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REFLECTIVE SELF AS AN ANTIDOTE TO EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN ITS FORMATION

The author of the article states since consumers learn their preferences as they make realistic decisions, the challenges of decision making process activate thinking and cognitive function, which can lead to development of analytical skills and self reflection. The author suggests that since there is a correlation between the concept of Self and consumer behavior, one of the ways to reduce consumption is to modify the concept of Self. There is also a correlation between the dominant role of socially conditioned Self and increased consumption.

The author introduces and suggests to use the concept “Reflective Self” which can act as an antidote to consumerism. Religious transformation can reduce consumption by directly modifying the concept of Self and reducing the dominance of the socially conditioned personality. Reflective Self can also be an integral part of Self concept modification, including the processes of religious transformations of the concept of Self.

Keywords: *Reflective Self, religious transformation, excessive consumption, consumer behavior, Maslow hierarchy*

Problem statement. Consumer behavior patterns vary significantly among different individuals. While there are many factors that contribute to forming consumer decisions, some of the important questions to ask are “what does a particular product mean to a customer”? From the standpoint of Marginal Utility theory, consumers derive a certain amount of utility from consuming a certain product. What are the components of what constitutes utility or value to a customer? Is it simply a pragmatic function that a particular product has? While some customers lean more towards products that have clearly a utilitarian and minimalistic purpose, other customers choose products that also have some extra features that cannot be classified as strictly utilitarian, but instead they also contain a compound that have some degree of non-verbal meaning in them, such as for example buyer that decides to buy a luxury car might try to differentiate himself from others and accentuate his social status.

Previous research. Such scientists as R. Belk, C. Brazier, and I. Burkitt studied the notion of Self from the psychological and philosophical point of view without approaching consumer behavior. On the other hand, other researchers, such as B. Hancock, R. Garner, A. Maslow, J. Needleman studied consumerism from the business oriented point of view. And lastly, the third group of scientists paid attention to the connection between spirituality and consumer relations: S. Pace, M. Richins, S. Dawson and J. Rindfleisch. However neither of the researchers combined three topics together, so this research is relevant and timely.

The main aim of the paper is to explore the correlation between the concept of Self and consumer behavior of the population on the background of religion and spirituality.

Main body. To explain what needs a buyer is trying to meet by choosing a certain product, scientists look at the concept of Self. How do we see ourselves, who we are and how we want to portrait ourselves to others – all these factors can affect our consumption patterns. From the standpoint of Maslow hierarchy we can see how for each level that a person reaches, there is a unique set of needs that he is trying to achieve. For example, the individuals that are on the level of physiological needs (level 1) are probably trying to achieve basic needs. So for example when choosing a food brand, an individual in that category will probably choose the cheapest food in Sam’s Club. On the other hand an individual that is on the level 5 of Maslow hierarchy, where people are trying to achieve their aesthetic needs might choose a somewhat more gourmet food (even at the same price by sacrificing the amount) from Trader Joe’s [5; 6].

So how do we define Self? There are various approaches to categorizing the Self and what it constitutes. Some of the first concepts of Self appear in Greek-Roman tradition that talks about the concept of the person and Christian tradition that talks about the concept of the soul. Some of the latest approaches look at Self in the context of what is true Self and what is not true Self, or the socially conditioned personality versus our True Self [7]. Another approach to categorization is to look at different interconnected levels of Self, such as Social Self, Individual Self, Neural Self and Molecular Self. The Self is a multilevel system, encompassing mechanisms that interact across those four levels. Each of these levels is a subsystem that consists of various influences, such as environmental, component parts, interconnections between parts, and regular changes in the properties and relations of the parts [11]. Another approach is to assess how permanent or how flexible Self is. For example, according to Ian Burkitt, Social Self has a shifting nature and is created in the process of interaction with society. And it is during this process that it acquires the techniques that are necessary for its formation [3].

Yet other authors emphasize the impact that history has on the processes of construction of the Self and conclude that each time creates a different mode of Self-construction. Specifically, in societies driven by consumption and thus materialism, we see a phenomenon of what can be referred to as Consumer based Self.

Erving Goffman developed concepts that contribute to an understanding of historical changes in the construction of the Self and enable us to see the new forms that Self construction is taking in a society driven by consumption, marketing, and media. These concepts include: commercial realism; dramatic scripting; hyper-ritualization; the glimpse; and the dissolution or undermining of the real, the authentic, and the autonomous. These processes result in such results as dissolution and fragmentation of the Self, creation of false needs and limitless wants in individuals, invasion and colonization of the Self [4].

This can also be viewed as one of the forms of what Jacob Needleman refers to as “socially conditioned personality” [7].

