Spiraling Downward: an Illustration of Social Breakdown Theory and Its Relationship With Self-Concept

Brian Brown, Georgia State University
George Moschis, Georgia State University

Vicious Cycle: An Illustration of Social Breakdown Theory and Its Relationship with the Self-Concept

Brian P. Brown, Georgia State University
George P. Moschis, Georgia State University

ABSTRACT

The present study is based on the social breakdown theory (Kuypers and Bengtson 1973), and is a study of how certain life transition events linked to possible role losses relate to older adults’ self-concepts. It illustrates how certain environmental conditions (i.e., media) and individual factors (i.e., health, income, and education level) may moderate the relationship between life transitions and self-esteem. The findings of this study seem to contradict the perspective that marketers are in a particularly strong position to influence the perceptions of society in general, and the life satisfaction and well-being of older adults in particular.

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Brian P. Brown, Georgia State University
George P. Moschis, Georgia State University

Extended Abstract
Social breakdown theory (SBT) suggests that an individual’s sense of self, his/her ability to mediate between self and society, and his/her orientation to personal mastery are functions of the kinds of social labeling experienced in life (Kuypers and Bengston 1973). It contends that the media can be instrumental in creating negative social labels that adversely affect the self-concept of susceptible older adults. The result is a downward spiral that finds victims accepting the view that they are incompetent, ailing, and useless to society and subsequently believing and behaving accordingly. Kuypers and Bengston (1973) argue that the elderly are more vulnerable to social labeling because of the “nature of social reorganization in late life” (i.e., role loss, vague or inappropriate normative information, and a lack of reference groups). Thus, the model has the potential to clarify why older individual’s self-concepts may change in later life and the consumption related consequences of such changes (Moschis 1994).

While SBT is yet to be empirically tested in its entirety due to its dynamic nature, specific relationships between variables lend themselves to falsification. Our efforts were in a similar vein, testing specific relationships and the moderating effects of select variables.

Conceptualization
Over their life course, older adults are likely to face a variety of life transitions that require the acquisition of new norms, behaviors, and roles. SBT addresses the issue of how one’s changing social world might result in changes in one’s self-concept (Moschis 1994). The SBT model acknowledges that one’s social system is in constant flux as it reflects new roles, norms, reference groups, and statuses characterized by different stages in one’s life (Kuypers and Bengston 1973).

Social roles are sets of expectations or guidelines for people who occupy given social positions, such as those of a widow(er), grandfather, and retiree. Yet, there appears to be little evidence of clearly-defined expectations concerning what the growing number of older people should do during their later years, as a result of transitions into various types of roles. The difficulty in determining the socially appropriate cognitions and behaviors for older adults is likely due to a number of factors. The transition to “old age” tends to be vague, amorphous, and unregulated, as the scarcity of rites of passage ceremonies that benefit children and younger adults reflects (e.g., graduation, marriage) (Rosow 1974). Additionally, the heterogeneity of older adults adds to the complexity of defining their social roles.

Kuypers and Bengston (1973) assert that when certain social reorganizations occur in late life, the individual is deprived of feedback concerning “...who he is, what roles and behavior he can perform, and, in general, what value he is to his social world” (p. 182), due to a lack of normative guidance, role loss, and a lack of appropriate reference groups. As a result of the subsequent “feedback vacuum,” the elderly are vulnerable to, and depend on, external sources of self-labeling (e.g., the mass media). Moreover, these external cues tend to communicate negative, stereotypical messages of the elderly as useless and obsolete. In short, Kuypers and Bengston (1973) contend that the effects of ambiguous role conditions leave older adults susceptible to the negative cycle of social breakdown syndrome because they rely on negative, external labeling that gradually erodes their self-concepts; ultimately, they accept a self-concept of a person who is useless, obsolete, and inadequate. Kuypers and Bengston (1973) predict that the consequence of this pattern is an atrophy of coping skills. However, they contend that SBT’s downward cycle can be broken and even reconstructed through certain personal circumstances and/or interventions (e.g., his/her health, financial resources, and housing situation).
The present study considers the basic foundation of the SBT model within the context of the life course framework. It proposes that various unexpected and anticipated life events that older adults encounter require transitions to new and not well-defined roles. Resulting feelings of role loss or discontinuity will lead to a susceptibility to negative labeling (i.e., via media messages) that weakens one’s self-concept and results in the initiation or intensification of emotion-focused coping strategies (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). This progression may be moderated by one’s financial status, health, and education.

