

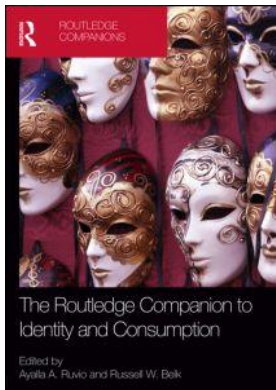
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3

THE DIALOGICAL CONSUMER SELF

Shalini Bahl

CLIENT: Sometimes I feel like I have multiple personalities.

THERAPIST: I see, for instance?

CLIENT: Well there's the Shy me, and the No-Nonsense me, Spiky me, Fierce me, Kitten me, the Man-eater me ...

The above dialog taken from a 2010 TV commercial for DSW shoes takes place between a therapist and a client. Both characters are depicted as animated shoes. As the client speaks about her different personalities, her appearance and her voice change to match the corresponding shoe type. The ad ends with the caption, "Shoes let you be you. All of you," and there is a voiceover that says, "Multiple choices, one more reason to love DSW." This ad encapsulates a fairly prevalent idea that consumers today have a plethora of marketplace choices to create, maintain, and augment their multiple identities (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998; Schouten 1991; Thompson 1997; Tian and Belk 2005). Having multiple identities can be liberating in that consumers can choose who they want to be in different situations (Askegaard *et al.* 2005; Firt and Venkatesh 1995), but it can also be a source of conflict if consumers lack the resources to satisfy the inconsistent preferences of different identities (Üstüner and Holt 2007). In the midst of multiple and sometimes conflicting identities, how do consumers make sense of who they are and their consumption decisions?

This chapter uses dialogical self theory (DST) to explore a relatively new way of understanding how consumers make meaning and consumption choices in the marketplace (Bahl and Milne 2010). DST attends to people's internal dialogs that render to an ongoing process of meaning making and shaping preferences. Further, the DST framework recognizes the self at three levels – the meta-position, I-positions, and *Me's*. As such, multiple subject positions exist within an individual, which allows multiple narratives to be authored and co-authored at the different I-positions. This theory provides researchers a new lens to understand consumers at their different I-positions and the dialog between I-positions to make meaning and navigate inconsistencies within the self. The understanding of meta-position has been successfully used in psychotherapy and offers much promise in consumer and marketing contexts as well.

The chapter is organized in the following manner. First, I describe dialogical self theory and its potential use in consumer behavior. Next, I briefly describe a methodology that can be used to study consumers' dialogical selves. Following this, I discuss how the key characteristics of

dialogical self inform our understanding of consumers' navigation of inconsistent choices. I conclude with a discussion on new insights that DST offers in the context of consumer identities, dialog, and consumption choices with suggestions for future research.

Dialogical self theory in consumer research

Consumer researchers have explored the multidimensional and dynamic nature of self using different self-conceptualizations including the extended self (Belk 1988), malleable self (e.g. Aaker 1999; Schouten 1991), situational self (e.g. Hogg and Savolainen 1998; Schenk and Holman 1980), fragmented self (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), narrative identities (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998; Thompson 1997), and so forth. Dialogical self theory is relatively new to consumer behavior (Bahl and Milne 2010) and can add to this discussion of consumer identities by attending to the inner dialogs between multiple I-positions in consumers. Narrative approaches commonly used in consumer behavior embrace the Jamesian distinction between I and Me. The I refers to the self as knower and Me is the self as known and comprises everything and everyone with which the self identifies. DST extends the narrative framework by acknowledging multiple I-positions in the consumer. The I can move from one spatial position to another and imaginatively endow each self-position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can emerge (Hermans and Kempen 1993). Consumers make meaning and negotiate consumption preferences as a result of this ongoing exchange between different I-positions (Bahl and Milne 2010). Consumer researchers and marketers studying consumers' processes of meaning and decision making in the marketplace can gain new insights by attending to this array of back and forth conversations between different I-positions.

