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How Self-Concept and Ego Can Be Evaluated and Discussed Within Consumer Habits

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Abstract

The impact that self-concept and ego have on consumeristic habits often goes unnoticed each day, as mundane purchasing habits become invisible and methodical. Do we truly acknowledge the implications behind what we buy? We may all resonate with how marketing can shape our perspectives, particularly given the societal awareness of social media and its influence, but are we truly honest with ourselves when we look deeper into our own actions? This study identifies the ways in which self-concept and ego can manipulate individual actions and viewpoints in relation to consumerism, drawing out pivotal theoretical understandings within the context of today through literature review, speculative design, autoethnography, and critical design practice. It therefore offers a new perspective within the self-concept and ego lens, bringing a speculative global design attitude to the largely theoretical and academic groundings of the topic, and by opening this new scope onto the relationship between the self, the ego, and consumption, it allows for a personal and societal shift in understanding the impacts and manipulations that consumption can have, creating a speculative space for reflection and critical assessment.

Keywords: Self-Concept; Ego; Consumer Behaviour; Identity Construction; Speculative Design; Symbolic Consumption.

Abstrak

Dampak yang ditimbulkan oleh konsep diri (self-concept) dan ego terhadap kebiasaan konsumtif kita seringkali tidak disadari dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, seiring kebiasaan berbelanja yang mendasar menjadi tidak kasat mata dan bersifat metodelis. Apakah kita benar-benar menyadari implikasi di balik apa yang kita beli? Kita mungkin sama-sama merasakan bagaimana pemasaran dapat membentuk sudut pandang kita, terutama mengingat kesadaran masyarakat terhadap media sosial dan pengaruhnya, namun apakah kita benar-benar jujur pada diri sendiri ketika menelaah lebih dalam tindakan kita sendiri? Studi ini mengidentifikasi cara-cara konsep diri dan ego dapat memanipulasi tindakan dan sudut pandang individu dalam kaitannya dengan konsumerisme, dengan menarik pemahaman teoretis penting dalam konteks masa kini melalui kajian pustaka, speculative design, otoetnografi, dan praktik desain kritis. Studi ini kemudian menawarkan perspektif baru dalam kacamata konsep diri dan ego, membawa sikap desain global yang spekulatif terhadap dasar teoretis dan akademis yang sebagian besar telah ada mengenai topik ini, dan dengan membuka cakupan baru terhadap relasi antara diri, ego, dan konsumsi, studi ini memungkinkan terjadinya pergeseran pemahaman baik secara personal maupun sosial mengenai dampak dan manipulasi yang dapat ditimbulkan oleh konsumsi, sekaligus menciptakan ruang spekulatif untuk refleksi dan penilaian kritis.

Kata Kunci: Konsep Diri; Ego; Perilaku Konsumen; Konstruksi Identitas; Speculative Design; Konsumsi Simbolik.



1. Introduction

In the contemporary cultural landscape of today, characterized by hyper-consumption and algorithmically mediated subjectivity, the self is inherently a less fixed entity, a fluid construct shaped through performative, economic, and psychological relations and exchanges (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991). The convergence of identity formation and consumer practices has resulted in a rendered selfhood, a malleable, market-responsive construct articulated through aesthetic presentation, digital visibility, and brand affiliation (Featherstone, 2007). This study critically examines the psychological constructs of self-concept and ego as foundational elements through which the individual navigates, reproduces, and internalizes consumer logics and responses, an understanding essential to decoding the ways in which consumption operates not merely as a material act, but as a symbolic and affective process in the making of the self (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Self-concept refers to the internal schema through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to their own identities, encompassing cognitive and affective representations of the self, including perceived roles, values, and social positioning (Rosenberg, 1979; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Closely related is the role of the ego, which, while often colloquially associated with narcissism, functions as a regulatory structure within the self that mediates between self-perception and the increasing demands of the external world, maintaining an ever-changing balance amid competing social stimuli (Freud, 1923/1991; Rogers, 1969).

These constructs within consumer culture are not neutral; they are actively shaped, and in many cases exploited, by marketing systems designed to tether identity to consumption, moulding and changing our relationship to ourselves through what we buy (Sirgy, 1982; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This inquiry is anchored in theoretical foundations such as the work of Carl Rogers, whose humanistic approach foregrounds the actualising tendency and the pursuit of congruence between the self and lived experience (Rogers, 1961), and M. Joseph Sirgy's self-congruity theory, which offers a pivotal lens for understanding consumer-brand alignment (Sirgy, 1986). These notions are further enriched by the critiques of Erich Fromm, who interrogates the commodification of human values within consumerism (Fromm, 1976), and Jean Baudrillard, who theorises the symbolic and simulacral dimensions of consumption (Baudrillard, 1988). Together, these frameworks provide the conceptual architecture that substantiates the analysis presented throughout this study, while the methodological approach integrates theoretical analysis with reflexive engagement, including critical reassessment of personal creative artifacts previously developed within artistic contexts, now examined as situated expressions of self-construction within consumer paradigms (Barrett, 2011; Bourriaud, 2002). Ultimately, the study critically engages with the theoretical frameworks of the self and ego, seeking to explore and expose the mechanisms through which we construct identity in the modern world.

