Framing the Negative Self: Consumers and Consumption

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FRAMING THE NEGATIVE SELF: CONSUMERS AND CONSUMPTION  Margo Buchanan-Oliver, The University of Auckland
Tatum Savage, Sony  Negative consumption concerns those products a consumer chooses not to buy, and the concept of the feared
self is used to explore that state This exploratory, emic research sought an increased understanding of the feared self, and the
subsequent role played by negative product-user stereotypes, in negative consumption. It found that the conceptualised feared self was
not as influential on negative consumption as the experiential feared self, and that negative product-user stereotypes emit the greatest
influence on negative consumption.

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The typical respondents lived in Taipei city and Taipei County, were female, 19-40 years old, and possessed at least a college degree or higher.

Most respondents were single, were highly interested in consulting bridal photography salons and were not much concerned about the price because they valued the function of commemoration more than anything else. Also, they preferred bridal salons that offered photo albums, designed wallet-size greeting cards, and wedding invitations.

Professional wedding magazines, friends and relatives’ recommendation, and wedding exhibitions were the main resources for the prospective consumers. Nevertheless, the prospective consumers would choose services in a certain salon based on the photographers’ expertise.

Most respondents agreed that modern women were independent, keen-witted and capable to handle major tasks alone, but women respondents agreed least strongly that women retained their positions in the workplace by wearing sexy dresses and maintaining a good-looking appearance.

Most respondents said that bridal photography was gorgeous and romantic. They believed personal glamour shots could present their personalities and commemorate their marriage. The youthful respondents were less concerned about the price factor but more interested in well-decorated banquet halls. It could attribute to modern feminism that women were daring to pursue and satisfy their personal desires.

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Consumer researchers have conventionally studied the link between self-concept and consumption choices within a positive frame (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983; Belk 1988), thus generally neglecting the negative circumstances of consumption. Others have long recognized that consumption is more convoluted than a mere response to need, want, or desire as people are also motivated by negative emotions (Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1997; Wilk 1997). Consequently, consumer researchers must also understand those states of mind that negatively impact upon consumption practice.

Negative consumption, or anti-choice, depicts those products a consumer chooses not to buy (Hogg 1998) and researchers suggest that the conceptualised feared self (Markus and Nurius 1986; Ogilvie 1987), a negative possible self, is an effective concept to explore negative consumption (Patrick, MacInnis and Folkes 2002). However, no consumer research to date has employed the actual feared or undesired self in negative consumption.

Using an exploratory, emic research design this research sought an increased understanding of the role played by the feared self and, subsequently, the role played by negative product-user stereotypes (Hogg and Banister 2001), in negative consumption. In-depth interviews were employed to gain an understanding of negative consumption behaviour of beverages consumed within a social consumption context. The findings support previous assertions that choosing not to consume a product is just as relevant in shaping our self-identities as positive consumption, and that choosing to not consume those products associated with the feared self does play an integral part in shaping our social, public, and private self-identities.

However, this research also discovered a further significance of the feared self within the realm of negative consumption. The findings discovered that the role the feared self played was dependent on the experiential nature of the feared self, and that the conceptualised feared self is not as influential on negative consumption as previously considered.

Rather, it was those feared selves that were experience-based that played a greater role. Renamed as the escaping self, to differentiate from the conceptualised feared self, experience-based feared selves appear more powerful as indicators of negative consumption. Denoted by flights from both past and current selves considered unfavourable or undesirable by the respondent, the escaping self differed from that of a conceptual feared self because respondents became more involved in its suppression.

Furthermore, it appeared that the undesired other, or a negative product-user stereotype, emitted the greatest influence on negative consumption. Respondents commonly associated their avoided products with negative images of the typical product-user. Those beverages that were avoided due to a link with a negative stereotype produced a heightened emotional response and an enduring avoidance.
It was discovered that the negative image of appearing as someone that they are not, or someone perceived to have lesser qualities than themselves is, for these individuals, more fearful. Therefore, negative consumption appeared more influenced by the undesired other rather than the undesired self.

This research undertook a more dimensional analysis of the undesired self than previously employed, and in combination with an emic approach, allowed a deeper understanding of the feared self’s influence on an individual’s avoidance behaviour. This enabled a gained understanding of the role played by the undesired or feared self in negative consumption. It also discovered that conceptual feared selves differ from experiential feared selves (escaped selves) in their relative influence over negative consumption.

Additionally, this research provides an enriched comprehension of negative stereotypes, the role they play in negative consumption, and their relationship with the feared self, and suggests that the influence negative stereotypes exert over consumer avoidance behaviour operates at a higher level than that of the feared self.

Such increased understanding of how negative selves influence negative consumption will assist in marketers’ positioning strategies. Marketers also need to be aware of the relative influence of the feared self, escaping self, and negative stereotypes in consumers’ negative consumption behaviour. Identification of these negative selves or stereotypes would assist in implementing advertising and communication strategies well removed from representations of these undesired selves or others.

The contributions also extend to the consumer. This, and further exploration of negative consumption, will give consumers’ confidence that the full scope of their consumption practices have been acknowledged, and that researchers recognise negative selves and their impact upon the preservation and enhancement of self-concept. Furthermore, this emic research highlights the relative impact of consumers’ negative self-identities and negative stereotypes as perceived by them, and their relative impact upon their consumption choices.

**CITATIONS**


