

Exploring Altruistic Self in Socially Responsible Behaviors

Zubair Ali Shahid ¹, Shahid Rasool ², Yu Chen ^{3*}

¹ Department of Business Administration, IQRA University, Karachi 74000, Pakistan

² Department of Management Science, Shifa Tameer e Millat University, Islamabad 44000, Pakistan

³ Anhui Urban Management Research Center, Anhui Jianzhu University, Hefei 230000, China

* Corresponding author. Email: chenyu@ahjzu.edu.cn

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of altruistic self as part of self-concept, particularly with regards to symbolic interactionism within the context of socially responsible behavior. Drawing from interviews conducted within communities (experiencing food insecurity), the article questions the content of experiences that may drive consumers to demonstrate behaviors leading to expression of altruism attached to self-concept. Research findings illuminate behaviors that individuals are likely to express over time in the process of constructing social-self. The article contributes to the theory of symbolic interactionism by identifying three qualitative themes that help consumers embed altruism deeply within their social-self for example through managing identity, aligning with symbolic group, and demonstrating mirroring effects to significant reference group. By integrating concepts of altruism and self-concept, our approach stresses the importance of altruism as symbolic behavior (as part of social self) in constructing meaning of actions that are largely influenced by a symbol (self).

1. Introduction, Research Aim, and Conceptual Background

Integration of Symbolic Interactionism, Altruism and Self-Concept: Altruism is a complex prosocial behavior. The concept altruistic-self has been discussed in detail in philosophy and psychology literatures [2][3][5]. It simply means selfless behavior and act as motivator in inducing socially responsible behaviors, for example, volunteering or helping communities with food insecurities (helping behaviors). The concept of altruism has been captured within the field of social marketing [7][8]. However, understanding of what drives consumers to demonstrate altruistic behaviors remains in paucity [15][17][20]. Predominantly, marketing is seen as part of exchange placing self-interest of consumers at core of its philosophy [13][16]. Individuals helping others with no reciprocity involved, is at heart of social consumerism and social marketing. However, it is puzzling why some consumers demonstrate altruistic behaviors when it comes to exchange with no expectations in return. Altruistic motivations are deeply-seated in human behavior driving intrinsic rewards. We take a point of view of social scientists that people demonstrate altruistic behaviors to adhere to social norms. Hence, to build greater life purpose at individual, image, and groups levels. Literature on altruistic self-concept provides directions towards two important factors such as benevolence and universalism in context of organic food consumption. Similarly, consumers involved in practicing eco-friendly life-styles (symbolic actions) demonstrate harmony and sustainability as motives to altruistic self-concept [18]. These types of consumers also tend to consume organic food in their daily life. Another important consumption pattern that has been observed in studies published in psychology literature is on ‘helping others’ in of sharing of food with disadvantage community members. The literature further suggests that behaviors such as being kind, benevolence, and sense of empathy. Individuals are intrinsically motivated to help others through difficult times and in some cases reported to be driven by divine or eschatological motives (symbolic actions). These motivations likely to create certain self-concepts. The literature on self-concept suggest four types for example, actual self, ideal self, social self, and ideal social self-

concept [9][10][11]. The debate on consumer self-concept is limited to products, brands in tourism and real-estate industries. Self is suggested to be an interaction process as it evolves through process of social experience. The aim of this paper is to explore dimensions of altruistic self-concept in socially responsible behavior in context of theory of symbolic interactionism [12][21]. Furthermore, the paper integrates the concepts of self-concept and altruistic self for social change. Accordingly, the paper explores the following research question: *What drives consumers to demonstrate altruistic self in socially responsible behaviors?*

2. Research Context and Methodology

The underlying reason to conduct this study is to respond to ever growing real life challenge of our times i.e. 815 million people are experiencing food insecurity [4][22]. Hence, tackling hunger and malnutrition has become one the Sustainable Developments Goals for 2030. We believe individuals in communities have a stronger role to play in sustaining food supplies to disadvantaged families. In current study, researchers conducted 10 in-depth interviews with individuals involved in sharing household items among community members with food insecurities. The interview protocol was adapted from Avino (2006) with multiple face to face interview questions [1]. Interview questions started and centered with the core question as “can you tell us about doing charity in this community?”, while interviewees telling their stories, the conversation were directed by researchers via few directional words in order to capture the relevant information, particularly about the concept “altruistic self”. However, instead of discussing “altruistic self”, researchers and interviewees talk around the concept since these directional words are “friends”, “family”, “community”, etc. The interviews were conducted among mid to low socio-economic communities. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a coding process including the use of open, axial and selective coding to extract key themes and give meaning to data [6][23]. Conclusions were drawn based on integration of theory and data to further refine our existing understanding of knowledge towards altruistic behavior, self-concept and symbolic interactionism.

3. Findings, Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of interview-data analysis indicate three themes. **Theme 1: alignment with symbolic group (socially responsible)**, in which consumers express *upholding one's values* and *resource sharing*. The accounts of the participants show sense of life purpose and sense of unity within community. John's example, deepened the social connections with other community members demonstrating similar behaviors. It indicates that aligning one's values to that of community induces value-in-behavior as he says, *'taking care of others is one of our family's core values as we are a part of this community...they [neighbors] all do it I mean we all do it and it makes me feel like a family...I would like my kids to do the same for others in future'*. The findings refine our existing understanding of social self-concept by suggesting that desired self is achieved through the process of alignment which further requires certain actions from individuals over time to strengthen their positions among community members. In terms of socially responsible interactions (eliminating food insecurities of others), individuals are required to proactively demonstrate symbolic actions such as sharing of resources, participation and other contributing values. Additionally, the second theme indicates behaviors such as *commitment (affective state)* and *civic duties* which helps consumers in **(theme 2) managing identity** to connect selflessness as a part of social self-identity. As illustrated by Carl's case that he is passionate and dedicated to the cause of food insecurity. He says, *'we moved here five years ago...we see others helping by being helpful you can make friends quickly...and five years later I am committed to solve the issue of food here...we have families living with kids and it's just hard to see them go through crisis'*. Such discourses illuminate not only the struggles of a community but also by ways in which resourceful members are voicing for others and feeling sense of responsibility towards a social cause. Furthermore, consumers demonstrate *empathy* and *identification* hence generating **(theme 3) mirroring effects** to create

social identity through symbolic actions. These actions enrich communities and individuals' social self-concepts in various ways (adding value). Our participants offered support to community members experiencing food insecurity by being involved in resolving their issues and bringing understanding of their situations at a community level. As Linda described these community actions as '*symbols of peace and harmony*' which in turn helps her in understanding her '*life purpose*'. The reflective dialogue is important to help navigate the evolving social aspect of self-concept. As Kate reflects, '*when you say you belong to this community you must also solve their issues and nothing is better than first understanding what others are going through...just help*'. Another important indicator observed through data collection is *identity* that defines individuals' role in a community. as Alex explains, '*...a major part of this has to do with my childhood...we always felt pride in helping people around us they, there was instant connection, we have been living here from last 15 years and this place I mean helping this community defines us who we are*'. Current literature on self-concept provides limited understanding on how individuals develop social self-concept by pursuing altruistic symbolic actions. Reflections are a way to understand one's own self-image and it can be achieved through altruistic actions [10][11][14][19]. In conclusion, we refine our understanding of social self-concept and how it is achieved in context of altruistic behavior (with specific regards to *content* needed to develop social self). We urge that marketers need to carefully introduce and manage value and identity-based advertising messages to articulate the purpose of cause i.e. eliminating food insecurity.

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