such as facial expres-sions, gestures, grooming or ethnicity could have an impact on what a product means in relation to the participant. Third, the participants in Phase Two saw photographs of products with brief descriptions. It could be the case that presentation of products in tangible form could influence perceptions of self-related characteristics in some way. Factors such as individual operant resources and cultural con-texts may also account for differentials in perceptions of senders and receivers. Further studies may focus on moderating roles of such resources in similar research contexts.

This study examined the nature and degree of success of young adult consumers in communicating aspects of their self via their product-ensemble choices. The study demonstrates a consensus amongst receivers on self-related characteristics that are externally oriented and socially observable in nature. However, there is little shared meaning on characteristics that are personal, inwardly ori-ented, and not sufficiently socially observable. The study demon-strates that the symbolic value of product ensembles tends to lie in socially oriented and/or socially observable self-related characteris-tics. Absolute congruency between owners' product-ensemble self-related characteristics and observer perceptions is, therefore, neces-sarily limited. To the extent meanings associated with products are commonly understood within a social community, consumers rely on them to both communicate and infer self-related characteristics.

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