Self-concept stands as a foundational construct in understanding human behaviour, particularly within the realms of perception, identity, and consumption. At its core, self-concept refers to the cognitive structure formed of beliefs, evaluations, and perceptions an individual holds about themselves (Rogers, 1959), encompassing various dimensions: self-image (the *actual self*), self-esteem (the *social self*), and the person one aspires to be, one's own idealized perception of being (the *ideal self*) (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Together, these dimensions form an interpretive lens through which individuals engage with the world, a lens that can be manipulated and controlled both internally and externally, shaping preferences, values, and relationships to products, ideologies, and the cultural symbols brands represent. The self-concept is not a static entity but a dynamic process that continuously integrates new experience; as Markus and Wurf state, "the working self-concept is a dynamic structure that changes from moment to moment depending on situational cues and internal motivations" (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This malleability becomes paramount when individuals engage with messages that either support or contradict their identity, meaning an individual does not merely choose a product, they affirm a version of the self. Consumption becomes a ritual of identity expression and protection, tightly bound to the psychological mechanisms of confirmation bias, identity-protective cognition, and cognitive dissonance discussed below.

Confirmation bias refers to the inherent tendency to seek, acknowledge, and recall information in a manner that confirms pre-existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). Individuals possess a "self-verification motive," striving to maintain consistency in their self-views even when those views are negative or unobtainable, a dynamic that feeds directly into the strength self-concept holds over our relationship to consumption, particularly in a climate where brands function as extensions of social platforms and internal reflection (Swann, 2012). This means people are more likely to engage with products, ideals, and social groups that affirm their self-perception, and to reject those that threaten it. Within consumer behaviour, this bias is evident: a person who identifies as environmentally conscious is likely to align with eco-friendly

brands while disregarding counter-evidence questioning the environmental impact of those products. This is not merely a matter of preference but a defence of the self, as "people seek out favourable self-relevant information because it reinforces their self-view and boosts self-esteem" (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), extending even into political and moral consumption, where individuals who perceive themselves as compassionate may favour humanitarian brands and resist critiques of them, because such critiques implicitly threaten their self-concept as compassionate beings.

Identity-protective cognition, closely related to confirmation bias, describes the process by which individuals assess evidence in ways that align with the values of groups they identify with (Kahan, 2013). When cultural, social, or political identities are at stake, individuals are prone to misinterpret or rationalise information to protect those identities, a response that is not irrational, but emotionally and cognitively rational insofar as it preserves the coherence of the self and reduces internal conflict. A recent example of the growing politicization of consumerism can be seen in the American Eagle "Good Jeans" advertisement (Di Placido, 2025), shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. American Eagle "Good Jeans" advertisement campaign
Source: Di Placido (2025).

What began as a denim pun, "Genes are passed down from parents to offspring, often determining traits like hair colour, personality, and even eye colour," was swiftly interpreted through ideological lenses: social progressives criticized perceived eugenic undertones, while conservatives embraced it as a stand against "woke" culture. This polarized reaction demonstrates how advertising no longer exists in a neutral space; brands become cultural flashpoints regardless of intent, and purchases become not just transactions but statements, turning mundane products into symbols within ongoing cultural debates. As Kahan *et al.* note, individuals will "conform their beliefs about disputed matters of fact... to values that define their cultural identities" (Kahan *et al.*, 2011). Identity-protective cognition insulates the self from dissonant information, a mechanism heavily exploited in modern marketing, as brands cultivate political or ideological identities that generate emotional loyalty transcending product quality.

Jaguar's recent strategic pivot in advertising, from technical excellence to broader emotional branding, exemplifies the growing commodification of the self-concept within luxury marketing. The campaign titled "Unleash Your Instinct" marks a significant departure from traditional automotive advertising, which historically emphasised engineering performance and mechanical innovation, as shown across Figures 2 to 4 below.