The dialogical self is defined by inter- and intra-subjective exchange and social domination (Hermans and Kempen 1993). Not only are consumers' identities shaped by relevant others and marketplace exchanges but also by the dialog among different I-positions. Further, an intrinsic aspect of dialog is turn taking in which one voice gains temporary dominance to speak while the listening voices recede in the background. As such, the notion of dominance is not necessarily negative in the dialogical self (Hermans and Kempen 1993).

The dialogical self can be thought of as a society involving oppositions, conflicts, negotiations, cooperation, and coalition among positions (Hermans 1996). Consumer researchers have studied identity conflicts in consumers and the role of possessions and specific brands in creating a coherent sense of self (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Fournier 1998; Schouten 1991; Thompson 1997; Tian and Belk 2005). Resolution between conflicting identities is seen as an ongoing process of choosing consumption objects and experiences to create a coherent sense of self. Western culture in particular, partly due to the influence of Aristotelian logic, finds it hard to accept and assimilate contradictions (Williams and Aaker 2002). DST, on the other hand, recognizes the potential in internal tensions and conflicts as a "fertile basis for the innovation of the self in particular and for creativity in general" (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010: 151). This perspective offers to consumers and consumer researchers a new way to approach internal inconsistencies whereby dialog offers possibility of new meanings and solutions that would be improbable at any one position (Hermans and Kempen 1993).

Postmodern research in consumer behavior acknowledges the fragmented subject with multiple narratives reflecting multiple realities and even celebrates the liberating aspect of the fragmented self (Askegaard *et al.* 2005; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Üstüner and Holt 2007). A big focus of postmodern studies in consumer research has been on the fluidity between conflicting cultural identities and the different ways that consumers deal with acculturation issues. Attending to dialog provides a new approach to exploring consumers' negotiation of the dominant cultural

influences and loyalty to the minority ideologies. Moreover, the DST framework extends the exploration of the fluid nature of consumers' selves beyond cultural fragmentation to multiple I-positions shaped by consumers' attachments to people, life events, body orientation, possessions and consumption experiences relevant to them.

One other contribution of DST to consumer behavior is the introduction of the meta-position. Given the multiplicity of I-positions and dominance in relationships, Hermans and Kempen (1993) describe the organization among these positions by recognizing the role of a meta-position. The meta-position reflects the ability of the self to observe the different positions from a distance and see how they relate with each other. It provides an overview and evaluation of the different positions, their linkages, and their accessibility, which allows the individual to have a broader perspective in decision making (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The meta-position is different from notions of core self or an agency that guarantees a coherent sense of self. Rather, "the meta-position is typically influenced by one or more internal or external positions that are actualized at the moment of self-examination" (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010: 148). Moreover, it is important to see meta-position as an ongoing process of synthesizing the centrifugal and centripetal nature of I-positions (Hermans and Kempen 1993). The centrifugal forces refer to I-positions' needs to retain autonomy and pursue their own strivings. The centripetal forces manage the I-positions so they can live like a harmonious community.

Methodology

In this section I briefly describe the integrated mixed methods approach used by Bahl and Milne (2007, 2010) to discern different voices in informants and their inner dialogs. They employed a combination of narratives, clustering – quantitative and qualitative, and metaphors in a study conducted over four stages. Mixed methods render to "divergent interpretations" (Thompson *et al.* 1998) that are consistent with the idea of multiple narrative voices in dialogical self and therefore a useful methodology to study consumers' dialogical selves.

The first two stages in the mentioned study were adapted from Raggatt's (2000, 2002) personality web protocol in order to discern important I-positions in the informants. The subsequent stages used metaphors as a way to get informants to speak about their feelings and perspectives at different I-positions. The nature of the study dictated an in-depth study of a small sample size of six participants. See Table 3.1 for informants' description and I-positions. The relationships among the I-positions in the six informants with respect to six different consumption experiences resulted in 90 possible relationships between I-positions and 216 self-consumption dyads (Bahl and Milne 2010). However, future studies exploring the dialogical nature of consumers could adapt the above combination of methods for larger sample sizes.

