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Consumer self-concept in the cyberspace: how digitization has shaped the way we self-disclose to others

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates digitization's implications on consumers' self-concept by focusing on how consumers build their self-concept and convey it to others in cyberspace. A systematic literature review (SLR) is undertaken using articles published on this topic in the last twenty years in scholarly business, management, and social science journals. The SLR method has been chosen as it considered as one of the most efficient and high-quality methods to acknowledge extensive literature on a subject, show the body of knowledge, let areas for further research emerge, and unveil the presence of research problems that justify further contribution to the body of existing knowledge. Five major themes characterizing consumer self-concept construction and disclosure online emerge: self-narration in digital spaces, ambivalence between the virtual and real self, digitization and self-enhancement, self and digital possessions, and privacy protection. Based on each topic, future research avenues have been identified. The analysis will help scholars identify some core issues and challenges that require further enquiry. In addition to academics, the analysis can also benefit practitioners who are confronted with a landscape that changes dramatically along with the technological advancements.

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Consumer self-concept; self-disclosure; cyberspace; digitization; systematic literature review

Introduction

There are more social media users nowadays than the world's population in 1971. Based on the latest Global Digital Report (*We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020*), there are an incredible 4.5 billion people worldwide who are now surfing the Web, and 3.8 billion persons – approximately half of the present global population – have a social media account and spend 2 hours and 24 minutes per day, on average, using social and communication apps.

Every minute, over 41.6 million mobile messages and 2.1 million pictures are sent globally, while 95 million photos are uploaded daily on Instagram (Stout, 2020). Digital activity has further – and dramatically – increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Accenture, 2020). The lockdowns, progressively adopted in multiple countries, have abruptly changed how we interact with others for job, study, or leisure-related reasons (Koeze & Popper, 2020). The advancement of cyberspace and the pervasiveness of digital

media and smart devices in our lives have significantly changed how we represent ourselves in social – though virtual – interactions (Belk, 2014). Furthermore, studies have long acknowledged that the online world provides users with greater freedom to experiment with ‘the constructions and reconstructions of the self’ (Turkle, 1995, p. 80). Academics agree that Internet-based communication tools possess numerous idiosyncratic aspects that allow higher flexibility in self-presentation (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). The increased possibilities to interact anonymously engender a virtual setting apparently securer and simpler for self-disclosure, allow greater control on content creation and adjustment (users can decide at will which pictures to upload, for example), and offer more occasions for asynchronous interaction. All these enable users to edit content before sending or posting it (Rafidah, 2016).

Authoritative scholars, like Sheth and Solomon (2014), have questioned how digitization influences consumers’ self-concept. These authors, commenting on Belk’s (1988) notion of the extended self, wonder whether a self, as currently perceived, will even exist when much of the world’s population will spend a substantial portion of their lifespan on digital outlets. A more recent call points out the relevance of a deeper understanding of digitization’s implications on consumers’ self-concept by comprehending how the digital environment impacts consumers’ choices, behavior, and psychology (Stephen, 2016).

This study responds to the abovementioned calls by providing a systematic literature review (SLR) on scholarly articles published in the last twenty years on the online consumer self-concept. The manuscript is structured as follows. First, we explain what the self-concept is and how it has changed due to digitization. Second, we illustrate the investigation methodology. Subsequently, we present the results of the study and provide future research avenues. Finally, we provide some conclusion remarks and the study limitations.

Self-concept

Self-concept is defined as ‘The description and evaluation of oneself, including psychological and physical characteristics, qualities, skills, roles’ (APA Dictionary, 2020). One’s perceptions are shaped through their experience with the environment and mainly affected by environmental reinforcements and salient referents (Shavelson et al., 1976). Self-concept encompasses all the thoughts and feelings a person holds toward the self as an object (Rosenberg, 1989). According to Rogers (1959), self-concept is the expression of an individual’s awareness of an existing ‘I’ and an object that is ‘me’ and of their perception of exerting control over that object. Self-concept is a cognitive structure that includes contents, attitudes, and evaluative judgments used by individuals to comprehend the world (Oyserman & Markus, 1998). Instead of being static, self-concept is a dynamic and multidimensional construct made up of identities that include the traits, characteristics, social relations, and roles that define ‘who one is’ (Oyserman et al., 2012). It changes throughout a person’s life based on the social environment and the identities that each person links to the self and their feelings, thoughts, actions, and appearance (Solomon, 2019). Hence, self-concept is a social outcome resulting from the interaction with and the perception of others, which guides people’s behavior and the role they play in society (Mead, 1913). Individuals express their self-concept in the social domain by self-

presenting themselves, providing others with desirable and socially acceptable representations, and 'playing' with identities during their entire life (Goffman, 1969). Self-presentation is realized through self-expression. It is the act of making an individual's inner thoughts and feelings visible to others using acts, behaviors, spoken and written language, images, and other means of expression. Through self-expression, an individual makes themselves known to others and increases the understanding of themselves by better perceiving their inner self (Kim & Sherman, 2007). When they reveal personal information to others, people self-disclose themselves for possibly initiating a socially intimate relationship with other human beings (Sprecher et al., 2013). An individual's view of themselves is the self-image (Rogers, 1959). Called self-schema, it is built around two components: the real self-con

