Approaching What We Hope For and Avoiding What We Fear:
The Role of Possible Selves in Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the domains in which consumers possess hoped-for and feared selves and the role of products and services in approaching hoped-for and avoiding feared selves. The results from an exploratory study indicate that consumers are able to identify products, services and activities relevant to the approach or avoidance of these possible selves and that hoped-for and feared selves exist in a variety of life-domains and are balanced for relevant life-tasks. Interesting differences also exist between males and females in the domains of hoped-for and feared selves and their reliance on products and services to realize these possible selves.

INTRODUCTION

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Children are often asked this question barely after they can walk and talk. We remain future-oriented as adults, trying desperately to navigate our journey through life. Each one of us harbors goals, fears, aspirations, hopes and dreams about what we want to be in the future. We strive to realize this desired future and create a vision, a possible self, which enables us to create plans and strategies necessary to bring about this change (Wurf 1991).

Research in psychology by Markus and colleagues (Cross and Markus 1991; Markus and Nurius 1986; Markus and Ruvolo 1989; Wurf and Markus 1991) suggests that the self-concept is a multifaceted entity comprised of a variety of selves. One's "selves" can be positive or negative, past, present, or future oriented, and descriptive or normatively based.

In consumer behavior, understanding how individuals define themselves through consumption is a central concern (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al 1993; Levy 1959; Onkvisit and Shaw 1987; Schouten 1991). One of the earliest references to the role of the self-concept in consumer behavior was made by Levy (1959). He suggested that consumers are influenced not only by a product's functional characteristics but also by its image or what it stands for. Thus, if what a product stands for matches a consumer's self-concept, it is more likely to be consumed. Belk (1988) describes the self as spanning past, present and future indicating the relationship between possessions and a consumer's self-concept. Perhaps the most work has been done on the "present" self-concept. Sirgy (1982) presents an exhaustive analysis and review of the self-concept literature relevant to consumer behavior. Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) also stress the importance of the self-concept in consumers' choice of products, services and stores.

Little has been done in the consumer behavior literature regarding the future-oriented dimension of the self-concept. In fact, Morgan (1993) made a case for a closer examination of the role of possible selves in the study of the self-concept in consumer behavior. One notable exception to the above observation is Schouten's (1991) discussion of the role of possible selves in identity reconstruction and the consumption behavior. In a somewhat related vein, Richins (1991, 1995) examines the role advertising plays in increasing consumer's dissatisfaction and discontent by idealizing a consumer's perception of how life ought to be. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) explore how consumers think about their physi-

cal selves as well as their self-concept and how these motivate different consumption behaviors. Banister and Hogg (2000) conduct an exploratory study to examine the role of the negative aspect of the self-concept in symbolic consumption and the rejection of product or brand images in this context.

Although considerable work has examined the role of the self-concept in consumer behavior, little has focused on the role of products, services and activities in realizing a future-oriented dimension of the self-concept. In this paper we seek to explore the domains in which consumers possess hoped-for and feared selves and the role of products, services and activities that aid in achieving hoped-for selves and avoiding feared selves.

The structure of this paper is as follows: We first review the possible selves literature and describe the role of consumption in validating possible selves. Next, we conduct a descriptive study focusing on possible selves of opposing valence (i.e. the hoped-for and the feared self), to explore the domains in which consumers possess these possible selves and to investigate whether and how consumers attribute products, services and activities to the approach of a hoped-for self and the avoidance of a feared self. Finally, we draw on the findings of this study to develop propositions for future research in consumer behavior.

POSSIBLE SELVES

Considerable work in psychology has sought to understand the role that possible selves play in our daily lives. Markus and Nurius (1986) define possible selves as "the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, hopes, fears and threats". Possible selves may include images of whom we wish we could be (ideal self), who we think we might become (expected self) and who we hope to be or fear becoming. Possible selves are therefore regarded as a category of self-knowledge that concerns how individuals think about their potential and about their future (Markus and Nurius 1986).

An important component of goal achievement is the representation that an individual has of him or herself approaching and realizing the goal (Markus and Ruvolo 1989). Thus goals, whether mundane or complex, involve the construction of a "possible self" in which the goal is accomplished. Goals regulate a person's behavior in the approach of the goal. Thus, possible selves are defined by these authors as "affective-cognitive structures that are constructed creatively and selectively on the basis of one's experience in a given domain."