Another way to look at this concept of artificial or socially conditioned Self is a concept of Self as commodity, or delusional Self [2]. Clearly the individuals

whose behavior is ruled and dominated more by the socially conditioned Self would be more prone to being manipulated into buying things and eventually more prone to excessive consumption. Consumerism nurtures delusional Self through tools like marketing, that advocates an affirmation of consumers identity and thus perpetuates materialism.

As one of the variations of socially conditioned personality we can also see the relevance of Belk's concept of Extended Self. He bases it on the premise that people regard their material possessions as part of themselves. Thus objects become carriers of symbolic meaning of personal attitudes and social patterns. They become the extensions of ourselves [1]. Consumption becomes a process of Self-identification and products can be also viewed as tools by which people affirm their own individuality

What could be an antidote that could modify individual's attitude towards materialism and excessive consumption?

There seems to be a correlation between how much a person's behavior is dominated by the socially conditioned personality and their propensity to materialism and excessive consumption. Therefore it is logical to assume that one of the ways to reduce materialism and thus excessive consumption would be to reduce the dominance of socially conditioned personality. While the process of discovery of True Self is probably a life long journey, it is possible to develop the awareness of the need to discover the True Self.

We suggest that one of the approaches would be a cognitive effort. Acquiring a good understanding of the channels through which consumerism can try to distort and fragment our true selves would be one of the ways that can lead to reducing the dominance of the socially conditioned Self.

As a part and as a result of this cognitive effort we suggest the concept of Reflective Self. Reflective Self can be viewed as a Self-image that a person tries to develop cognitively (who we want to be) and as a path that leads to discovery of true Self it eventually becomes a part of this new Self (who we really are).

Reflective Self observes and analyzes the impact that social factors in general and consumption in particular have on it, realizes the needs that the consumption serves and the potential dangers of excessive consumption. It might draw the correlation between the amounts of consumption and the degree of dependency on it, which perpetuates more consumption. Reflective Self recognizes the impact of social conditioning on the personality and seeks to transcend or at least minimize its impact.

Formation of Reflective Self image and actually developing the Reflective Self as a part of True Self require the input of some degree of cognitive effort. Religion can be one of the forces that can also instrumental in forming not only Reflective Self, but also in helping discover true Self.

One of the reasons religion can be viewed as an antidote to consumerism is because it shifts the core Self from our Self identify to deeper parts of our beings. Or in other words it reduces the dominance of the socially conditioned personality and helps us discover more of our true Self.

Another reason religion can be an antidote to marketing is because it shares

some of the same features with marketing and thus both act as competitors in some ways. Both religion and marketing promise to be somewhat of a tool to reduce or eliminate the lack of comfort (or suffering). The promises of marketing are the same as the promises of spirituality, in this postmodern form of spiritual materialism: to unleash the infinite powers of a hidden Self that can only be revealed by adopting the latest techniques and spiritual practices and spirituality” [10]. The concept of the Self is thus the key point of convergence between spirituality and materiality [10].

While offering to fulfill various human needs, such as needs of security, Self-transcendence, etc. religion impacts us through various channels. One of the important mechanisms are the concepts of reconciliation with problems and transcending those problems. When the state of transcendence is achieved people’s attitudes towards those problems is fundamentally different. Religion seeks to reconcile dualities by embracing and transcending them .

As an example that illustrates our assertions, we look at the results of the research of the ways in which Buddhism affects materialism both directly and through the Four Immeasurables (or Four Abodes), which are the four main ethical virtues that Buddhists should pursue [8]. The researcher argues that Buddhism can tame materialism directly, similar to other religions, and through the specific Buddhist ethical doctrines of the Four Immeasurables: compassion, loving kindness, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The empirical results show the following: (1) Buddhism reduces materialism directly and through some of the Four Immeasurables, and (2) despite the doctrine of non-existence of the Self, positive emotions toward the Self are still present, and the Self absorbs the effects of Buddhist ethics on materialism. The latter finding suggests a “resistance of the Self” that is coherent with the idea of a consumer who leverages the Self to go beyond it [8]. The Four Immeasurables that are doctrinal tenets unique to Buddhism are compassion, loving kindness, empathetic joy and equanimity. According to Richin and Dawson, the Four Immeasurables reduce materialism by curbing each of the three components of possessions: centrality, happiness through possessions, and success through possessions [9]. The specific effects of the Four Immeasurables occur as a result of the reduction of qualities that are opposites of compassion and loving kindness [8].

We suggest that a concept of Reflective Self can be either intentionally or unintentionally an integral part of the processes that take place under the transformative influence of religion.