In consumer marketing research, self-concept has long been recognized as an extremely valuable construct, given that it is potentially cept – the image the individual believes themselves to have (Sirgy, 1982)—and the ideal self-concept – the self-concept the individual would like to possess the most (Rogers, 1959) relevant and helpful in explaining and envisaging one's behavior (Shavelson et al., 1976), and therefore, their buying and consumption behavior. The two self-schemas – real and ideal – are meant to drive consumption behavior and function as predictors of purchase intention. Consumers perceive their self-schemas through the image of products and brands they possess (Sirgy, 1982). The possession of goods, in fact, conveys the self-concept to others and functions as a 'tool' for individuals to be overtly recognized (Grubb, 1967). Possessions, in the form of artifacts, objects, body parts, people, places, and ideas, represent consumers' self-extensions and are means to show one's own identity to others and receive feedback (Belk, 1988). Therefore, the meaning attributed to objects by individuals turns the market into a reserve of symbolic resources exploited by consumers for the realization of their individual and collective identity projects and to show a coherent narrative of their selves (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Digital self-concept

The broad development of cyberspace and the ubiquity of digital media in everyone's existence have significantly changed the way individuals represent themselves in virtual social interactions (Belk, 2014). Human life is claimed to have become 'a matter of *onlife* experience,' which redesigns limitations and provides novel opportunities in the construction of people's identities (Floridi, 2011, p. 550)). The asynchronous nature of device-mediated communication enables individuals to manage online self-presentation strategically, sometimes even self-censoring themselves, thereby mystifying the process of self-disclosure (Rafidah, 2016). Instead, due to visual anonymity, they sometimes end up expressing themselves more sincerely than in *vis-à-vis* contexts (Ellison et al., 2006). The cyber universe provides a plethora of different outlets where people can upload and share content, participate in discussions, and collaborate and interact with others. Examples of such outlets include Social Networking Sites (SNSs), brand communities, online video games, blogs, vlogs, discussion forums, and dating sites. In these outlets, people present themselves using digital cues to construct desired personalities (Zhao et al., 2008) and provide the public with often enhanced – embellished, improved, smarter – virtual versions of their real selves (Doster, 2013). Mediated by technology, online interactive

communication provides individuals with higher control over the content shared by themselves, enabling them to willingly adjust digitized textual, visual, and audio cues to craft an ideal self and present it to desired others (Dunn, 2012). People use avatars to experiment with identities and express different aspects of their self online (Turkle, 1995). Far from being only static or animated graphic representations of Internet users, such as those employed in Second Life for example, in a broad sense, avatars are constituted by *all* our digital representations in a disembodied virtual experience, including pictures, videos, selfies, and social network profiles (Garnier & Poncin, 2013). Therefore, digital technologies have impacted the way people convey their image online as consumers, providing not only new spaces but also novel means of extending individuals' selves. This has spurred scholars to revise the original construct of the extended self (Belk, 2013). Avatars represent the foremost means of consumers' online self-extension, together with wholly digital possessions – snapshots, emails, videos, books, music, website pages, and virtual possessions of people's graphic avatars, such as apparels, vehicles, furniture, arms, supernatural powers, and armors (Belk, 2014). The rise of a digital extended self and the consequent change in the way individuals relate to the marketplace and interact with brands, products, and firms have relevant implications for marketers (Sheth & Solomon, 2014). Despite this relevance, to the best of the authors' knowledge, only one systematic literature review (Stephen, 2016), covering a four-year period (2012–2015), was published and it was limited to consumer behavior on social media. This study therefore broadens the time horizon of the review (twenty years) and, adopting the consumer self-concept perspective, considers the overall phenomenon of digitization.

Methodology

To identify the main research topics on the digital self-concept in the relevant field of studies, we conduct an SLR on scholarly articles published in the last twenty years. Figure 1 shows the literature review flow diagram. SLR is considered as one of the most efficient and high-quality methods to acknowledge extensive literature on a subject, show the body of knowledge, let areas for further research emerge, and unveil the presence of research problems that justify further contribution to the body of existing knowledge (Levy & Ellis, 2006). Here, the review process is divided into three phases (Tranfield et al., 2003):

- (1) *Planning* – First, a preliminary analysis of the subject was undertaken, and the research topic and the set of keywords for article extraction were identified. Next, a review protocol was written and shared among the authors.
- (2) *Execution* – Record extraction was undertaken through the following set of concatenated keywords using Boolean modifiers (Brereton et al., 2007): Consumer OR Customer AND Image OR Identit* OR Self OR Selves AND Digital OR Web OR Online OR Internet OR Digitization OR Digitalization OR Digitisation OR Digitalisation. To widen the search, extraction was done via two different databases—SCOPUS and EBSCO—which are acknowledged to be reliable sources of data for SLR (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2019). Data extraction was limited to peer-reviewed scholarly journals written in English and published from 1 January 2000, to 31 May 2020. On the SCOPUS database, extraction was applied to title, abstract, and keywords