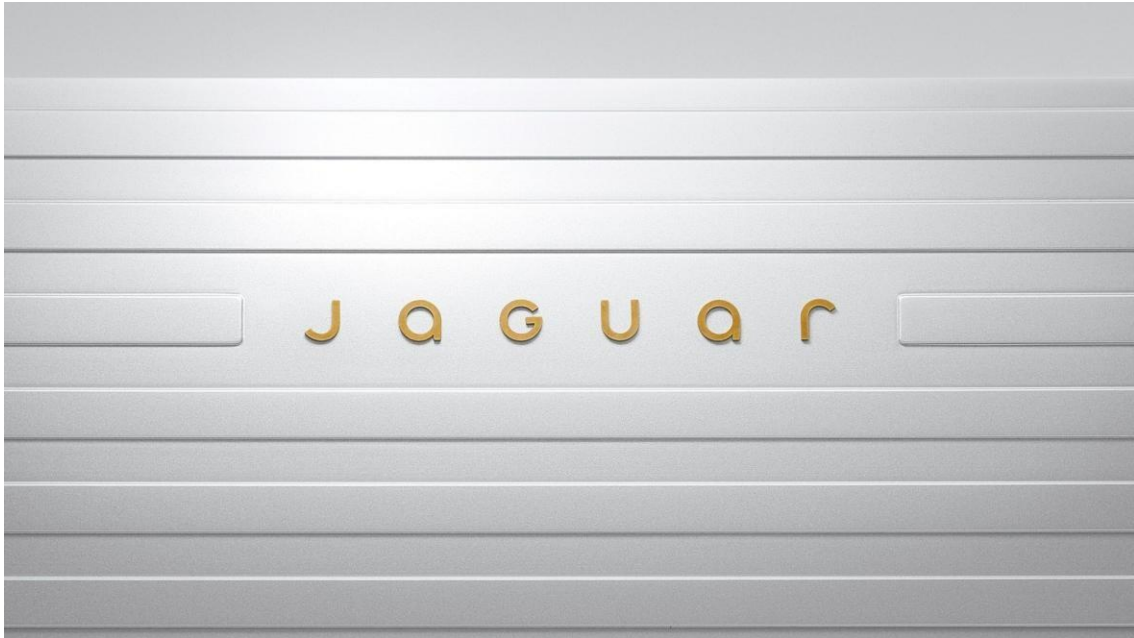


Figure 2. Jaguar "Unleash Your Instinct" rebranding campaign
Source: Race (2024).

Instead, Jaguar now engages consumers on a symbolic and emotional level, presenting the brand as a facilitator of identity expression rather than merely a vehicle manufacturer. The car becomes an extension of the self, embodying elegance, controlled rebellion, and power, reinforced by Baudrillard's observation that "objects are no longer functional; they are signs and play a part in a code of social standing" (Baudrillard, 1998). Jaguar's advertisements present the acquisition of the product as a marker of refined individualism rather than a mere display of affluence, featuring charismatic protagonists and minimal dialogue that converge to present a romanticized image of what it means to be a Jaguar driver.



Figure 3. Jaguar "Unleash Your Instinct" rebranding campaign.
Source: Race (2024).

This framing links to Markus and Wurf's theory of the working self-concept, the situation-dependent configuration of self-perception that guides behaviour and decision-making (Markus & Wurf, 1987). As Giddens states, "the self becomes a reflexive project, sustained through the routines of daily life"

(Giddens, 1991); in this context, Jaguar no longer sells a physical product, it sells the identity consumers wish to inhabit, inviting them to "unleash" a latent version of themselves through consumption. This strategy reflects broader cultural movements toward identity-driven marketing, in which brands become mirrors of consumers' idealized selves, especially consistent in the luxury segment where purchasing decisions are rarely made on utility alone but serve as a form of self-affirmation.



Figure 4. Jaguar "Unleash Your Instinct" rebranding campaign.

Source: Race (2024).

This is evident in Jaguar's efforts to attract a younger, urban demographic previously alienated by the brand's association with older, traditional consumers; through lifestyle-focused rebranding, Jaguar repositions itself within aspirational consumer culture, appealing to the "ideal" version of self rather than the practical and rational mind (Rogers, 1959). In conclusion, the product Jaguar represents becomes less relevant than the symbolic power it holds in constructing and affirming the self. Jaguar's campaign is not only aspirational but a display of curated identity architecture, offering the consumer a coherent story of who they are, and who they are becoming, through what they buy, grounding the theoretical framework of this research within a topical, real-world example.

Within contemporary consumerist societies, purchases act as a vessel for identity construction and ego reinforcement, manifesting as a complex psychological act that both manipulates and is influenced by the self. The ego, referring to an individual's sense of self-worth, finds affirmation through material possession; as Belk states, "possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (Belk, 1988), functioning as symbolic extensions of the self that serve as visible markers of personal values, narratives, and social belonging. Owning designer apparel, for example, becomes a vessel for self-definition, both to oneself and to others, moving consumption beyond mere utility into something deeply intersubjective and symbolic. The concept of conspicuous consumption further foregrounds how ego acts as a motivator for status, prestige, and social recognition, leading consumers to purchase goods not to satisfy functional needs but to demonstrate wealth and success (Veblen, 1899/2007), particularly in modern Western societies where self-worth is frequently equated with external markers of achievement.