For example, compassion and loving kindness are interconnected with each other in synergistic way and have dualistic quality to their synergy: loving kindness focuses on positive aspects while compassion addresses the negative side. To achieve both a person needs to embrace duality and transcend his own individuality. Transcendence is also a feature that we suggest is characteristic of the concept of Reflective Self. Thus we suggest that developing Reflective Self can be one of the ways to help develop compassion and loving kindness.

Compassion and loving kindness encourage a decrease in materialism because the predominance of one’s ego is tempered by empathetic attention toward

the feelings and circumstances of others. Typical traits that accompany materialism, such as envy and non-generosity, are incompatible with compassion and loving kindness [8].

The Buddhist doctrinal tenets have a direct impact on reducing materialism as they challenge the socially conditioned personality and thus act as a strong transformative force in Self-construction. Perhaps one of the strongest antidotes to the consumer based Self is the concept of Non Self in Buddhism.

The concept of Non Self doubts the very existence of Self and most importantly the value and relevance of whatever we think our Self might be like, and as a result we ignore or minimize it. The Self is viewed as a delusion or the highest form of delusion. While in its most extreme forms the Non Self can lead to negating even the most authentic and beneficial virtues since there is no Self that will receive the benefits of the act; yet as a tool that is used appropriately it can be also instrumental in minimizing the materialistic patterns of the socially conditioned personality by challenging our mind to doubt the very existence (or authenticity) of it.

For example, in constructing the non Self, we utilize such features as cognitive effort, observation and analysis. We suggest our concept of Reflective Self has these features as well. All of these can help us understand our true Self better. Or, alternatively, if achieving non Self is our goal, they can be used in either reversing or minimizing the socially conditioned Self, by the means of cognitive effort combined with observing the process and analysing the progress. The ultimate goal is to transcend the dominance of socially conditioned Self. Reflective Self also has transcendence as one of its goals.

Another example of transformative potential of a religious tenet would be the Buddhist doctrinal tenet of equanimity. Equanimity is detachment from any form of extreme. Moderate consumption fulfills needs and prevents delusional attempts to satisfy endless desires. Everything that we consume is a means and not an end. Equanimity is detachment both from cravings and aversions. Distancing one Self from desires and cravings is central in Buddhism.

Equanimity dictates that detachment from things should not amount to hating or avoiding things. Equanimity reduces the centrality of possessions by assigning them a proper weight in life. One can consume and possess, but one should not place things at the center of life and assign to them an importance that they do not have. Equanimity displaces the idea of reaching happiness through consumption and encourages the pursuit of balanced contentment [8].

We can also apply our concept of Reflective Self to the context of developing equanimity. To achieve equanimity, one would seek to transcend the centrality of possessions. Transcendence is also a key component of the Reflective Self.

Conclusion. The findings suggest that since there is a correlation between the concept of Self and consumer behavior, one of the ways to reduce consumption is to modify the concept of Self. There is also a correlation between the dominant role of socially conditioned Self and increased consumption. Thus to reduce consumption we would need to reduce the dominance of the socially conditioned

Self. We introduced the concept of Reflective Self that can be used as an antidote to consumerism. Some of the features and the processes that are typical for the Reflective Self are also typical for the processes that the Self undergoes through transformative religious experiences. Religious transformation can reduce consumption by directly modifying the concept of Self and reducing the dominance of the socially conditioned personality. Reflective Self can also be an integral part of Self concept modification, including the processes of religious transformations of the concept of Self.

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Анотація

Санько Анна. Рефлексивне “Я” як антидот надмірному споживанню і роль релігії в його формуванні.

Автор статті стверджує, що оскільки споживач вивчає свої уподобання приймаючи реалістичні рішення, складність завдання для вирішення активізує мисленнєву функцію, що, у свою чергу, призводить до розвитку аналітичної функції і самоаналізу. Автор звертає увагу, що оскільки існує кореляція між поняттям “Я” і поведінкою споживача, одним із способів зменшення споживання є модифікація того що входить до складу поняття “Я”. Також існує кореляція між домінуючою роллю соціально обумовленого (сфабрикованого) “Я” і збільшення споживання.

Автор вводить і пропонує вживати поняття “Рефлексивне Я” , яке може виступати як антидот надмірному споживанню. Автор стверджує що релігійна трансформація може зменшити споживання, безпосередньо змінюючи концепцію “Я” і зменшуючи домінування соціально сфабрикованої особистості. Рефлексивне “Я” може також бути невід’ємною частиною модифікації і росту загального поняття “Я” , включаючи процеси спричинені релігійною трансформацією цього поняття.

Ключові слова: рефлексивне “Я”, релігійні перетворення, надмірне споживання, поведінка споживачів, ієрархія Маслоу.