Table 3.1 Participants' information and I-positions

	<i>Informant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Profession</i>	<i>I-positions</i>
1	Ari	40	Musician/teacher	Sensitive, artist and teacher, striver, survivor, helpless
2	Beth	54	Activist	Quilt maker, teacher, activist, spiritual, mother and grandmother, lover of nature
3	Brad	26	Realtor	Athletic, closed, open, spiritual, experience with women, critical
4	Dee	37	Project manager	Strong, competitive, giving, low self-esteem, insecure
5	Jessica	21	Student	Irish, social, concerned with appearance, realistic, goal-oriented, politically aware
6	Sam	57	Artist	Connected with world, spiritual, enjoying life, healing, expressive

Narratives

Dialogical self theory is rooted in narrative psychology. As per the narrative approach, people make sense of who they are through the psychosocial construction of life stories (Escalas and Bettman 2000; Harré and Gillett 1994; Hermans *et al.* 1992; McAdams 1996; Raggatt 2002). Dialogical self theory extends this view by acknowledging multiple narrative voices within any life story (Raggatt 2002). Narrative voices in participants can be discerned, as in the first stage of Bahl and Milne's (2007, 2010) study, by attending to participants' most important symbolic valuations or attachments in the social (people), temporal (events), bodily, physical (objects and places) and moral (beliefs) spheres (Harré and Gillett 1994; Raggatt 2002).

Quantitative and qualitative clustering

The second stage of the Bahl and Milne (2007, 2010) study involved participants thinking about relationships among their attachments using qualitative and quantitative methods. Informants' narratives provided important attachments that were used as input for multidimensional scaling (MDS) and cluster analysis in this stage. The qualitative clustering task invited participants to group their attachments into self-relevant clusters that reflected their different I-positions and to provide a name for each I-position cluster. The resulting MDS and cluster solutions were analyzed in combination with the informants' narratives and qualitative clusters in order to discern I-positions relevant to the informants at the time. A more detailed description of the use of MDS and cluster analysis in this stage can be read in Bahl and Milne's (2007) contribution.

Metaphors

Pictures effectively elicit respondents' subconscious thought processes (Belk *et al.* 1989; Collier and Collier 1986; Zaltman 1997). Further, as emphasized by Zaltman (1997), metaphors can elicit cognitive processes and important mental states that are not easily accessible to the conscious mind of participants. The third stage in the study used metaphor analysis to get a deeper understanding of the I-positions and their dialogical relationships. Informants brought in three-to-five images that represented their feelings and thoughts about their I-positions discerned in the previous stages. After describing the metaphorical meanings for each I-position, the informants created a montage that provided an overview from the meta-position of how the different I-positions relate with each other. In addition, the informants described dialogues that are typical between their I-positions.

In the fourth stage, metaphors were used to understand the meaning of consumption at different levels of the self and dialogical relations between them in the context of consumption choices. Informants were asked to bring three-to-five metaphorical pictures for each of their three most positive and three most negative consumption experiences with respect to products, brands, and/or services. After describing each consumption experience from the meta-position, informants were invited to describe the experience from the perspective of each I-position, providing examples from real situations involving different I-positions and possible or actual dialogue between different positions with respect to the consumption experience.

Looking at consumption through the lens of dialogical self

Consumers' preferences and narratives are not the same at a meta-position and their different I-positions (Bahl and Milne 2010). The importance and feelings pertaining to consumption objects and activities differ across the I-positions with some overlap across positions and some unique perspectives, which point to the specific needs and concerns at the different I-positions. If

consumption narratives at different I-positions involve inconsistent feelings, how do consumers make decisions? In this section, I discuss specific characteristics of the dialogical self – dominance reversal, innovative solutions, and meta-position – that explain how consumers navigate inconsistent consumption preferences across their I-positions.