Furthering this discussion, self-congruity theory states that consumers seek products that reflect or enhance their ideal self-image (Sirgy, 1982); failure to achieve such congruity may result in lower self-esteem or identity dissonance (Sirgy, 1982). Consumption aligned with one's perceived ideal self reinforces the ego, while misalignment produces dissatisfaction, meaning ego-driven consumption acts as both balm and barometer, offering temporary elevation while depending on constant external validation and fostering vulnerability. This vulnerability is particularly visible in Dittmar's concept of "compensatory consumption," suggesting individuals with low self-esteem or insecurity may use purchasing behaviour as a coping mechanism (Dittmar, 2008), extending ego involvement beyond identity-affirmation into a psychological crutch: the constant acquisition of goods provides fleeting reassurance, while underlying self-doubt

remains, necessitating further consumption. This self-perpetuating cycle causes both individual harm and, on a wider scale, contributes to climate change through increased demand, global wastage, and damaging production methods required to sustain it.

Modern marketing techniques exploit this ego-centric loop for monetary gain, as brands craft identity narratives through advertising, influencer culture, and branding to link consumption with aspirational selves, amplified by the reach of digital and social media sending subliminal messages that "you deserve this" or "you need this." Consumers are thus not merely seduced by the product but sold its being and the idea of having it (Belk, 1988; Veblen, 1899/2007; Dittmar, 2008). This ongoing cycle is further identified in Giddens' notion of the "reflexive project of the self," which states that individuals continuously reconstruct their identity in a fluid modern world (Giddens, 1991), suggesting that possessions act as tools for self-narration even as the ego becomes reliant on market-mediated narratives of success. In conclusion, ego-driven consumerism plays a key role in shaping contemporary purchasing behaviour: the ego's search for identity and self-worth is deeply entwined with material culture and symbolic consumption, possessions create identity (Belk, 1988), conspicuous consumption highlights status-driven behaviour (Veblen, 1899/2007), and the psychological reliance on possessions to buffer insecurity is captured in the self-image congruence between user and product (Sirgy, 1982; Dittmar, 2008). Together, these frameworks reveal a cycle in which ego-based motivations create and reinforce pressures placed on ourselves, shaped and exploited through broader consumerist systems, a relationship that can be either positive or negative depending on an individual's life experience and reasoning.

In today's practice, choices are increasingly harmful due to the social pressures formed through media and generalized societal expectations placed onto the self. This harm is identified in Dittmar's comprehensive meta-analysis of 259 independent samples, which illustrates a significant negative correlation between materialistic value and psychological wellbeing, concluding that as ego-driven consumption values increase, psychological wellbeing decreases, further reinforcing the effects the ego can have on the individual (Dittmar *et al.*, 2014), as calculated in the correlation below.

Table 1. Correlation between materialistic value and psychological wellbeing.

Variable	Statistic	Value
Independent samples analysed	<i>k</i>	259
Correlation coefficient (materialism – wellbeing)	<i>r</i>	–0.19 to –0.24
Direction of relationship	—	Negative correlation
Interpretation	—	As materialistic/ego-driven consumption values increase, psychological wellbeing decreases

Source: Dittmar, H., Bond, R., Hurst, M. and Kasser, T. (2014) 'The relationship between materialism and personal well-being: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107(5), pp. 879–924.

2. Methodology

Having established the theoretical framework surrounding self-concept, ego, and the manipulation of consumer viewpoints, the study now turns from literature-based analysis toward a practice-based investigation. These artifacts examine how self-concept and ego shape, and are shaped by, our relationship with products; through the transformation of a single everyday object, the razor, across three theoretical perspectives, the work reveals how consumer goods reflect, reinforce, or distort identity. By reimagining the mundane, the study invites viewers to critically reflect on their own roles within systems of consumption and to reconsider the ways in which objects become mirrors of the self. As established previously, self-concept encompasses three interpretive dimensions: self-image, referred to here as the Actual Self; self-esteem, referred to as the Social Self; and the idealized perception of one's own being, referred to as the Ideal Self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). These three dimensions provide the theoretical scaffolding upon which the practical component of this study is built, allowing the same everyday object to embody three divergent expressions of selfhood rather than treating them as abstract psychological categories alone.