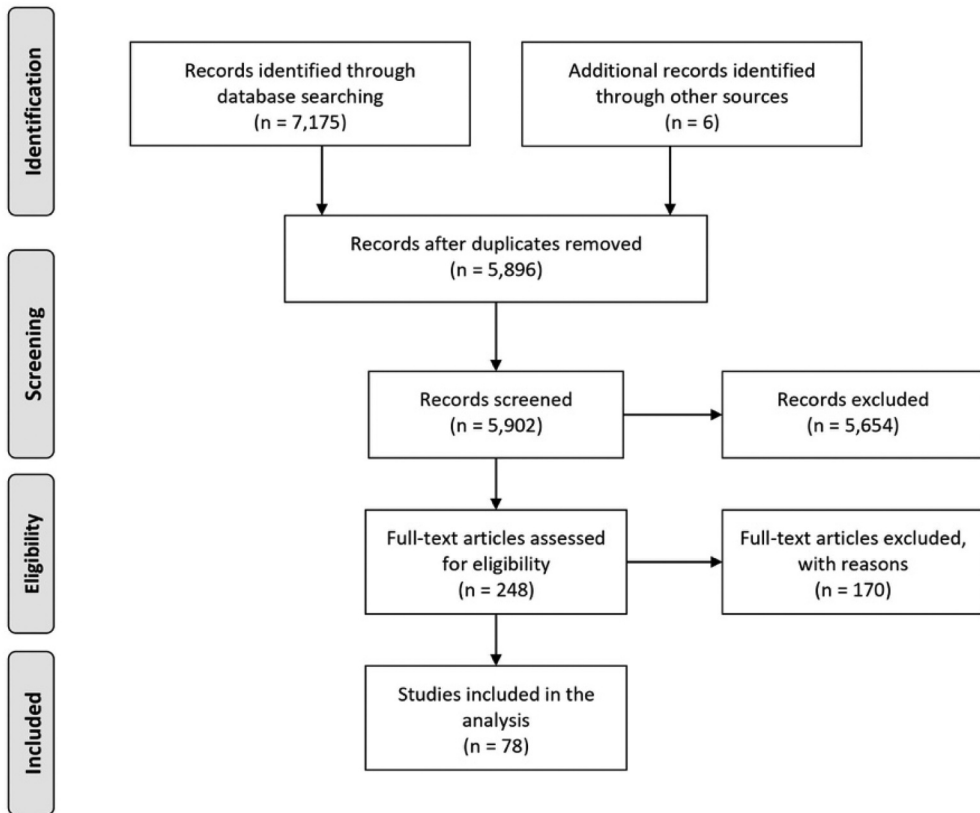


Figure 1. SLR flow diagram. *Source:* Adapted from Prisma 2009 Flow Diagram.

and limited to Business, Management and Accounting, Social Science, and Decision Science fields. On EBSCO, records were retrieved without applying any field code, in Boolean/phrase search mode, restricted to the Ebsco Host Business Complete Database. A total of 7,175 records were retrieved, 1,279 duplicates were eliminated, and 5,896 articles were retained for further analysis. Next, the abstracts and article keywords were read to exclude records unrelated to the research subject. This screening resulted in 242 articles that were selected, saved, and stored on Mendeley software for further analysis. Both theoretical and empirical papers were included in the analysis. The objectives, findings, and discussions were read. Only manuscripts specifically dealing with consumers were retained. Articles reporting the viewpoint of the retailer, that of the company, or of third-party subjects, such as managers, entrepreneurs, or any type of practitioners were also excluded. Articles providing both consumers' viewpoint and that of a business actor were analyzed considering the sections related to consumers. Such decisions were made according to the objective of the study to investigate the self-concept domain exclusively based on the consumer's standpoint. Six additional articles were retrieved through cross-referencing and snowballing and added to the final database. Finally, a total of 78 articles published in 48 different journals were included in the analysis.

(3) *Evaluation* – To identify the main topics examined by the articles, given the novelty of the research, the article titles and abstracts were manually coded by two independent researchers through two phases (Saldaña, 2013). First, data were processed through descriptive coding. Subsequently, through pattern coding, the main themes were identified and qualitatively analyzed. Figure 1 shows the SRL flow diagram.

Findings

Quantitative analysis

A quantitative analysis of the selected studies shows an increasing interest in the subject over the years, peaking in 2019 with 12 publications; this is probably due to the advances in technology and digital media, which have made investigations on the subject increasingly relevant. Considering the country of university affiliation of the first author, data show that most works originate from North America (37), namely Canada and the US, followed by Europe (25), with the UK accounting for approximately one-third of the articles from the area. Authors from Asian and African institutions started focusing on the subject in the last ten years, with studies originating mainly from India and Korea. Figure 2 the number of articles on the topic by country of university affiliation of the first author and year of publication.

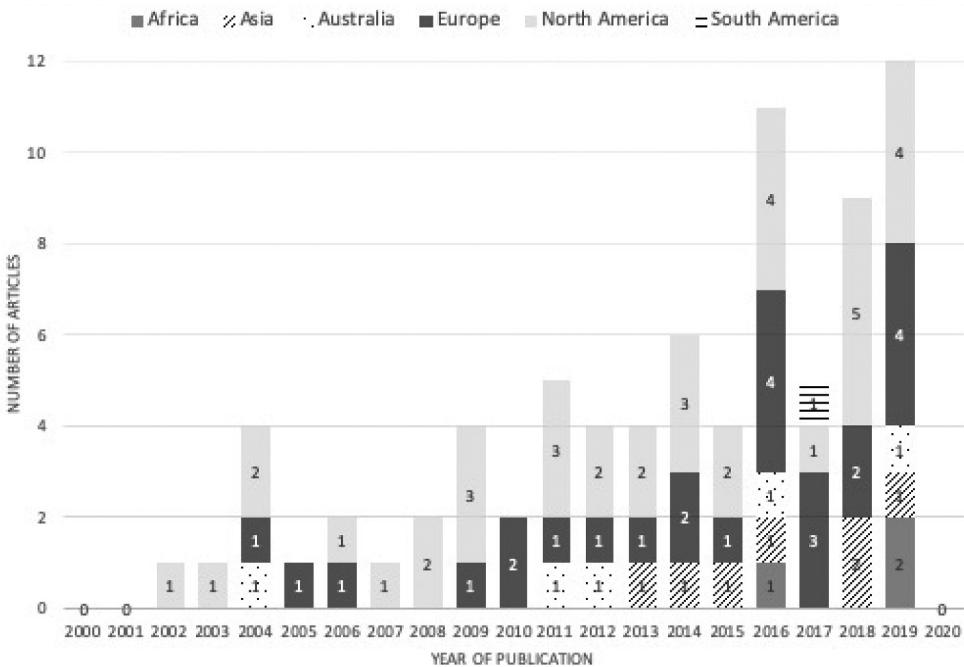


Figure 2. Number of publications per year and Country of university affiliation of the first author.

