

Talking to ourselves: How consumers navigate choices and inner conflict

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From simple decisions like "Should I eat this brownie?" to bigger questions such as "Should my next car be a hybrid?" consumers are involved in an inner dialogue that reflects thoughts and perspectives of their different selves, according to the authors of a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Shalini Bahl (iAM Business Consulting) and George R. Milne (University of Massachusetts) studied the multiple perspectives that exist within consumers and explored the ways they navigate inconsistent preferences to make consumption decisions.

The authors conducted a study combining in-depth interviews, multi-dimensional scaling, and metaphors to identify some of the voices that engage consumers' minds. They used "dialogic self theory," which differentiates between the "Meta-self" and multiple selves. According to the authors, multiple selves have unique perspectives and speak from different positions with relatively independent voices, while the Meta-self reflects a distanced neutral perspective.

"In our analysis of relationships between two selves with different worldviews and consumption preferences, we discovered a unique relationship in which one self offers a non-judgmental acceptance of another self's opposing views and behavior, and in doing so brings peace and equanimity in a situation involving opposing preferences," the authors write.

At other times, one self will take over and dominate, which can lead to inner conflict. One finding exposed a "desirable self," which can promote positive consumption behaviors like exercise and hard work. However, when allowed free reign, this self can push consumers to overstretch their limits and end up with physical injuries or burnout.

The authors believe this study can help marketers and other agencies that are trying to promote more mindful consumption choices. "By understanding the different voices in [consumers](#) they can promote communications that model consumers' inner conflicts and present different dialogical strategies like negotiation, coalition, compassion, and compartmentalization that will help them navigate conflicts to make better choices."

More information: Shalini Bahl and George R. Milne. "Can Talking to Ourselves Help Us Navigate Inner Conflicts?" [Journal of Consumer Research](#): June 2010. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr.

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