Method

The data used in this study was based on a national mail survey of 695 U.S. consumers who were part of a panel. Because SBT applies only to elderly individuals, this number was reduced to 314, by limiting analysis to only those respondents 60 years or older.

Regression analysis was utilized to test the relationships between role discontinuity events, declining self concept, and emotion-focused coping strategies. The moderation effects of media, education, income, and health were also tested.

Major Findings

The hypothesis that the relationship between one’s self-concept and emotion-focused coping strategies was supported. The mass media measure did not emerge as a significant moderator of the relationship between role discontinuities and declining self-concept. A key finding of this study was the moderating effects of health and education as they relate to anticipated life discontinuities and one’s self-concept. Apparently, the impact these factors might have on the elderly’s stability of their self-concept due to role discontinuities in later life has important societal implications.

References


Developing and Testing the Cultural Embeddedness of Products (CEP) scale

Alexander Jakubanecs, Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration
Magne Supphellen, Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration

Extended abstract

Background

National culture seems to be an increasingly important variable in consumer behavior research. First, the variety of products from all over the world is growing in most Western markets. At the same time, there is now stronger political pressure to display the origin of products, especially within the European Union. Moreover, previous speculations about convergence of national cultures (e.g. Levitt 1983), are countered by recent evidence showing that many cultures are in fact diverging along several dimensions (de Moolij 2000; de Mooij 1998).

Research on cultural meaning of products has typically adopted a qualitative anthropological approach (Applbaum and Jordt 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Past research has provided useful insights of how consumers ascribe cultural meanings to specific products. However, in order to study larger numbers of products and exploit the advantages of multivariate statistical analyses, we need quantitative measures of focal concepts. In this research we develop a scale for measuring the type- and extent of national cultural meaning embedded in products, the CEP-scale.

Defining the CEP construct

CEP is an individual level variable and refers to the degree to which a product category (e.g., pizza, meatballs, orange juice, TV, jeans, etc.) is perceived to be embedded in a given national or ethnic culture. The dimensionality of the construct was uncertain ex ante. Our research strategy was to develop a broad set of scale items and look for different dimensions by means of factor analysis.

We used three theoretical frameworks in developing the scale items: theories on transferal of cultural meaning to products (McCracken 1986), theories on symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983), and social identity theory (Kleine et al. 1993). Furthermore, we consulted two experts on national culture and consumer behavior, one academic and a marketing director of a multinational consumer goods company. The items were developed to capture the interaction of meaning in consumer products with the culturally-constituted world and consumers’ self-concepts. The initial list included 17 items, such as “when consuming this product, I feel that I am part of the national tradition” and “this product is probably found in some folk tales, songs, or jokes (of this nation)”.

Method and major findings

The CEP Scale was tested on two non-student samples in Moscow, Russia (N= 201 and 238). Five products were included in both tests. Products were selected systematically to provide variation in the expected level of cultural embeddedness: ketchup (low), soft drink (low), vodka (high), mors (a special kind of juice based on berries; high CEP), and pelmeni (a special kind of meatball; high CEP).

Based on the first dataset we performed exploratory factor analyses in order to explore the dimensionality of the scale. Regardless of extraction- or rotation schemes, the analyses tended to converge in two factors, but with some sign of a third factor (explained variance, all factors: about 65%). The two major factors seemed to represent a descriptive CEP dimension (items such as: “This product could be