Dominance reversal: fluidity, compartmentalization, and negotiations

Dominance reversal: Dominance is a normal aspect of any dialogue. It is natural that in a dialogue between two I-positions the speaking voice gains dominance while other voices recede. DST also speaks of dominance reversal suggesting that different I-positions take turns in being dominant (Hermans and Kempen 1993). As such, consumption decisions and experiences are driven by the I-position that is dominant in that situation.

To illustrate dominance reversal, let's study the example of Ari (Bahl and Milne 2010), an artist and teacher whose metaphors to depict his feelings for Doritos (a brand of packaged food) at the meta-position conveyed mixed feelings including “wearing food,” needing “damage control,” “love them [Doritos] but can kill me,” “unhealthy but appealing,” and “seductive.” Ari's voice, meaning, and feelings related to Doritos change depending upon which I-position is describing the experience. For the *spiritual* I-position, it is a “tasty treat” and he can see the “humor” in it. From this position eating Doritos is a “joyous experience” and there is no “guilt.” He is satisfied after eating a few chips. The survivor I-position is in more “control” so he will either “not eat the Doritos” or “control” what he does eat. For the survivor I-position Doritos is a “reward” for exercising. The *helpless* I-position views them as being “more seductive” and “a crutch.” When he is in pain he uses Doritos as a “distraction” and finds that he gives into the seduction more easily. From his *helpless* I-position Ari can eat “a whole bag of Doritos” because he is feeling “weak and helpless.” The decision to eat and how much along with the experience and meanings for Doritos changes and is determined by the I-position that is dominant at the time.

Fluidity: What allows consumers to move easily between different I-positions is the notion of fluidity. The ease with which informants moved between their I-positions is noted by one of the informants, Brad: “Sometimes I indulge one or the other [I-position], in fact, I guess I always do” (Bahl and Milne 2010: 188). The celebratory nature of the fragmented self (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and the protean self (Lifton 1993) speak to the freedom postmodern consumers have in moving between different I-positions without any conflict.

Compartmentalization: Dominance reversal naturally renders to the ability in people to compartmentalize consumption activities to specific I-positions (Bahl and Milne 2010). Compartmentalization enables people to engage in negative or seemingly contradictory consumption behaviors because they are able to isolate those behaviors to specific I-positions for which such behaviors are acceptable. For example, Jessica continues to enjoy smoking in company even though all her other voices are against smoking because she can compartmentalize her smoking to her *social* I-position:

When I'm here [at school], [I] don't view [myself] as like a smoker, it's just when I go out, people see me smoking, but I associate that more with like a different part of my lifestyle. When I'm here it's like I'm not a smoker and I'm goal oriented ambitious Jessica, not the smoker Jessica.

(Bahl and Milne 2010: 188)

Negotiations: The ability to move between different I-positions allows for negotiations between I-positions in order to justify their choices (Bahl and Milne 2010). This aspect of the dialogical

self adds to the current research on intra-self negotiations, which have been examined in specific contexts such as time styles' preferences (Cotte *et al.* 2004) and the use of rituals, brands, and possessions to negotiate identities (Ahuvia 2005; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Fournier 1998; Holt 2002; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Schau and Gilly 2003; Tian and Belk 2005).

Consumer researchers have studied the liberatory aspect of moving between I-positions in the context of cultural identities (Askegaard *et al.* 2005; Üstüner and Holt 2007). The notion of dominance reversal, which is an important aspect of DST, offers the three vehicles of fluidity, compartmentalization, and negotiation that help consumers navigate inconsistent identities and choices in the marketplace. However, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) warn against trends in consumerism promoted by the choices available that can result in consumers lacking the depth of experience and a leveling of enjoyment. This is an important area of investigation that needs further exploration in consumer research.

Innovative solutions: coalitions and conciliations

Dialogue between I-positions initiates possibilities for innovative solutions that wouldn't have been possible in the absence of dialogue. Two distinct types of dialogical relationships that offer innovative outcomes are coalition and conciliation (Bahl and Milne 2010; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010).