VALIDATING POSSIBLE SELVES THROUGH CONSUMPTION

Wurf and Markus (1991) hypothesized that there are two basic processes by which individuals achieve growth and personal change in pursuit of their goals: *the personalization of motivation* which involves the construction of a possible self and *validation*, the process by which an individual searches for or creates evidence for the existence of this possible self.

Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that an individual's possible selves are the cognitive manifestations of enduring goals,

TABLE 1
Products, Services and Activities Relevant to Approaching a Hoped-For and Avoiding a Feared Self

| | Hoped-for selves | | Feared selves | |
	Examples	% (No.)	Examples	% (No.)
Products	Books, Cosmetics, Computer, DVD's	30 (101)	Self-help books, Vitamins, Healthy food,	24 (77)
Services	Gyms, Classes, Movies Health care, Restaurants	25 (88)	Job seminars, Fitness clubs, Church, Counselors	20 (63)
Activities	Develop skills, Study hard, Make friends	45 (152)	Work hard, Save money, Better decisions	56 (185)
Total		100 (341)		100 (325)

aspirations, motives, fears and threats. But from where do these goals, hopes, fears and aspirations arise? These same authors suggest that possible selves arise from a variety of sources such as the socio-cultural context, the historical context, models, images and symbols provided by the media, an individuals' immediate social experiences and even from past selves.

Most importantly, these possible selves play a key role in an individuals functioning. The first role is *motivational* where the possible self acts as an incentive for future behavior, while the second role is *regulatory* where the possible self provides a context for evaluation and interpretation of the current view of the self (Markus 1986). Possible selves also have *affective consequences* since affect may be inherently associated with a possible self or may arise from the discrepancies or conflicts within the self-concept.

Wurf and Markus (1991) suggest that after an individual creates these possible selves, he or she seeks to validate these selves in direct and indirect ways. Individuals may take direct action to validate these possible selves by, for instance, undergoing aesthetic plastic surgery (Schouten 1991) or hairstyle changes (McAlexander and Schouten 1989). Individuals may symbolize these possible selves through indirect action by portraying that he or she possesses the desired self. The work on symbolic consumption (Belk 1988; Levy 1959; Solomon 1983; Wright et al 1992) in consumer behavior confirms the role of products and services in portraying a desired self-concept. This suggests that consumers strive to achieve a desired self-concept. This is supported by the assertion that the commitment to a particular self-definition creates a tension that requires a person to "complete" this definition or to establish this self as stable (Wickland 1982). In consumer behavior, we are interested in how consumption reduces this tension to establish a stable self-concept.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The descriptive study below aims 1) to establish that consumers possess a range of hoped-for and feared selves in different domains, and, 2) that they consume products and services that aid in achieving a hoped-for self and avoiding a feared self.

Morgan (1993) proposed that individuals are able to identify and articulate a distinct possible self. Based on the research by Cross and Markus (1991) and Wurf and Markus (1991) who examined this issue, we can assume that this assertion is valid. Morgan also proposed that certain consumption behaviors could be attributable to the approach or avoidance of a possible self. We pick these two propositions where Morgan (1993) left off and apply them to the context of hoped-for and feared selves

Proposition 1: Consumers are able to attribute products, services and activities to the approach of envisioned hoped-for selves.

Proposition 2: Consumers are able to attribute products, services and activities to the avoidance of envisioned feared selves.

METHODOLOGY

90 undergraduate students at a large west coast university recruited through the subject pool completed two parts of a survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire had not been used before. The first part explained that people often have ideas and images of what they hope they will be in the future. The respondents were then asked to think about and list three of these hoped-for images. Subsequently, they were asked to list any products, services or activities that they thought were relevant for achieving this hoped-for self. The second part asked respondents to think about and list three images of what they feared that they might become in the future. Similar to the "hoped-for" part, this questionnaire also asked subjects to list the products, services and activities relevant to avoiding these feared selves. The two parts were counterbalanced among subjects.

We obtained eighty-one usable surveys (38 male and 43 female). Nine surveys were either incomplete or illegible and were deleted from the analysis.

RESULTS

To determine whether individuals are able to attribute products, services and activities to the approach of envisioned hoped-for selves (Proposition 1) and the avoidance of feared selves (Proposition 2) the proportion of products, services and activities were calculated are shown in Table 1. Items listed were categorized as "product" or "services" based on the respondent's specific indication of these categories (E.g.: Cosmetics or Health Clubs respectively). A response was coded as an activity when the person relied on himself/herself only (E.g.: Work hard or Spend less).

