



# Self-concept clarity: Exploring its role in consumer behavior



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## ABSTRACT

Even two decades later since Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) first emerged in the psychology literature, this important concept has escaped the attention of consumer psychologists. Distinguished in the psychology literature from the concept of self-esteem, our study examines the role of SCC in selected consumer behaviors. A survey of 301 consumers established that SCC contributes to consumers' general satisfaction with life and its absence leads to such consumer behaviors as susceptibility to interpersonal influence, materialism, post purchase doubt, shopping as escape, and use of products as identity bolsters. This last set of results shows that low SCC consumers, who by definition are inflicted with self-confusion and concomitant anxiety, use the marketplace as a coping resource. These results suggest the concept's utility in extending our understanding of certain important consumer behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumers' identities play a significant role in their consumption behaviors. As has been long established in the marketing literature, products are consumed not only for their functional utility but also for their value as tools of identity expression (Levy & Rook, 1999; Sirgy, 1982). In choosing their products, consumers attempt to match the symbolic images of brands with their own self-concepts. Expressing their self-concepts is an ever-present goal of consumers in everyday life, and, in this quest, consumers use consumption and brands as props (Durgee, 1986; Kleine et al., 1995; Mittal, 2006).

In the psychology literature, another concept related to the concept of self-concept has been proposed, namely, the concept of *self-concept clarity*. A 25-year history in the psychology literature notwithstanding, the concept has not been studied much in consumer behavior. The concept has the promise of clarifying a number of specific consumer practices, particularly those hitherto thought to be driven by the broader concept of self-esteem. The purpose of the present study is to investigate this concept—self-concept clarity—and to understand some of its effects on consumer behavior.

### 1.1. Self-concept and self-clarity

The concept of self-concept itself has two meanings in the psychology literature. The first is self-esteem—the degree to which one considers oneself as a valued, capable, and worthy person (e.g., Brandon, 1969; Rosenberg, 1965). This is a global view of oneself, a summary indexing of one's worth on a low-to-high grading scale (Cast & Burke, 2002). The other meaning

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refers to the more specific attributes or traits a person assigns to himself or herself, such as rich, handsome, caring, competitive (or alternatively, accommodative), a successful doctor, not much good at chess, etc.—all of the perceptions about oneself as an object. These two views are characterized, respectively, as affective, evaluative appraisal (self-esteem) and as an aggregate of cognitions about the attributes of oneself (the trait view).

Because self-esteem is a global attitude (with self as the object), it has all the properties of attitudes, namely, direction, accuracy, intensity, consciousness, salience, clarity, confidence, and stability (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 23). In the same vein, self-concept as self-cognitions too has all of these properties or dimensions (except *direction*). Three of these properties (which seem to be conceptually interrelated), namely, clarity, confidence, and stability, are subsumed in a recent concept termed *Self-Concept Clarity* (SCC). SCC is defined as the extent to which the contents of an individual's self concept are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable (Campbell, 1990).

SCC has been researched in a number of studies in psychology. In this literature, SCC is postulated to be related to a number of personality traits: the Big Five of personality (Digman, 1990), social phobia—low SCC leads to social phobia (Wilson & Rapee, 2006), career exploration by students and their readiness for career decision-making (Arnold & Masterson, 1987), etc.

However, in marketing and consumer behavior, SCC has remained almost unexamined. In fact a search of literature turned up only four studies. In the context of the foot-in-the door technique of persuasion, Burger and Guadagno (2003) found that the persuasion technique worked only for low SCC consumers. A similar effect of low SCC was found by Lee, Lee, and Sanford (2010), who studied consumers' product and service choices in the context of online recommendations. These researchers presented subjects with digital camera and computer security software alternatives along with a recommendation. Their data revealed that subjects with lower SCC were more likely to comply with the recommendation (they chose the recommended alternative) compared to those with higher SCC. Isaksen and Stuart (2008) measured SCC among British teenagers and found a higher tendency among low-scoring teenagers to look to normative influence for their brand choice. In the fourth and last of these studies, Reeves, Baker, and Truluek (2012) investigated and found support for their hypothesis that celebrity worship among consumers is engendered by consumers' low SCC. Thus, all these four studies attest to the role low SCC plays in consumers being susceptible to or seeking influence from others. The present research builds on these studies; its goal is to cast the net wider, to include and explore a number of consumer behaviors as possible outcomes of low SCC.

## 1.2. SCC versus self-esteem

As Campbell (1990) clarifies, the concept of SCC is independent of the concept of self-concept itself. One could believe anything about him/herself and those beliefs may be factually true or untrue, but one person could hold those beliefs with certainty, while the other could be in a state of doubt. With certainty comes stability and clarity while with doubt comes flickering self cognition. SCC itself is a personality trait-like construct, i.e., it is temporally stable (Campbell et al., 1996). In the present study, whereas our primary goal is to theorize and confirm selected consumer behavior correlates of SCC, as a secondary goal we also examine the relative roles of SCC vis-à-vis self-esteem in explaining the selected consumer behaviors.

## 2. Hypotheses

### 2.1. General personality traits relevant to consumer behavior

I chose five personality traits to study, namely, Achiever (the degree to which consumers are motivated for success), Optimism (the degree to which consumers feel good about their personal future), Innovator (the extent to which consumers embrace change, novelty, and new ideas and products), Uniqueness (the extent to which consumers like to think of themselves as being distinct from the mainstream), and Excitement seeker (the extent to which consumers seek fun and non-routine activities). These traits were chosen because they feature prominently in any discussion of personality in most texts on consumer behavior (e.g., Hoyer & MacInnis, 2013).

Following prior literature (e.g., Judge & Bono, 2001), my expectation is that self-esteem will be positively correlated with these five personality traits. Self esteem is, by definition, a positive view of oneself, which in turn leads to looking at the world and future with positive outlook (optimism) and to strive for even greater success in life (achiever). High self-regard entails high self-confidence, which makes consumers embrace innovation (innovativeness), venture into novel experiences (excitement and novelty seeking), and have feelings of distinction and experience a need to maintain distinction from an average person (uniqueness).

In a number of studies among school children, test performance has been found to be related to self-esteem (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006). Likewise, among American-Indian adults, academic success was found to be correlated with self-esteem (Whitesell, Mitchell, & Spicer, 2009). These studies of past achievement and esteem linkage point to the plausibility of the currently experienced self-esteem producing a desire for future achievement. Similarly, research has found a positive link between esteem and optimism. In Sweeny, Carroll, and Shepperd (2006), for example, persons high in self-esteem exhibited greater resilience in their optimism. Depression (which is negatively associated with optimism) has also been found to be linked to low self-esteem (Huang-Chi et al., 2008).

More broadly, a number of studies have studied self-esteem as a predictor of the Big Five of personality. Perhaps the most prominent among these is Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski (2001) study (data from 326,641 persons of 9–90 years of age!); in this study, high self-esteem individuals were found to be extraverted and conscientious, scored low on neuroticism, and were

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