

# MIRROR-MIRROR: HOW CAN WE BETTER UNDERSTAND OUR CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR? REFLECTIVE THINKING, WRITING AND IMAGERY AS TOOLS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND ABSTRACT MARKETING CONCEPTS

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## ABSTRACT

Many important marketing concepts, especially those related to understanding consumer behavior, are abstract concepts grounded in cognitive and social psychology. Many of these critical concepts such as self-image, personality, social self, and role influence can be challenging to demonstrate in predictive and/or representative models, computer simulations, and within the application of client-based projects. Naturally, it is also challenging to engage students in active learning methodologies conveying these abstract concepts. This is troubling given the pronounced influence of these important constructs on consumer decision-making. This paper introduces an exercise used within Principles of Marketing courses at two different universities, and discusses anecdotal feedback on its usefulness as an active learning tool to engage students with abstract marketing concepts.

## INTRODUCTION

While many of the concepts covered in a Principles of Marketing course are concrete in nature, and provide ample opportunities to be incorporated in experience based learning (EBL) activities, there are others that pose significant challenges for incorporation into EBL exercises due to their abstract nature and often-subconscious use by consumers. Heimann & Pittenger (1998) recognized the challenges students have in understanding and thus applying abstract marketing concepts such as *self-concept*. Many of these abstract marketing concepts have important and foundational influences on consumer behavior, therefore, a thorough understanding of these concepts is important to inform and shape tomorrow's business leaders.

Reflective thinking, writing and imaging are gaining momentum as powerful and effective learning tools, and have received considerable coverage in pedagogical research in recent years (Brodie, 2007; Bruce, 2001; Hadjilambrinos & Thiel 2012; Hansen, 2005; Taylor, 1998;

Wardlow, 1998; Whiteley, 2006; Zalatan, 2007). Our professional backgrounds coupled with our personal and professional mentorship of others led to the co-authors' incorporation of several unique class activities. Showcased among these class activities was one that we found particularly interesting and compelling. Within this exercise, we found that reflective thinking, writing and imaging paired exceptionally well with some of the abstract concepts that we were teaching within our marketing classes (e.g., such as the stand-alone and intersectional interplays of important constructs such as consumer personality, peer and reference group dynamics, consumer values, consumer beliefs, consumer attitudes, consumer roles, consumer expectations, brand values, brand personality, brand meaning, brand favorability, brand resonance, etc). This exercise thus became one of our favorite teaching tools, AND one of our students' favorite methods by which to learn and/or to reinforce the learning of these abstract concepts. We have used this exercise as both a regular in-class activity, as well as an extra credit assignment (an example of which appears in Appendix A). The following sections discuss the nature and structure of the exercise, as well as some of our key takeaways.

## THE EXERCISE

As Kolb and Kolb (2005) discuss in their work, many students "don't believe that their experience is of any value to the teacher or for learning the subject matter at hand" (2007). In actuality, and especially as it relates to consumer behavior, most Principles of Marketing students have 18+/- years of real and relevant experience as consumers. In trying to create deeper levels of student understanding of abstract marketing concepts, and based on our understanding of what "students bring to the table," we developed an exercise that allowed students to apply the concepts of role influence and role conflict to their previous consumption experiences. We found that it was not until students were asked to directly consider and apply their personal experiences that many of these students were able to seamlessly make the connections between the theory and

practice of consumer behavior. We found that virtually all our students were able to not only make these connections once we changed the “lens” through which they were viewing and applying theory, but that they were able to better retain and apply the concepts throughout other class activities and projects. The format and structure of the exercise was intentionally designed in a way that facilitates a deep level of personal introspection and reflection, as outlined immediately below (full exercise description is presented in Appendix A).

This exercise first has students identify the various roles they associate with their total self, focusing on those roles they see active in their life on a regular basis. After identifying these roles, students create a pictorial representation of these various roles. This visual representation can be created in any format the student desires such as: poster board collages, scrapbooks, PowerPoint decks, original works of art, Keynote presentation decks, posters done in Photoshop/ InDesign/ Publisher/ etc., sketchbooks, paintings, iMovie works, etc... The images students select can be from their personal collections, or can be images pulled from magazines, the Internet, newspapers, or any other source. After visually identifying their roles, students are then required to reflect on how these various roles impact their consumption behaviors. For example: What things are purchased to support ... or as a result of each role?, When do the roles lead to consumption conflicts?, When do the roles lead to similar consumption experiences?, When are these roles least and most active? These questions require students to reflect back through prior experiences and determine how those experiences directly and indirectly reflect and relate to course concepts, rather than having students attempt to conceptualize, extend, and connect something in the “here and now”.