Table 1 provides some examples of the kind of products, services and activities that were listed by our subjects and the proportion of products, services and activities seen as relevant to the approach of a hoped-for self and avoidance of a feared self. We find that a total of 341 products, services and activities were seen as relevant to achieving a hoped-for self while 325 products, services and activities were seen as a means to avoid a feared self. Thus, lending support to Propositions 1 and 2.

TABLE 2
Some Examples of Hoped-For and Feared Possible Selves

Domain	Hoped-for selves	Feared Selves
Occupational	Successful Professional, Employed, Enjoy Career, Partner, Manager, Boss, Financial Advisor, College Instructor	Unsuccessful, Unemployed, House-Wife, Work-A-Holic, Unfulfilling Stressful Job, Worker At Macdonald's
Physical	Healthy, Active, Attractive/Pretty, Thin, Fit, Sporty, Young, Long Life, Cover Girl Model	Overweight/Fat, Unhealthy, Sick, Ugly/Unattractive, Old, Disabled, Suffering, Wrinkled, Burnt-Out,
Family	Being Married, Having Kids, Good Parent, Strong/Stable Relationship	Being Single, Divorced, Failure As Parent, Abusive, Dead Beat
Personality	Hardworking, Independent, Honest, Dynamic Leader, Confident, Caring	Self-Centered, Low Self-Esteem, Greedy, Dependant, Dishonest
Economic	Wealthy, Financially Stable, Investments, Good Standard Of Living	Poor, Homeless, In Debt, Financial Insecurity, Snobbish, Materialistic
Academic	Graduating, Getting CPA, Good Grades, Public Speaker, Skilled	Drop-out, Uneducated, Lacking computer skills, Not A Graduate

Table 1 also reveals that subjects are able to think about a greater number of products and services that are relevant to the achievement of their hoped-for selves than the avoidance of their feared selves. This is in accordance with the consumer behavior literature on symbolic consumption. Respondents listed 189 products and services (55%) to achieve a hoped-for self and listed 140 products and services (44%) to avoid a feared self. Since consumer products and services are likely viewed as instrumental to the achievement of the hoped for self, one might logically conclude:

Proposition 3: Consumers are able to think about a greater number of products and services relevant to the achievement of their hoped for selves than the avoidance of their feared selves.

Conversely, we observe that subjects list a greater number of activities to be undertaken in avoiding a feared self than in approaching a hoped-for self. In other words, we may conclude that consumers appear to place greater reliance on their own activities to avoid a feared self and less reliance on products and services. We can therefore surmise that

Proposition 4: Consumers rely more on their own activities or actions and less on products and services in avoiding a feared self.

In summary, consumers do rely on products and services to help validate and attain hoped-for selves and avoid feared selves. Overall, however, consumers tend to rely on products and services to a greater extent to realize a hoped-for self than a feared self.

Domains of Possible Selves

We next explored the domains in which subjects possess hoped-for and feared selves and the products, services and activities relevant to achieving possible selves in these different domains. Cantor et al (1987) examined the concept of life tasks, defined as the

"set of tasks that a person sees himself or herself working on and devoting energy to solving during a specified period in life. Cross and Markus (1991) examined how possible selves vary over a person's lifespan and act as guides during life-changes or transitions. The domains into which consumer's hoped-for and feared-selves were categorized were based on Cross and Markus (1991) by conducting a thought-listing analysis. Table 2 presents some examples of hoped-for and feared selves in different life-task domains.

The possible selves identified in Table 2 are similar to those reported by Cross and Markus' (1991) findings for this age group. They observed that "the pattern of hoped-for selves reflect the many transitions, such as marriage, family, and choice of career, they were facing" (pp 240).

A number of feared selves concerned the failure of a major transition. For example, a male respondent said that his feared image of himself was "divorced two or three times", while another feared "I will be abusive like my parents". Both men and women feared that they would become "fat and unattractive".

Table 3 lists the domains of self-statements and the actual numbers and percentages of thoughts that correspond to each domain. Overall self-statements tended to focus on subjects' occupational and physical selves followed by their family, personality and economic selves. Similarly, hoped-for selves mainly focused on their occupational selves followed by their physical and family selves. However, their feared-self involved more thoughts about physical selves and fewer thoughts about the occupational self. These results are very similar to Cross and Markus' (1991) findings. They found that for subjects aged 18 to 24; hoped-for selves reflected mainly family (19%) and occupational (18%) concerns while feared selves reflected mainly physical (24%) concerns. Based on these findings we propose that:

Proposition 5: The predominant domains of possible selves would reflect the consumer's life tasks.