Coalition: Coalition involves two or more I-positions working together to come up with a win-win solution that caters to the needs of both I-positions (Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010). For example, the *quilt maker* and the *activist* I-positions in Beth have been in conflict over how her time should be spent, but this dialogue allows her to see a new way of meeting the needs of both her I-positions:

I can't really be a *quilt maker* when I'm spending time as an *activist*. I don't have enough time really to do both. Well, I'm making a choice. I'm looking at my life and finding choices that reflect who I am now and I might give up a certain amount of the activism so I can have this other life. Otherwise I'm gonna miss out on having a life that I would really like.

I guess there's another way to look at it in that my making quilts and giving them away to children in orphanages is also being an activist it's a different kind of activism. My activism is gonna take a different turn now. It has to somehow incorporate the quilting thing, so that I can be an activist in a way of giving something lovely to someone. I might not be an activist standing on a street corner trying to change what's happening. I'll be an activist by offering my love to children.

(Bahl and Milne 2010: 189)

Conciliation: Conciliation involves the creation of a new position that resolves the conflict between the earlier positions (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). For example, Beth's *spiritual* and *activist* I-positions have conflicted because she doesn't see spirituality and activism as compatible. She creates a new position defined by the Native American approach to spirituality that allows her to pursue activism in a spiritual way:

there's a lot of people who are spiritual who meditate a lot and they aren't activists. I can't do that. It's like if I care about something, I have to be out there, if it's a tree being killed, find out why and do something about it. To me spirituality, especially

eco-spirituality, ecological spirituality is caring about the planet, caring about the land. I guess it's more of a Native American approach to spirituality – I have to be out there and saying, doing something.

(Beth, Interview 4, from transcripts made for Bahl and Milne 2010)

Meta-position: balance and compassion

The meta-position has the important quality of seeing multiple I-positions and the ability to juxtapose different perspectives so that they can be compared. The ability to view the world from the perspective of a meta-position instead of the narrow lens of a particular I-position offers many advantages to consumers including bringing balance and compassion in situations involving conflict (Bahl and Milne 2010). The balancing quality is reflected in Jessica's *realistic* I-position, which has the ability to see multiple points of view. From this I-position she approaches junk food in a balanced way even though she initially picked it as a negative consumption experience: "I guess the realistic part of me knows how to balance the two [indulging with friends and concerned about weight]" (Jessica, Interview 4, from transcripts made for Bahl and Milne 2010).

Research in psychology has noted the importance of self-compassion as an important coping mechanism to deal with negative or unpleasant situations (e.g. Adams and Leary 2007; Crocker and Canevello 2008; Neff 2003). In the context of consumer research, compassionate dialogs can help deal with inconsistent I-positions and choices by offering a non-judgmental acceptance of the values and preferences at different I-positions (Bahl and Milne 2010). In an example exemplifying compassion, Sam's different voices are angry when Sam gives in to eating sugar products when he is depressed. Sam's *spiritual* voice speaking from a meta-position is compassionate as it can see the pattern in other voices related to overconsumption of sugar products:

The spiritual I-position: "okay, you [his healing I-position] aren't doing something very smart here but I'm not gonna get down on you for doing it. Because you have a lot of patterns of doing something stupid, which get reinforced because there's a part of you that is dying to feel stupid and this is the way to feel stupid and so you keep on doing the stupid thing." If you're gonna do any bad habits whatsoever, less you can feel about it the better. Because it's feeling bad will make you do it more in association with a behavior that reinforces it.

(Bahl and Milne 2010: 187)

By being compassionate towards other voices, the *spiritual* I-position helps Sam in dealing with sugar addiction. These findings are consistent with the work on self-compassion in psychology. The positive impact that the meta-position can have on consumer decision making makes it a viable topic for further research in consumer behavior.