To realise this investigation, the study adopts a practice-based research methodology, in which theoretical inquiry and creative production are not treated as separate stages but as mutually informing processes. Rather than using practice merely to illustrate pre-formed theory, the razor artifacts function as active sites of investigation, allowing the psychological mechanisms discussed above, identity-affirming consumption, ego-driven possession, and the tension between actual and ideal selves, to be tested, materialized, and critically

examined through the act of making. This overarching approach is supported by eight interrelated methods, each contributing a distinct lens through which the relationship between self-concept, ego, and consumption can be explored.

At the conceptual core of this approach are Speculative Design and Critical Design, which together allow the razor artifacts to function as instruments of questioning rather than resolution. Speculative design is employed to project the psychological theories of self-concept and ego into tangible, provocative objects, projecting abstract consumer behaviour patterns into a physical form that can be encountered and experienced. Critical design extends this by positioning each version of the razor, the fractured Social Razor, the restrained Actual Razor, and the gilded Ideal Razor, as a deliberate construction designed to expose and critique the mechanisms of consumer culture identified in the theoretical framework, rather than to propose a resolved or commercially viable design outcome. Each razor becomes, in this sense, a speculative proposition: not "what could be sold," but "what is already happening to the self, made visible." The reflexive dimension of the study is carried through Autoethnography and Heuristic Inquiry, both of which position the researcher not as a neutral observer of consumer culture but as an active participant whose own habits, choices, and creative instincts become data in themselves. Autoethnography is used to situate the researcher's own creative practice and lived experience as a primary source of reflection, with previously developed artistic work critically reassessed as evidence of how the self and ego are performed, curated, and commodified through personal creative practice (Bourriaud, 2002). Heuristic inquiry complements this by allowing the researcher's own process of discovery, through the act of making, damaging, enlarging, and refining the razor artifacts, to become part of the study's findings; insight emerges not only from analysing existing literature, but from the iterative process of creation itself.

To ensure the theoretical discussion remains grounded in lived experience rather than abstract economic behaviour, the study draws on Phenomenological Research and Artistic Provocation. Phenomenological inquiry anchors the discussion of the actual, social, and ideal self in how individuals actually experience their relationship with the objects they own and desire, while artistic provocation ensures that this experience is actively disrupted rather than passively observed. By damaging, enlarging, or gilding a mundane grooming tool, the razor artifacts provoke discomfort or curiosity in the viewer, unsettling their automatic relationship with everyday consumer objects and prompting confrontation with their own consumeristic assumptions.

Defamiliarization and Dialogical Design work together to transform the razor from an overlooked object of habit into a site of renewed critical attention and open conversation. Defamiliarization is applied directly to the chosen object: by distorting its print, altering its scale, or applying gold leaf to its practical components, the study strips the razor of its habitual invisibility, forcing renewed attention to what it silently represents about identity and consumption. Dialogical design ensures that this attention does not settle into a fixed conclusion; displayed together, the three razor artifacts are intended to provoke dialogue between viewer and object, positioning the audience as active participants in interpreting how consumer goods mirror, distort, or construct the self, rather than as passive recipients of a finished argument. These eight methods allow the study to move fluidly between literature-based theoretical grounding and reflexive, practice-based critique. By using one everyday object, the razor, as the connective thread across three sculptural interpretations, the methodology enables the abstract psychological constructs of self-concept and ego to be interrogated materially, critically, and speculatively, setting the foundation for the case studies presented in the following section.

3. Case Studies: One Product, Three Selves

3.1 The Social Self

The social self is a vital part of self-concept that reflects how individuals perceive themselves in correlation to others and within various social contexts, encompassing roles, group memberships, interpersonal relationships, and the way one believes they are perceived by others, a belief often shaped through the purchases one makes or the alignment of self-identity within social communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Foundational in framing the social self as a product of social interaction was George Mead (1934), who asserted that the self emerges through the process of role-taking and symbolic communication, conceptualizing the notion of the "generalized other" as the internalization of societal norms and expectations, a sense of "other" gathered through the creation of social relationships that shape and differentiate one's actions. In a more contemporary theoretical context, the social self is often understood through social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, influencing behaviour, attitudes, and intergroup dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This is complemented by the looking-glass self theory (Cooley, 1902), which illustrates how the self is shaped by imagined perceptions and

judgments of others, implying that social feedback plays a critical role in the development of the social self. However, this reliance on social validation can make the social self susceptible to conformity and external control, potentially leading to self-alienation, a conflict between one's authentic desires and social expectations that can damage one's internal relationship with the self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The evaluation of the social self therefore reveals a dual role: it fosters belonging and identity coherence through social integration, yet may also impose limitations through normative pressures. In collectivist cultures, the interdependent self plays a central role in defining identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); in individualist cultures, tension may instead arise between the desire for autonomy and the pull of social conformity. Overall, the social self is essential for navigating social life and constructing a coherent identity, but its influence must be critically appraised in relation to personal authenticity and autonomy.