TABLE 3
Domains of Self-Statements for Hoped-For and Feared Selves

Domains of self-statements	Overall		Hoped-for selves		Feared selves	
	Number*	%	Number*	%	Number*	%
Occupational	116	23	74	26	42	18
Physical	105	20	45	16	60	26
Family	68	13	44	15	24	10
Personality	62	13	34	12	28	12
Economic	59	12	27	10	32	14
Academic	35	7	24	8	11	5
Social	30	6	14	5	18	8
Leisure	28	5	13	5	15	6
Moral	10	2	8	3	2	1
Total	513	100	284	100	232	100

*Number of thoughts

TABLE 4
Domains of Balanced Hoped-For and Feared Selves

Domains	Balanced Selves	
	Number	%
Occupation	39	39
Physical	17	17
Economic	14	14
Family	14	14
Personality	13	13
Social	2	2
Moral	1	1
Total	100	100

Additional analysis was conducted to examine the domains in which the hoped-for and feared selves were most complementary or balanced. Oyserman and Markus (1986) proposed that a given possible self is maximally effective when it is offset or balanced by a countervailing possible self in the same domain. Thus, if hoped for self was matched with an equal and opposite feared self, motivation would be greatest.

The data was examined by listing the domains in which subjects had listed hoped for and feared selves that opposed each other or were counter-balanced (Table 4). An example of this in the occupational domain would be a hoped-for self as "a successful lawyer" balanced by a feared self for the same subject as "stuck in a unsatisfying job". Table 4 reveals that subjects had balanced hoped-for and feared selves in the occupational and physical domains followed by the economic and family domain. These domains corresponded to the domains most relevant to our subject's life-tasks. On the basis of this finding we propose that:

Proposition 6: The hoped-for self would be matched with a corresponding feared-self in the domains most relevant to the consumers' life tasks.

To summarize, subjects possessed hoped-for selves mainly in the occupational domain followed by the physical, family and personality domains and feared selves predominantly in the physical and occupational domains. These domains are also those for which subjects had the greatest number of balanced selves.

Gender Differences in Possible Selves

We are not aware of any research that examines the role of gender in the formation and validation of possible selves so we conducted some analysis to investigate this issue. Table 5 shows the proportion of products, services and activities viewed as relevant to the hoped-for and feared selves of male and female subjects.

As shown, women seem to rely more on products and services to achieve a hoped-for and feared self than men do. In contrast, men tend to rely largely on their own activities to achieve these possible selves. This suggests that women are more willing than men to rely on external sources, like products and services, to help achieve their goals. We thus propose that:

Proposition 7: Women rely more on products and services to approach a hoped-for self and avoid a feared self than men do.

Next, we examined the gender differences in the domains of possible selves (Table 6). From this analysis, we can infer that men and women are similar in their focus on hoped-for occupational selves (28% for men vs. 25% for women) while they differ with regard to their physical and family selves (18% for women vs. 13% for men) and economic selves (13% for men vs. 7% for women).

The difference between men and women was more pronounced in the domains of their feared selves. Women's feared selves revolved around a physical feared self (33% for women vs. 19% for men) and an occupational self (25% for women vs. 11% for men) while men's feared selves were predominantly economic (20% for men vs. 9% for women) or physical (19%).

TABLE 5

Gender Differences in Products, Services and Activities Relevant for Hoped-For and Feared Selves

| | Hoped-for self | | | | Feared self | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | |
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Product	35	25	66	33	22	17	55	28
Service	27	19	61	31	19	14	44	23
Activity	80	56	72	36	90	69	95	49
Total	142	100	199	100	131	100	194	100

TABLE 6

Gender Differences in Domains of Hoped-For and Feared Selves

| Domains | Hoped-for Selves | | | | Feared Selves | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | |
	No.*	%	No.*	%	No.*	%	No.*	%
Occupational	34	28	40	25	12	11	30	25
Physical	16	13	29	18	21	19	39	33
Family	16	13	28	18	13	11	11	9
Personality	15	12	19	12	13	11	15	13
Economic	16	13	11	7	22	20	10	9
Academic	11	9	13	8	8	7	3	3
Social	7	6	7	4	12	11	4	3
Leisure	3	3	10	6	9	8	6	5
Moral	4	3	4	2	2	2	0	0
Total	122	100	161	100	112	100	118	100

*Number of thoughts

As in the general analysis, we were interested in determining the domains in which males and females have balanced hoped-for and feared selves. Table 7 exhibits the domains for which the hoped for and feared selves for male and female subjects were balanced. Overall, females had a slightly larger number of balanced selves than males did (53 versus 47). Females had more balanced selves in the occupational (43 % for women vs. 34% for men), physical (19 % for women vs. 15 % for men) and family (17 % for women vs. 11 % for men) domains but less in the economic domain (21% for women vs. 8 % for men) than men.