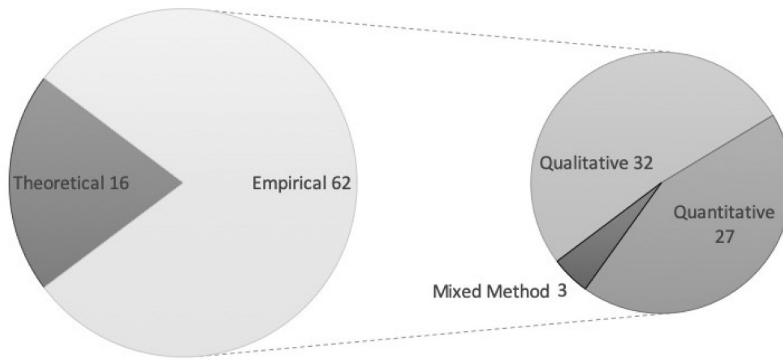


Figure 3. Studies by type and adopted research methodology.

Regarding the type of study, most articles are empirical (62) with a prevalence of qualitative analyses (32). [Figure 3](#) shows the percentages of articles by type and adopted research methodology.

More than one-third of the articles examine images and/or videos, stressing the relevance of visual expression in the digital landscape. Moreover, more than two-fifths of studies focus on SNSs and Apps, with many studies dealing with Facebook. Slightly more than one-fifth investigate more than one SNS simultaneously. [Table 1](#) exhibits the number of articles by technology or digital platform investigated.

Qualitative analysis

Nowadays, a large part of people's consumption-related decisions and how they relate to brands is based on their inner self and personality as well as on the way their online shared personal data are enriched and augmented by others.

During the qualitative analysis, the coding process identified five main themes: i) self-narration, ii) self-enhancement, iii) ambivalence of the virtual and real self, iv) digital consumption and self-extension, and v) privacy protection. Based on the analysis, future research directions were proposed. Research questions had been grouped according to the identified themes and are summarized in [Table 2](#).

These identified themes substantiate that digitization has further and dramatically enhanced a phenomenon that could be labeled 'consumption humanization.' Already detected by scholars since the 1980s (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), such phenomenon has undergone an acceleration along with technological development and the online availability and usability of consumer-generated contents that can be exploited by businesses for commercial purposes. Such changes spur both social scientists and companies to adopt a renewed perspective to look at consumer markets that overcomes the traditional view of consumers as economic actors and increasingly considers them as human beings.

Self-narration

The Internet enables self-presentation through an array of visual and textual digital resources that allow consumers to build their desired identity narratives to portray to others. In this perspective, cyberspace represents the outlet where self-concept becomes

Table 1. Articles by investigated outlet.

Outlet	Main features and information	Articles
Cyberspace		14
Database (CRM)		2
Dating sites		2
Online		5
Communities		
Sharing platforms		3
Smart		7
Technologies		
IoT		1
Voice assistants		1
Smart devices		3
AR		1
ICT		1
SNSs		36
Facebook	People can share information such as photos and quotes about themselves, and respond or link to the information posted by others	12
General		4
YouTube	Allows users to watch videos posted by other users and upload videos of their own	2
Bebo	Went bankrupt in 2013. Original features: users received a personal profile page where they would post blogs, photos, music, videos, and questionnaires. Announced relaunch early 2021, now still in private beta-testing phase	2
Instagram	Allows users to edit and upload photos and short videos through a mobile app	2
Instagram and Facebook		2
Twitter	Microblogging system that allows users to send and receive short posts	2
Facebook and YouTube		1
Instagram and Snapchat	Snapchat – Multimedia messaging app where pictures and messages are usually only available for a short time before they become inaccessible to recipients	1
Instagram and Jodel	Jodel – Anonymous mobile social media application that allows users to send short messages that anyone in the community can read	1
MySpace, Anobii, Facebook	MySpace – Allows users to create webpages to interact with other users. Anobii – Allows users to catalogue their books and rate, review and discuss them with other readers	1
Pinterest	Image-based platform where users and businesses can promote and explore their interests by pinning images and videos on virtual bulletin boards	1
Twitter and Sina Weibo	Sina Weibo – “Weibo” is the Chinese word for “microblog”, it is known as the “Twitter of China” and provides the same services as Twitter (i.e. send and receive short posts)	1
Wechat	Multi-purpose social media, messaging and payment app	1
Yelp	Business directory service and online crowd-sourced review platform that provides information on local businesses	1
Yik Yak	Shut down in 2017. Original features: it allowed people to create and view discussion threads within a 5-mile (8.0 km) radius (termed “Yaks” by the application)	1
Virtual Gaming		6
Websites		4

Source: authors' elaboration on multiple sources.

a multidimensional, socially crafted construct based on device-mediated interactions and exchange (Belk, 2013). The Web is, in fact, a virtual space that provides consumers with a new means of expressing themselves through ‘digital collages’ of thoughts, feelings, ideas, places, objects, and brands to draw an integrated self (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Far from merely being a singular act, online identity construction is the result of a co-creation process where individually produced content is exhibited, shared, and augmented by others’ inputs (e.g. comments, likes, re-tweets) (Fujita et al., 2019). In addition to self-concept being a social outcome in the real world (Sheth & Solomon, 2014), on the Internet, environmental reinforcements and salient referents’ contributions thrive, are more immediate, and become potentially boundless spatially.