Figure 5. The Social Razor
Source: Bolger (2025).

The Social Razor is one of the suite of sculptural artifacts, deliberately damaged and poorly printed, serving as a material metaphor for the instability of the social self under consumer pressure; its broken, deformed form visualizes the psychic fragmentation imposed by the authority consumer culture holds over us. The print itself, rendered in white, becomes a metaphor for the purity of the social self, pure in the sense of its ease of manipulation and control, an innocence reflecting our need to feed into the things and relationships around us for both our own and others' benefit. The work draws directly on Mead's theoretical understanding of the social self as something that emerges through interaction, "the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth" (Mead, 1934), this development shown through the use of white as a canvas for the viewer to witness the form being manipulated by the world around it, through touch, stains, and scratches made more visible by the material's colour choice. Furthermore, the "bad print" acts as a disruptive artifact that unsettles Baudrillard's critique of consumer society, framing the razor as a simulacrum, a symbol whose surface visuals hide the instability beneath (Baudrillard, 1998), an echo of Goffman's model of the self as a social performance, but one where the props falter (Goffman, 1959). The sculpture visualizes what happens when the performance of the social self breaks down, giving physical form to our emotional strain within consumption. The flawed nature of the razor's design further illustrates how identity can become "liquid" (Bauman, 2000), continuously reshaped through trends and the social craving for approval, adopting the aesthetic logic of glitch art, using the application of error as a form of resistance.

3.2 The Actual Self

The actual self is a central component within psychological and philosophical theories of self-concept, referring to an individual's perception of who they truly are, encompassing the attributes they believe they currently possess, such as social roles, values, and personal traits (Rogers, 1959). Grounded in self-perception and personal experience, Rogers argued that the actual self forms the basis of one's identity and plays a vital role in psychological health, as incongruence between the actual and ideal self can lead to emotions that diminish self-worth and produce harmful reactions such as anxiety and depression. From a cognitive-social perspective, the actual self can be seen as a dynamic structure shaped by social interaction, self-reflection, and cultural context; Markus and Wurf argue that the self is not a static entity but a system of self-schemata that adjusts over time, reflecting changes in social roles and life experience (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The actual self is therefore not merely a subjective inventory of human characteristics, but a socially informed construct that emerges from the internalization of feedback and social comparison throughout our lives (Festinger, 1954), our internal reflection being based on our surroundings and thus subjective to all. This multidimensional nature makes the actual self susceptible to both internal bias and external pressure, requiring a careful balance between an overtly negative self-view, which can cause low self-esteem or depression (Beck, 1967), and an inflated self-view, which can hinder personal growth and authentic relationships (Baumeister, 1988), a balance

that further indicates our reliance on products and how they can influence our self-view without our realization. Thus, the actual self becomes a foundational yet fluid construct, shaped by internal cognition and external experience, functioning as a benchmark for self-evaluation and a mediator between self-concept and behavioural response.



Figure 6. The Actual Razor

Source: Bolger (2025).

The Actual Razor is a sculptural artifact that resonates through restraint: a life-sized, realistically proportioned razor with minimal embellishment, displayed on an upscaled plinth that further emphasizes its mundane, everyday appearance. The work resists spectacle and embraces the physical language of the ordinary, representing the actual self in its unaltered form, a grounded, realistic perception one holds of oneself, separate from the idealized or performative personas formed through the consumeristic lens of self-concept. Its "neutral" design reflects an internalized view of the self, echoing Rogers' definition of the actual self as "the self-concept that is grounded in the individual's own perception of who they really are," as opposed to the other selves (Rogers, 1951). This deliberate contrast allows the razor to become a sculptural stand-in for what Baumeister calls the "private self," a space of quiet coherence rather than outward performance (Baumeister, 1999), a space that further allows for an inter-perspective thinking process, as viewers see their own consumeristic impact reflected onto the razor itself. By maintaining realistic proportions, the sculpture critiques the contemporary aesthetic pressures of today, echoing Giddens' observation that "the reflexive project of self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens, 1991). In its modest realism, the razor echoes the illusion of choice-as-freedom, instead becoming an artefact of sufficiency, a stable but unspectacular self, an effect mirrored further through the vast display of the object and the plinth it sits upon. The Actual Razor does not reject the symbolic significance placed within it; rather, it amplifies the effect the self can have on our viewpoints, acting as a stable point of reference within the broader cognitive discussion of the exhibition itself.

