

Self-Image Portrayal in Advertising

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The self-concept of the consumer is an important focus in the marketing of many products, brands, stores, and services. The self-concept comprises a number of different images, such as the real self-image, the ideal-self-image, the looking-glass self-image, and the true self-image. The true self-image is the “objective” self-image (i.e., the sum of all of one’s experiences throughout life); it is the self-image of which one is not consciously aware (see the work of Harry Stack Sullivan [Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry, 1947] and the work of Carl Ransom Rogers [Client-Centered Therapy, 1951] to investigate the meaning of the true self-image). For this reason, it should not be of concern to the marketer. However, this is not the case for the conscious entities of the real, ideal, and looking-glass self-images (see Charles Horton Cooley’s “Human Nature and the Social Order” [1902] and “Social Organization” [1909] to investigate the looking-glass self-image). You might remember the looking-glass self-image concept from “Alice in Wonderland.”

Marketers believe that, in many cases, consumers seek to express one or more of their self-images in the marketplace, by selecting products, brands, stores, and services that have images (i.e., product, brand, store, service images respectively) that comprise human characteristics that are similar to or match the self-image that the consumer seeks to express. Because of this aspect of consumer behaviour, it is possible to segment the market not only on the type of self-image (i.e., real, ideal, and looking-glass), but also based on the actual characteristics of the relevant self-image (e.g., rugged, gentle, intellectual, sports-minded, home-body, outdoor adventurer).

To investigate this aspect of marketing, find three ads in one consumer magazine (e.g., aimed at families, teens, males, and/or females) that indicate that the concept of self-image is relevant.

Questions:

1. Identify the self-image that the marketer is trying to reflect in each ad (i.e., real self-image, ideal self-image, looking-glass self-image, or any other that you have studied). Is the use of the self-concept appropriate in each case (i.e., relevant)?
2. What are the characteristics of the identified self-image that are relevant in each ad (i.e., What are the human characteristics being portrayed - demographic, personality, lifestyle, etc.)?
3. What type of people (i.e., self-image characteristics) would not be attracted to the market offering in each ad?