Table 2. Future research questions by theme.

Theme	Future research questions
Self-narration	
SNRQ1	What is the role of consumer socio-demographics in shaping online narratives?
SNRQ2	What is the role of consumer cultural characteristics in shaping online narratives?
SNRQ3	How do different online platforms influence consumer narrative content for self-disclosure?
SNRQ4	How do different online platforms influence consumer narrative content for the creation of different identities?
SNRQ5	How do platforms based on new self-expression forms influence consumer online identity construction and self-disclosure?
SNRQ6	How do virtual cultures influence the way people self-disclose online?
SNRQ7	How do the new forms of online expression influence brand engagement and loyalty offline?
SNRQ8	How does interaction with AI-based smart objects model self-narratives?
SNRQ9	What is the role of brand-criticism on self-narration and -disclosure?
SNRQ10	How does online brand criticism reverberate on the offline consumer-brand relationship?
Self-enhancement	
SENQ1	What is the role of consumer socio-demographics in shaping online self-enhancement?
SENQ2	What is the role of consumer cultural characteristics in shaping self-enhancement?
SENQ3	How do different online platforms influence consumer self-enhancement?
SENQ4	How do novel brand social endorsement methods contribute to self-enhancing practices?
SENQ5	What are the reasons that spur people to use any type of material, living, or fantasy manifestation, besides humanized artifacts and real pictures, to enhance their digital self?
SENQ6	How do online co-destruction practices reverberate on consumer self-esteem?
SENQ7	How does this phenomenon take place in normal discussions among peers?
SENQ8	What are the consequences in more serious situations, such as in the case of hate speech, cyberbullying, homophobia, etc.?
Ambivalence digital-real self	
ARQ1	Did the increased familiarity with cyberspace due to COVID-19 change the way consumers relate to the digital and physical dimensions, including the relationship they have with brands?
ARQ2	Do novice digital users show the same merging with the digital world and attachment to their avatars?
ARQ3	Does the digital-physical hybridization of environments affect the values and benefits sought by consumers in brands, objects, services and experiences as well as their approach to consumption and possessions?
Self-extension	
DCRQ1	How does the ontological reversal between the real and digital world influence the way consumers conceive, combine, and use digital and physical objects to construct their extended self?
DCRQ2	How will the merge of liquid and solid consumption impact the way consumers combine the digital and physical spheres to extend themselves?
DCRQ3	How do algorithm-driven suggestions shape consumers' taste?
DCRQ4	How do algorithm-driven suggestions shape consumers' online public representation?
DCRQ5	How does the influence of algorithms on co-creation process shape consumer self-enhancement and extended self?
DCRQ6	What is the influence of algorithms on consumer online experience?
DCRQ7	What is the influence of algorithms on consumer brand preferences?
DCRQ8	Which are the related economic, social, and ethical implications?
Privacy protection	
PPRQ1	Which are the ethical and social privacy-related issues deriving from the increasing use of detection methods?
PPRQ2	How does online self-disclosure change based on the degree of consumer awareness about the functioning of these new technologies?
PPRQ3	Do consumers' perceived vulnerability and possible feelings of exploitation hinder or change the way people construct their online identities and convey them to others?
PPRQ4	Are there intergenerational differences?
PPRQ5	Does interacting with increasingly humanized devices influence consumer personal information sharing and security perception?

A large part of the examined literature claims that digital cues are exploited by consumers to construct desired personalities (Zhao et al., 2008) and provide the public with enhanced virtual versions of their real selves (Doster, 2013) to connect with others (Castro et al., 2017; Chen, 2016; Doster, 2013; Dunne et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2008).

Avatars, broadly intended as all the digital portraits of a consumer (pictures, videos, selfies, social network profiles, etc.) in the disembodied virtual world, are used by individuals to narrate the self and disclose personal details (Cova & Pace, 2006; Schau & Muniz, 2002). The aim is to build selective self-presentations to affirm personal credibility (Ellison et al., 2006; Smaill, 2004; Walther, 2007). The act of creating a digital self is deeply symbolic (Chen, 2016). Consumers utilize archetypes to communicate a positive self-presentation for enhancing reputation and to establish sound relationships with other individuals both online and offline (Pera et al., 2016). Brands play a major role in the construction process of the digital self. They are an essential part of the image that consumers convey in the digital space as brands also provide figurative, non-verbal cues to develop ideal self-presentations and express aspects of an individual's identity (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Simon et al., 2016). The relevance of visual cues related to brands is particularly emphasized in studies investigating selfies posted online. Here, the brand is part of a complex assemblage of self-expression (Rokka & Canniford, 2016) and is most often included in the narratives of consumers with high brand engagement and trust (Hinson et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2018).

An interesting avenue for future research consists of exploring the role that consumers' socio-demographic (SNRQ1) and cultural characteristics (SNRQ2) play in shaping online narratives. In addition to gender, age, education, and so on, Hofstede (2011) six dimensions of national cultures (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, long/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint) could profitably be used to explain possible differences in the way people craft their online identities and convey them to others. A further noteworthy field of investigation concerns the influence that different platforms used for self-disclosure (SNRQ3) and creation of different identities (SNRQ4) exert on consumer narrative content and their use of verbal and non-verbal cues, including those that are brand-related. Future studies could make cross-platform comparisons, investigating those that provide different forms for self-expression, such as voice (i.e. Clubhouse), short videos (i.e. Tik Tok) as well as gaming (i.e. Twitch) (SNRQ5). Considering that each platform gives rise to a 'virtual culture' based on 'shared values' and a specific 'sense of community' (Macfadyen et al., 2004), it could be interesting to explore how these collective beliefs and communal tights can possibly enhance the willingness to self-disclose among participants (SNRQ6). The analysis on digital self-narration should also go beyond digital platforms and apps to enter the realm of human-computer interaction to explore how the consumer experience with smart objects models self-narratives (SNRQ7). For example, the way we use a wearable or interact with a voice assistant could provide important insights into our personality and digital self that could be exploited by brands to craft and provide effective value propositions. The links that can be established between the online consumer self-concept and brands should also be explored considering the new formats of consumer's self-narration, especially those employing visual cues, such as selfies (Rokka & Canniford, 2016) or memes, and study how these new forms of expression relate to brand engagement and loyalty in the offline world (SNRQ8). Finally, while the literature has examined