3.3 The Ideal Self

The ideal self is a reflection of a person's aspirations, values, and identity goals, an encapsulation of who "someone wants to be" (Rogers, 1959). Within consumeristic cultures, the ideal self is heavily shaped and continually manipulated by market forces and advertisements, creating a constant need for new desire and self-change; as Solomon states, "products often function as symbolic props that support consumers' identities" (Solomon, 2017), illustrating that consumption is not merely a functional transaction, but a form of self-expression and self-creation. Furthering this relationship, Thompson and Hirschman describe consumer goods as "symbolic resources" (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) that individuals use in the ongoing narrative and manipulation of their own identity; through this lens, the ideal self becomes a curated fantasy, sold back to the consumer through visual media, influencer culture, and branding, especially prominent in the social media landscape of today. The ideal self within consumer culture is perpetually out of reach, designed to remain an elusive conceptualization, sustaining the cycle of desire and dissatisfaction upon which capitalist economies thrive through what Galbraith terms "manufactured discontent" (Galbraith, 1958), an articulation that ensures consumers remain in a state of perpetual longing, on the cusp of self-completion but never fully arriving. The ideal self, in its very form, is a commodified and externalized mechanism for identity fulfilment. Within this postmodern consumeristic culture, signs and symbols have evolved to replace substance, meaning individuals consume not for the thing itself and its practicality, but for the meaning it confers (Baudrillard, 1998); the ideal self is therefore shaped not by intrinsic values or personal growth, but by how well one can emulate the dominant, obsessive aesthetics of success, beauty, and happiness displayed and marketed through crafted media channels and advertisement.



Figure 7. The Ideal Razor
Source: Bolger (2025).

The Ideal Razor presents both a familiar and amplified form of the razor, with gold leaf detailing applied specifically to its practical components, foregrounding a multilayered dialogue between utility, aspiration, and the elusive nature of the ideal self. At its fundamental core, the razor is a tool intrinsically linked to grooming, precision, and self-presentation, intimately tied to notions of identity within societal standards of perfection (Goffman, 1959); by enlarging the object to a monumental scale, the work amplifies its symbolic weight, transforming the mundane object into an emblem of cultural and psychological significance for the viewer (Miller, 2008). The use of gold leaf is a historic reference to associations of value, purity, and reverence (Joyce, 2011); its application specifically on the razor's practical parts introduces a deliberate tension between aesthetic and practicality, rendering the razor practically unusable (Bourdieu, 1984). This juxtaposition crystallizes the paradox of the ideal self: while culturally revered, like the gold leaf, it remains often inaccessible or unsustainable in reality, much like the ideal self itself (Baudrillard, 1994). Finally, the piece, like the others, functions as a broader cultural commentary on self-concept and the influence of ego within consumeristic behaviour, the razor becoming symbolic of societal ideas of success and beauty that are often intertwined with impossible demands, near impossible or highly difficult to sustain (Wolf, 1991). The razor critiques these dynamics, representing how the essential tool needed to cut through or transform the self is rendered ineffective in the pursuit of superficial ideals (Sontag, 1977; Barthes, 1972).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The output from the study extends beyond individual psychological processes to highlight pressing social, cultural, and environmental consequences. At a sociological level, the interplay between self-concept and ego-driven consumption reinforces a moulded market system in which identity becomes commodified and sold back to the consumer (Baudrillard, 1998; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Personal cycles of dissatisfaction, alongside macroeconomic patterns of overproduction and resource depletion, are fuelled by this commodification,

contributing to the ecological crises of today (Jackson, 2009). Within the global market, this dynamic holds particular relevance for both developed and developing economies, as marketing strategies exploit the gap between the actual and ideal self to create a perpetual demand for consumption that fuels economic growth (Rogers, 1959; Galbraith, 1958). This fostering of "manufactured discontent" creates unsustainable consumption habits that exacerbate climate change, exploitation in lower-income countries, and waste accumulation (Fletcher, 2010). These results demonstrate that the psychological drivers of consumption carry tangible impacts on global inequality and environmental degradation.

4.2 Discussion

The global impact of this project is embedded throughout its context, particularly within the manipulation of the self in consumer culture. In many societies today, self-worth is increasingly mediated and commodified through representations of success, lifestyle, and beauty; these illustrations of desired goals are dispersed globally through advertisements and digital media, constructing hegemonic ideals that provoke cognitive discomfort in individuals as they fall short of these standards. This discomfort has been used within the project through the realization of the impact these ideals of self can have on a viewer's perspective of a product. The dynamic between the idealized self and the discomfort of self-realization fosters a homogenization of the self-concept across cultures, decreasing local identities and traditions in favour of Western-centric, romanticized, and marketed ideals (Featherstone, 1991); the exportation of such ideals functions as a soft power mechanism, preserving neoliberal ideologies and deepening socio-cultural inequalities.