We see the complementary and additive benefits inherent within the reflective thinking, writing and imaging components embedded within this assignment as a combination of vicarious experiential learning (VEL) and direct experiential learning (DEL) (Hoover & Giambatista, 2009; Micklich, 2012). It is our position that it is the midpoint between the two approaches – recognizing vicarious experiential learning and direct experiential learning as the two endpoints of the experiential learning continuum. In requiring students to reflect back through their own personal experiences, it possesses aspects of the direct experiential learning approach – for students are the performers. However, it is important to note that students are not engaging in new activities to apply these concepts, but rather observing their past behaviors and applying the concepts to their own past behaviors – focal aspects innate within the observational aspects of vicarious experiential learning.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

“Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person— thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005 p. 194). While there is no single consensus definition of

learning, several propositions of Kolb and Kolb (2005) on experiential learning theory (ELT) seem relevant to this exercise as a powerful learning tool. One of their propositions is “Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (p. 194). This exercise requires students to use their personal knowledge, their prior and current experiences, to provide context for the abstract concepts of role influence and role conflict. In requiring students to reflect on their various roles, create a pictorial representation of those roles and consider the impact those roles have on their various consumption activities, the student is creating and recreating knowledge, just as Kolb and Kolb outline. The student is integrating the new information with their current personal knowledge and drawing conclusions based on that integration.

Feedback from students on this assignment has been incredibly positive, but mostly anecdotal. Many students make statements such as “*I had never realized how much my consumption was influenced by my roles.*” A couple of additional representative examples of roles influencing consumption include:

*“I sometimes have a difficult time managing my relationship with my sister because we are in very different places in our lives. I am still in college mode whereas she has officially begun her “adult” life. She is very influential in determining my consumption habits. In an effort to try and get together we both look for fun things to do that generally cost money. We both love exploring new restaurants and going to the movies so when we get together it often will mean spending money - something that I am more than happy to do so that we can spend quality time together!” - 21-year old female*

*“Volunteering definitely has an affect on my consumption activities. Spending time in poorer communities has led me to cut down on most of my frivolous spending. I have chosen to use some my money for donations rather than new sunglasses. Also, volunteering is an unpaid role so by choosing to volunteer at times over working a paying job, I am limiting my ability to actively participate in consumer markets.” - 22-year old male*

*As a babysitter, I often purchase stickers and candy so that I have little rewards available for the children when they are behaving. - 22-year old female*

Both co-authors have received consistently positive feedback from students on how much the students enjoyed the assignment, and how enlightening the assignment is for them. Of particular interest are the large numbers of students who define at least one of their roles entirely by the act of consumption. For example, *Fashionista*, *Shopaholic*, *Hockey fan*, *Shoe Obsessed*, *Homeowner*, *Music Lover*, *Cook*, *Skier*, *Digital Consumer*, *Gourmet*, *Computer Game Player*, and *Traveler* are just a handful of the many roles and consumption contexts identified by

students. What students realize during this exercise are: 1) the ease in learning and applying important, but abstract marketing concepts, and 2) how much of their consumption behavior is affected by roles that advance or retract at given points of time. Both of these findings were extremely enlightening for them. Interestingly, both of the co-authors found that our students were also much better able to connect the lessons derived from within this activity to subsequent activities performed within the course of the term – for example Market Opportunity Assessment or Integrated Marketing Communication efforts. The co-authors also realized that by personalizing and Socraticizing the learning process through this exercise, that students were able to learn and retain more than they had previously, making this teaching exercise a valuable foundational building block for our students.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **The Exercise**

Each student is required to develop a visual collage or pictorial representation that he/ she feels represents the full array of roles that comprise him/ her - i.e., ALL the roles you associate with yourself. Each image used in your collage should be indexed (numbered, lettered, etc.). You will also submit an accompanying typed write-up that explains EACH of the roles you perceive and recognize within yourself, clearly identifying how your selected image(s) signify that particular role. In addition to identifying and describing these roles, you should also discuss when each role is at its MOST and LEAST prominent - for example, while I am a wife, mother, friend, professor, colleague, etc., not all of these roles are equally active during the day, week, or even my life. Lastly, identify 1) some specific consumption experiences/examples represented by each of your roles individually, 2) HOW each of these roles impacts your consumption activities - e.g., my role as an adventurer tends to emerge on the weekends or when I'm on vacation, and I tend to be willing to "make considerable investments" for unforgettable experiences, as well as 3) when these roles cause consumption conflicts - e.g., as an adventurer, I would love to skydive, but my roles as wife, mother, and provider conflict with this, and 4) when these roles lead to similar consumption decisions - e.g., when any combination of my roles leads to similar consumption decisions/no conflict.

Submit your extra credit collage and typed write-up during my office hours on [fill in the date], or from 11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. [fill in the date]. Submissions after 1:00 on [fill in the date] will not be accepted. I will not accept them during class as I likely will not physically be able to transport them to my office.

Your collage and write-up will not be returned. Please make sure your name and enrolled class time (3:30 or 5:00) are printed on both your collage and write-up.

This extra credit opportunity is worth a maximum of 10 points, added to your final point total. This is a graded assignment - you will receive points based on the thoroughness of your work, effort, grammar/spelling, professionalism, and how well you followed the assignment instructions.

Your collage and report can be in either hard copy or electronic form. If any part of your report is in electronic form, you will need to burn it/them to a CD/DVD or to a jump drive.

- Make sure your name is on the CD/DVD.
- Put your jump drive in a Ziploc baggie with your name in or on the baggie.

**I will not accept email submissions** - these will likely be too large to have multiple students submitting them via email.

**If you are submitting electronic files, please make sure that your name and section time (3:30pm or 5:00pm) is included in the name of your file.**