Discussion and future research

Dialogical self theory introduced the study of dialogical relationships between I-positions in consumer research (Bahl and Milne 2010). Attending to the dialogical self offers new insights into how consumers navigate the sea of inconsistent identities and consumption preferences. In this section I conclude with three key insights using DST in consumer research with related questions for future research.

The innovative potential of dialog

Many consumer studies suggest that consumers strive to avoid conflicts and create a coherent and unified sense of self (e.g. Ahuvia 2005). DST, on the other hand, argues that conflicts and contradictions are not necessarily negative as they offer the potential for innovations in the self. Dialog between I-positions invites creative exchanges like coalition and conciliation that bring win-win solutions for the concerned I-positions or the creation of new I-positions that embrace the goals of conflicting I-positions in innovative ways.

Further, DST suggests that consumers are not always looking to resolve internal inconsistencies among I-positions because of their ability to compartmentalize (Bahl and Milne 2010). As seen in Jessica's case, she is able to smoke despite all her I-positions disliking smoking because of her ability to compartmentalize smoking to her *social* I-position. People's ability to move between I-positions and engage in innovative exchanges allows them to embrace seemingly inconsistent consumption preferences. Some other questions related to the innovative nature of dialog that still need to be addressed are:

- Under what conditions do consumers seek to resolve internal inconsistencies and when do they find it useful to compartmentalize?
- What are other innovative dialogical relations between I-positions besides coalition, conciliation, and compartmentalization?
- How do post-consumption outcomes such as customer satisfaction, evaluation, and well-being vary as a result of different dialogical relationships, including compassion, coalition, conciliation, compartmentalization, and domination?

Compassion, conflicts, and self-control

Compassion is a fairly new concept within consumer research that offers much potential for future research. Bahl and Milne (2010) found compassion to be a kind of dialog that helps to avoid conflict between I-positions with different preferences. Their findings corroborate research in psychology that self-compassion is an effective mechanism to deal with addictions and negative behaviors. These initial findings beg more research in consumer behavior:

- What is the difference between self-control and self-compassion in dealing with negative consumption behaviors?
- How do self-compassion and self-control compare in bringing long-term changes in lifestyles and habits? Do some personality types and situations call for one intervention rather than the other?
- Can self-compassion be taught to people to bring positive changes in their consumption habits?

Meta-position and mindful choices

The meta-position is another valuable contribution of DST. Even though a meta-position may be drawn to some positions more than others, it offers an overarching view of different I-positions and their relationships with each other (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The findings in the Bahl and Milne (2010) study suggest that the ability to see different positions with non-judgmental acceptance assists in overcoming overconsumption and addiction problems (e.g. Ari and Sam eat fewer unhealthy foods when they are compassionate toward other I-positions addicted to such foods). The meta-position as a process of synthesizing multiple perspectives also

creates possibility of bringing balance by alternating unhealthy consumption with healthier choices. For example, Jessica's *realistic* position allows her *social* I-position to enjoy eating with her friends, knowing that she can go the gym the next day to make up for any overeating. Future research can further explore the role of a meta-position in consumers:

- Are consumers' decisions different when made from a meta-position versus other I-positions?
- Can activating a meta-position provide a more holistic view of a consumption decision and provoke more mindful choices than decisions made at specific I-positions? If so, such research would be valuable in getting people to make choices that are healthy and sustainable for them and the environment.
- How can consumers be taught to activate their meta-position in the marketplace?

DST offers a useful framework to study consumer behavior as it facilitates studying consumers at different levels of the dialogical self. Especially, as interest in transformative consumer research grows (Mick 2006), researchers are going to need innovative theoretical frameworks to explore identity formations and negotiations in a fragmented postmodern world. DST provides such a framework to consumer researchers by introducing important concepts including dialogical relationships, dominance reversal, meta-position, and compassion. DST opens new doors for transformative consumer researchers to engage in cross-disciplinary work with direct impact on consumer well-being.

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