This raises ethical concerns around the commodification of the self, as corporations leverage psychological insight into the self and ego to engineer dissatisfaction and insecurity that drives consumption and profit. When the ideal self is constructed through unattainable, socially manufactured norms, it systematically cultivates a sense of inadequacy: "marketing to the poor or emotionally insecure by manipulating identity needs is not just strategic, it is ethically suspect" (Hull, 2001). This exploitation of cognitive discomfort pushes the project's implications into the outer layer of moral boundaries surrounding marketing psychology and the deeper-rooted impact objects and brands can have on the self.

The environmental implications of this cycle of identity-driven consumption are equally significant. The constant internal and external pressure to perform or attain an ideal self through material acquisition festers into a harmful model of production and waste, accelerating environmental degradation and resource depletion across markets such as fast fashion, cosmetics, and technology, all marketed as extensions of the self. As Jackson (2009) states, "consumerism is the single biggest threat to sustainability," and the psychological dissatisfaction stemming from unrealistic self-concept goals therefore acts as a catalyst for environmental harm with tangible global consequences. Beyond the environmental, the manipulation of the self-concept and ego can also become a biopolitical tool, a weaponized standard that people must strive toward through curated ideals of success, productivity, and self-branding (Foucault, 2008); within today's social climate, systemic inequalities such as gendered exploitation and racial capitalism are often masked as personal shortcomings. The cognitive discomfort explored throughout this study thus acts as a catalyst for social transformation and a growing realization of the blind manipulation embedded within contemporary society.

In addition, ego-driven consumption has intensified the homogenization of aspirations and goals, as global media disseminates narrow ideals of success and lifestyle that reinforce the desire to consume (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Veblen, 1899/2007). This not only erodes local cultural identities but also accelerates processes of social comparison, lessening individual self-expression while moulding individuals into formatted consumer tribes (Festinger, 1954), undermining community cohesion and increasing mental health pressures worldwide through heightened feelings of alienation from both self and others (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). These findings underscore the need for interventions that address both the psychological and material drivers of consumption; public campaigns promoting values-based consumption, educational initiatives in media literacy, and systemic regulation of manipulative marketing could all aid a behavioural shift toward more sustainable practices (Jackson, 2009). From a policy standpoint, this study does not seek to dismiss the concept of consumerism outright, but to highlight its negative dimensions when self and ego become the primary drivers of purchase. For individuals themselves, recognizing the identity-based nature of their own purchasing decisions may empower them to resist market pressures and make more authentic, autonomy-supportive choices (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

5. Conclusion

The study has examined the interrelations between self-concept, ego, and consumption, situating

them within a contemporary landscape of hyper-consumption and algorithmically mediated subjectivity, supported throughout by key case studies for grounded awareness. Returning to the questions posed in the introduction, such as how the self is shaped, performed, and commodified within consumer culture, the findings demonstrate that identity construction is neither a neutral nor a wholly autonomous process, but one profoundly entangled with market logics, symbolic economies, and mediated aesthetic regimes, becoming a fluid entity of self moulded by internal and external implications (Baudrillard, 1988; Belk, 1988). Through the triadic model of the social, actual, and ideal self within the project "One Product, Three Selves", the razor artefact acts as both a literal and metaphorical device for understanding the performative and regulatory aspects of our own selfhood. As an everyday consumer object, the razor's material functionality is eclipsed by its symbolic role in shaping self-presentation and its alignment with culturally constructed ideals. In this way, the razor becomes an "idol" (Bourriaud, 2002) through which the ego mediates between internal identity states and the demands of the external world, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between authenticity and social validation (Rogers, 1961; Sirgy, 1982).

The analysis further solidifies that consumption operates not merely as material acquisition but as a symbolic and often subconscious process of self-making. It highlights the ways in which the ego adapts to the shifting pressures of mediated desirability, perpetually reconfiguring the balance between self-congruence and aspirational self-reconstruction, as displayed through the three models of the same razor designed to evoke the different ideals of the self (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Giddens, 1991). In addressing the study's overarching concerns, it underscores that contemporary identity is performed through artefacts that condense social expectation, identity narratives, and market influence into a single malleable form. By critically interrogating such objects, this study illuminates the subtle yet pervasive ways in which selfhood is commodified, and how awareness of these mechanisms can open possibilities for more conscious engagement with consumption. The study acts as a break in the cognitions of society, an opening through which our own relations to consumption can be understood as mediated and controlled through the depictions of self and ego. It becomes a process of realisation rather than a finalised, definitive output of dismissal, allowing the study's implications for the world to serve as a catalyst for introspective thought around the way we navigate consumeristic habits, not a forefront for ending capitalism.

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