how brand social endorsement is used for self-narration, brand criticism and the role it plays in consumer self-disclosure (SNRQ9) as well as how this reverberates on consumer-brand relationship in the physical world are still underinvestigated (SNRQ10).

Self-enhancement

A stream of the literature focuses on how the digital environment enhances a consumer's self-concept, transforming it into a consumption object through the production and sharing of content. Digital platforms, in particular SNSs, function as a consumer's self-enhancers to affirm self-promotion and increase self-esteem (Kietzmann et al., 2011). In these outlets, the level of self-esteem depends on the perception of people regarding an individual's strong ties with friends and followers (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). Scholars also stress that self-enhancement and extraversion are antecedents of eWOM posting (Chu et al., 2019; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and sharing of experiences (Atwal et al., 2019).

People who are more narcissistic tend to share experiences more frequently for self-presentation (Kim & Jang, 2019) by using selfies more often than other consumers (Jajodia et al., 2019). Selfies are shared to convey a positive self-image of desired happiness and physical appearance to increase self-esteem and feel instant gratification (Fox et al., 2018; Pounders et al., 2016) in an attempt to be seen as celebrities (Milivojević & Ercegovac, 2014). Studies on sharing images with mobile devices underline that this is part of a luxury experience and often tends to replace real experiences (Atwal et al., 2019).

The linkage between sharing, self-enhancement, and self-esteem of consumers and their aspiration to convey a positive image to others influence marketing communication strategies and the opportunity that companies have to engage consumers. The ability to build valuable relationships with consumers, in fact, lies in promotion strategies that make consumers feel unique (Kim & Jang, 2018) and contribute to constructing their desired image and status (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013; Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

Self-enhancement attempts give rise to the phenomenon of self-branding (Soonkwan, 2009), where the self is deliberately transformed into a collection of flexible personalities that can be created, sold, and consumed (Hearn, 2008; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016). Regarding social networks, Chen (2013) shows that self-branding is led by the sense of empowerment and freedom felt by consumers who can strategically manage content to create attractive and engaging representations of themselves. The same happens with selfies, which are exploited as empowering tools to allow the affirmation of self-identity (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Izak, 2014), and with online reviews that constitute a productive social activity for branding the self and show expertise that erodes the distance between users and content producers (Kuehn, 2016). As brands and products become part of consumers' self-promotion activities, their success depends not only on the ability of marketers to construct engaging online experiences and contents (Atwal et al., 2019) but also on their suitability to be used as effective means for self-enhancement and self-branding.

Consumers' socio-demographic (SERQ1) and cultural characteristics (SERQ2) as well as adopted platforms (SERQ3) represent a fruitful investigation field to explore if and to what extent these variables influence online self-enhancement. With specific reference to the

use of brands to shape an online enhanced self, companies should carefully monitor the evolution of existing platforms and the novel forms of brand social endorsement that may emerge (SERQ4).

A further interesting topic concerns the digital means used for self-enhancement. While in fact the literature has explored why and how some visual prompts, such as embellished photos, selfies, humanized avatars that resemble the real person, etc. contribute to self-enhancement, the employment of different cues is still underinvestigated. There are in fact some multi-user virtual environments, such as Second Life, that enable people to choose to depict themselves online as animals, imaginary characters (i.e. dragons, leprechauns, elves), objects, or any type of material, living or fantasy manifestation (Procter, 2021). The reasons behind these choices to enhance the online self are still relatively underexplored and would deserve further investigation (SERQ5).

Additionally, while most studies focus on individual self co-creation, augmented by others' online inputs, 'co-destruction' practices are almost completely ignored and would deserve some inquiry (SERQ6). Instead of being supplemented by positive comments, sharing, liking, and so on, in fact, the online disclosure of personal details may be followed by criticisms and blames. Future research could explore how this reflects on self-esteem, especially of youngsters, also unveiling possible ethically-related aspects. Such research could be done both in contexts of 'normal' discussions among peers (SERQ7) and in more serious situations, such as in the case of hate speech, cyberbullying, homophobia, and so on (SERQ8) that represent extremely critical issues in current digital environments.

Ambivalence of the virtual and real self

Technology consumption is characterized by liminality (Buchanan-Oliver & Cruz, 2011)—a temporary condition of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and blurring of boundaries that implies the transition from one state to another. Šimůnková (2019) points out that smart devices, through co-presence, disembodiment, and an unconscious switch between online and offline, design consumer 'hybrid identities' guided by superficiality, immediacy, lack of attention, and self-commodification. Reflecting on the notion of the extended self (Belk, 1988), Sheth and Solomon (2014) point out that technology has made the limits between the body and external stimuli more permeable. This has produced a fusion between the online and the offline world – the corporeal and cyber dimensions. As the consumer's self overcomes the physical limits, a collective external 'communal self' emerges, which is designed around giving and sharing with others (Hemetsberger, 2005).