In sum, analysis of the gender differences in the domains of possible selves and the proportion of products, services and activities seen as relevant to the possible selves reveals some interesting insights. First, men and women differ in their reliance on products and services to achieve their goals. Second, men and women have hopes and fears in different life-domains. Women have hoped- for selves mainly in the occupational, physical and family domains and men have hoped-for selves mainly in the occupational, physical, family and economic domains. Men and women differ more significantly in their feared selves. Women have feared selves mainly in the physical and occupational domains while men have feared selves mainly in the economic and physical domains.

DISCUSSION

The objective in undertaking this study was to explore the variety of hoped for and feared selves that consumers possess and to understand the role of products, services and activities involved in approaching the hoped-for self and avoiding the feared self.

Our results indicate that consumers do indeed possess hoped-for and feared possible selves and are able to determine products,

services and activities relevant to these selves. Consumers possessed hoped-for and feared selves in a number of life domains (Occupational, Physical, Personality, Economic and Family) and saw a number of products and services as relevant to the achievement of these possible selves. We also replicate findings from psychology, showing that the predominant life domains in which possible selves exist and are balanced are relevant to the consumer's life task. Finally, we find some interesting differences in the domains in which men and women possess hoped-for and feared selves and also in their use of products and services versus activities to approach a hoped-for self and avoid a feared self.

Although we believe that this research is a significant first step in demonstrating the importance of possible self-conceptions in consumer decision-making, we nonetheless are not unaware of the limitations of this research. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to note that this work draws on the social-psychological models of the self and does not consider the role of social, cultural, political influences and other influences on the self. In addition, the gender differences were investigated as an interesting outcome of the exploratory study and do not draw on the growing literature on gender in consumer behavior and related fields. In terms of methodology, a few more limitations need to be addressed. First, in "requiring" consumers to list three hoped-for and feared selves, we may have obtained possible self-concepts of varying importance and accessibility. Second, the products, services and activities elicited as a means to achieve a hoped-for self and avoid a feared self may also differ based on accessibility. Third, in light of the dynamic relationship between the self-concept and consumption, as evidenced by the self-concept literature, we cannot neglect the possibility that the desire for certain products or services may play a role

TABLE 7
Gender Differences in Balanced Hoped-For and Feared Selves

Domains	Males		Females	
	Number	%	Number	%
Occupation	16	34	23	43
Physical	7	15	10	19
Economic	10	21	4	8
Family	5	11	9	17
Personality	7	15	6	11
Social	1	2	1	2
Moral	1	2	0	0
Total	47	100	53	100

in the formation or creation of a particular possible self that, in turn, justifies the acquisition of those products or services. Last, because our sample comprised of undergraduate students our results may not be generalizable to other populations.

We believe that this research has barely scratched the surface of the issues underlying the role of possible selves in consumer behavior and despite its limitations, presents some noteworthy directions for future research. First, in discussing the results of our study, we have identified a series of testable propositions that may be examined in different empirical contexts. Second, although in this paper we have focused mainly on the motivational consequences of possible selves i.e. goals to be approached and threats to be avoided, the affective and evaluative consequences of possible selves merit research in consumer behavior. Third, research on how consumers translate their vision of a future self to their everyday lives plays an important role in a variety of different areas relevant to consumer research, such as impulse buying decisions, self-regulation (budgeting and dieting) and self-control. Finally, this research stream also lends itself to the examination of public policy issues in the domain of advertising and promotion. Based on the findings from this paper, we know that consumers (especially women) rely more on products and services and less on their own activities in achieving a hoped-for self. This fact is often made use of in the advertising of products such as nicotine patches or dietary supplements. These products lead consumers to infer that quitting smoking or losing weight (hoped-for selves) is easily achievable through the use of these advertised products and less on their own effort, actions and willpower.

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