Digitization has gradually blurred the boundaries of the virtual and the real worlds relationship between consumers and their avatars, thereby spurring consumers to perceive a substantial continuity along the two dimensions (Halliday, 2016). This is particularly true for the younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, who are claimed to be deeply merged with the digital sphere with a negligible difference between their virtual and real lives (Bischoff et al., 2019).

This state influences consumption behavior and the relationships that consumers develop with brands. Exploring the connections between consumers' virtual and real identities, the literature claims that high levels of intimacy and attachment with avatars and digital possessions lead to highly engaging consumption experiences and deeper immersions with products (Jin, 2009). The creation of virtual identities is a role-playing process and experimentation of identities that overcome physical barriers, thereby

enabling the design of alternative virtual selves characterized by different degrees of connection with real selves (Parmentier & Rolland, 2009). The ambivalence between the virtual life (VL) and real life (RL) has been observed in selfies (Ma et al., 2017) and the activities conducted on SNSs. The latter represent outlets to play and explore possible future selves and discover and try new consumption fantasies before concretely experimenting with them in RL (Phillips et al., 2014). Hence, the translation of consumers into the virtual world creates novel market spaces and places of encounter with companies (Parmentier & Rolland, 2009). Here, valuable consumer brand relationships can be built to positively affect purchase intention in both VL and RL (Gabisch, 2011).

As people are more absorbed in the digital space, they experience the Proteus effect – the deliberate manipulation of avatars (especially physical appearance) to comply with socially accepted stereotypes and expectations (Belk, 2015). Trabelsi-Zoghalmi and Touzani (2019) also demonstrate the permeability of the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds. The authors show that positive feelings perceived online, such as greater self-confidence developed wearing an attractive avatar for a certain amount of time, tend to also persist in RL. Therefore, virtual life becomes an integral part of consumers' existence and experience in the offline world. Accordingly, cyberspace represents a place where consumers have the power to realize their desires and fulfill their fantasies, and whose effects reverberate on their corporeal dimension. Therefore, for marketers, cyberspace constitutes an invaluable source of information that should be traced and collected to identify emerging needs, change attitudes, and influence buying and consumption practices (Kozinets et al., 2017).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, cyberspace has become a familiar environment for many individuals who either started to or intensified the use of the web, social networks, and digital devices for experiencing and managing multiple aspects of life: work, entertainment, information, healthcare, fitness, education, and social connection (Accenture, 2020). Future research could investigate how increased familiarity with cyberspace has impacted the ambivalence between real and virtual self and identify the possible opportunities for brands (ARQ1). Moreover, while the literature has traditionally focused on the younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z), future studies could explore whether novice digital users, arguably belonging to older generations – comprising digital immigrants – perceive the same sense of merging with the digital sphere and the same attachment to their avatars of youngsters (ARQ2).

A further interesting theme to investigate concerns the progressive hybridization of real environments – retailing outlets included – that are increasingly endowed with digital technologies (sensors, intelligent interfaces, augmented reality, etc.). This calls for further reflections on how interacting with hybrid environments might affect the values and benefits sought by consumers in brands, objects, services and experiences as well as their approach to consumption and possession (ARQ3).

Self-extension

Digital consumption embraces both the consumption of completely digitized objects, such as e-books, digital pictures, and songs, avatars in virtual worlds and players in video games, and the use of devices, such as laptops, smartphones, wearables, and more recently, artificial intelligence-based personal assistants, such as Amazon Echo with Alexa and Google Home with Google Assistant (Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Schweitzer

et al., 2019). Most studies on this topic investigate digitization's impact on the meaning that people attribute to this 'new' type of possessions. These studies also speculate whether Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self that was conceived as emerging from people's—*corporeal*—possessions is still compelling in the digital era.

Mutatis mutandis, it seems that self-extension is still deeply connected with what we possess or have access to in cyberspace (Belk, 2013). Regarding completely digitized objects, we could label self-extension as an *avatar-based* extended self, where people use virtual consumption objects – the music they listen to, the books they read, and the brands they show in their selfies – as tools to empower their selves and communicate to others who they are (or would like to be). Consumers show attachment to their digital possessions and smart devices that become a means for a process of re-embodiment of the self in cyberspace (Jung & Pawlowski, 2014). On the Internet, an extended self emerges in the form of a public representation of the consumer, where digital goods integrate the self and become prostheses that can enhance people's body and mind (Belk, 2014). Digital consumption is defined as 'liquid,' ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In liquid consumption, consumers develop a 'liquid identity,' where the relationships with other people, objects, and brands are more transient and utilitarian than in the corporeal environment. Here, the self is a 'liquid self': flexible, dispersed, and socially constructed in networking sites (Kubat, 2018).

A first valuable topic to explore concerns the changing duality of the physical and digital world. While traditionally, the reality of the digital sphere represented or mirrored the physical sphere, nowadays digital often comes first, giving rise to a phenomenon that has been labeled 'ontological reversal' (Baskerville et al., 2020). In this renewed state, there are some objects that are present in the digital world but that cannot exist in the physical world, such as a digital picture until it is printed or flirting online with potential partners on a dating site until we meet them in person. This ontological reversal implies that the digital sphere is progressively shaping our physical dimension, providing us with possessions or accessed-based services that we may only volitionally either transform into material objects or experience in real environments. How this transformation influences the way consumers will conceive, combine and use digital and physical objects to construct their extended self represents an extremely intriguing research topic (SENrq1).

Additionally, as digital technologies become increasingly pervasive and ubiquitous, such as in the field of domotics, smart cities, and so on, people will find themselves 24/7 immersed in phygital, extremely intelligent environments where liquid and solid consumption will seamlessly merge. Future studies could valuably investigate how the disappearance of a solid-liquid spectrum of consumption will impact the way consumers will combine the digital and physical spheres to extend themselves (SENrq2). Finally, a very interesting topic to further investigate relates to the 'power of algorithms' that function as active agents in cyberspace. First, they can deeply influence consumers' collections of digital objects. For example, when recommender systems for streaming music and films, instead of suggesting contents only based on past consumer choices, attempt to broaden their assortment by recommending other types of contents that consumers might try (Denegri-Knott et al., 2020). When followed, these algorithm-driven suggestions will probably give rise to co-creation processes through sharing, online discussions, and so on, not only ending up shaping consumers' taste (SENrq3) but also their public representation, and hence, their extended self (SENrq4). Furthermore, while

consumers are active creators of digital content, algorithms can decide whether this content is meaningful, as when social networks arrange post descending order of interest for users. Algorithms also intervene in the co-creation process as when, again in SNNs, they decide what to show people (and what not to show), therefore establishing who can enhance the content, providing additional inputs, and who cannot. In this case then, algorithms can shape the process of consumers' self-enhancement and eventually their extended self (SENQR5). Given that social platforms are owned by companies, and all social media algorithms aim to keep people scrolling and watching multiple contents so that they see more ads, companies and brands play a huge role in this phenomenon. This raises questions not only about the real autonomy and protagonism of consumers in cyberspace and the influence that algorithms have on their online experience (SENQR6) and brand preferences (SENQR7) but also about the related economic, social, and ethical implications (SENQR8).

Privacy protection

The advancement of cyberspace and the pervasiveness of digital technologies in people's life have given rise to privacy-related issues. These issues have spurred consumers to increasingly care about their online identity and devote efforts to protect it from the possible misuse by third parties. Self-disclosure is, in fact, perceived as a 'social currency' to allow participation: whereas in social networking outlets, multiple services are free to use, consumers pay for access to these tools sharing their information (Bateman et al., 2011). Self-disclosure is characterized by the trade-off that consumers perceive between the benefit from motivating factors, such as social acceptance and public recognition derived from information sharing, and the cost of taking the risk that this information will be mishandled by some online entity (Yu et al., 2015). Consumers are aware that digital footprints reflect their self-concept and try to protect their identity from 'scrutiny and unsolicited inputs' (Markos et al., 2018) by adopting identity disclosure tactics such as presenting inaccurate or false selves or creating multiple identities (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). While consumers are reluctant to self-disclose data regarding themselves, such as emotions or values (Bateman et al., 2011), simultaneously, online anonymity is considered as a means to protect themselves from reputational risks (Kasakowskij et al., 2018; O'Leary & Murphy, 2019). Finally, part of the literature is devoted to increasingly intelligent devices and apps, as well as online behavioral tracking methods, that can capture data and craft consumer identities without the consumers even realizing it, such as when they merely undertake a consumption act (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). This raises the debate on the mishandling of consumers' data, especially sensitive data, such as health-related information, and the measures that can be taken to eliminate unintentional and unknowing sharing and prevent their misuse (Estrin & Juels, 2016).

Technology development topics are probably the most relevant topics concerning privacy protection to investigate in the future. The increasing use of detection methods, such as AI-based algorithms, machine learning, and biometric identifiers (i.e. facial recognition, iris/retinal scans, etc.) on the part of public authorities and companies particularly raises questions about ethical and social privacy issues (PPRQ1). Future studies could explore how online self-disclosure changes based on the degree of consumer awareness about the functioning of these new technologies (PPRQ2).

Furthermore, it could be investigated if and to what extent consumer perceived vulnerability and possible feelings of exploitation hinder or change the way people construct their online identities and convey them to others (PPRQ3). Such themes should be analyzed to verify whether there are differences between generations given that arguably the youngsters are the most exposed category of consumers (Dahabiyeh et al., 2021) (PPRQ4).

Finally, an interesting field concerns the spreading of increasingly 'humanized' devices and human-machine interaction processes (i.e. Voice User Interfaces, audio-based tools, person identification, gesture and emotion recognition mechanisms, etc.). A noteworthy research avenue could be to explore the effect that more intuitive user experiences have on sharing personal information (may be increasing the willingness to share) and security perception (lowering the perceived risk of information mishandling) (PPRQ5).

Concluding remarks and limitations

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive outlook on the state-of-the-art research on digital consumer self-concept domain in business, management, and social science studies. Hopefully, the analysis will help scholars identify some core issues and challenges that require further research. In addition to academics, our analysis could also benefit practitioners who are confronted with a landscape that changes dramatically along with the technological advancements. Managers are increasingly required to adopt a human-centric mindset when looking at consumer markets. A large part of brand preferences and consumption decisions are in fact indissolubly connected to our self and personality – that is, the condition of being an individual person and not merely an economic actor. Cyberspace and contents that we deliberately create and share online as well as smart objects and devices we interact with daily, represent an extremely valuable resource for businesses to shape their brand value proposition, tailor their offerings, generate innovations, and eventually, compete.

In addition to the possible value of this contribution, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the findings from this systematic review were identified from two scientific databases (Scopus and Ebsco) using a specific set of concatenated keywords. Future studies may obtain different results by exploring more databases and using different search formulae. Second, this review includes studies published only in peer-reviewed scholarly journals written in English, excluding books, book chapters, and other grey literature as well as articles written in other languages that might be important. Future research may profitably enlarge the spectrum of analyzed materials to enrich the findings. Finally, the review was limited to business, management, and social science studies. In the future, articles published in different fields could also be investigated.

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