

# Reference group influence in consumer role rehearsal narratives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to analyse reference group influence through the imagined audience construct of the role theory. Prior research has shown the influential nature of reference groups on an individuals' behaviour. The studied theatrical metaphor supplies a new perspective to the social phenomenon of reference group dynamics in consumer behaviour.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted utilizing a naturalistic research study design. The interviews took place in the participants' homes, and participants were asked to create five outfits for various social situations. Then, the participants were asked about the outfits they created, and how that outfit aided in their role preparation process. An inductive analysis of the data resulted in narrative themes that align with several role theory constructs.

**Findings** – The consumer role rehearsal narratives that emerged describe the process individuals go through for anticipated social interactions. Depending on the social situation, role theory constructs such as role expectations, role location, role learning and role skill were highlighted. The imagined audience of various reference groups do impact the individual's future behaviours.

**Research limitations/implications** – Future researchers could apply additional role theory constructs not only to reference groups but also to other aspects of consumer behaviour as well.

**Originality/value** – This paper supplies a role theory framework that can be used by future researchers when studying reference group influence on consumer behaviour.

**Keywords** Impression management, Consumer behaviour, Naturalistic research, Reference groups, Role theory

**Paper type** Research paper

Reference groups are an important component in the study of consumer behaviour. Prior research has shown that the individual consumer often makes consumption decisions which have been influenced by his or her membership in various reference groups. The current study seeks to gain further understanding of the impact of reference groups on the individual through the application of role theory. Role theory comes from the social psychology literature, and it uses a theatrical metaphor where the researcher can study the individual as if one were studying an actor portraying a role (Sarbin and Allen, 1968). In brief, role theory argues that the individual's role enactment is influenced by the role expectations of others, from the role learning he or she has obtained from others, through the role skills he or she has built up over time and from his or her current role location.

Here, the audience construct in role theory is of particular interest. In social psychology, the audience represents the social other during interpersonal interactions. Audiences can be physically or symbolically present for the actor. According to role theory, the symbolically



present audience, or what is called the *imagined audience*, is always present during the actor's role rehearsal. The role expectations of the imagined audience help to guide the actor's future behaviours. In many ways, reference groups can be viewed as an imagined audience for individual consumers. They are always symbolically present, and they guide future behaviour due to the expectations they place on the individual. Therefore, the imagined audience of reference groups in consumer research is the focus of this study.

A naturalistic research study design was implemented to obtain more insight on how reference groups pre-emptively influence individual consumer identity processes. Twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted, and each took place in the participant's home (i.e. while the actor was in role preparation mode). Each participant was asked to create five different outfits for a specific social interaction. Later, the research participants were asked about the outfits they created, and how that outfit aided in his or her role preparation process. The results revealed that depending on the anticipated social interaction, certain role theory constructs were more salient in the participants' thematic narratives. These results highlight how the imagined audience influences the individual as he or she went about his or her role preparation processes.

Consumption and consumer behaviour is an inherent part of the impression management process. In particular, the study of how consumers dress in everyday social interactions with anticipated others in one's reference groups can be useful to consumer researchers. Clothing, shoes, accessories, high-tech gadgets, brands, etc. all function as symbolic signals and are extensions of that individual's sense of self (Belk, 1988). Craik (2009, p. 2) states, "Fashion is a cultural practice that is bound up with the specification of our sense of self both as individuals and as members of groups". The day-to-day modes of dress by consumers are continuous presentations of self that are expressed by the individual and are interpreted by others, which, in turn, allow others to make inferences about that individual's identity. According to Goffman's (1959) impression management theory, the appearance of the actor is a core aspect of his or her front. Costumes, props and masks are all elements that the individual is strategically bringing to the social interaction to cultivate the impression others will form of him or her.

In addition, fashion trends arise out of cultural norms, and fashionable styles are guided by each social group's preferences. Individual fashion choices communicate in-group and out-group membership with various reference groups. Therefore, reference groups often influence the consumption decisions that individuals make. Wearing an article of clothing that does not line-up with a particular reference group may violate social norms to the point that the individual loses social membership. The study of "fashion discourse" (Thompson and Haytko, 1997, p. 15) has been gaining popularity in consumer research (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Perez *et al.*, 2010). The use of fashion choices by the individual provides a dialogue between the individual and the society. Therefore, the interplay of identity creation and communication via fashion can provide important managerial implications to marketing and advertising practitioners (Kim, 2013; Loo and Hackley, 2013).

The goal of the current research project is to study how consumers engage in role preparation processes by analysing the impact of anticipated reference groups on their fashion selections. First, role theory will be introduced to supply a theoretical framework. The major constructs and assumptions associated with this theory will be discussed. Then, a literature review on reference groups will showcase the various ways in which consumer researchers have tried to understand reference group influence. As one will see, the use of a

theatrical metaphor in the study of consumer behaviour has seen limited use thus far. Finally, the current research project will be introduced and further discussed.

### **Theoretical framework**

Sarbin and Allen's (1968) role theory arises out of the social psychology literature, and it consists of constructs such as role enactment, role expectations, role location, role demands, role skills, etc. This theory seeks to understand how the individual becomes properly socialized in his or her community by analysing the individual as if one were studying an actor in a play. This theatrical metaphor allows the researcher to dissect the actor's attempts at enacting a role and determine his or her success at portraying that role. Role theory also encompasses the people surrounding the individual. These other individuals put role expectations onto the actor as they engage in their own role enactments. This role set—the complementary roles encompassing a larger structure—supplies a rich resource of studying identity signalling through social interactions among individuals.

The audience, or, “observers who are present during role enactment”, (Sarbin and Allen, 1968, p. 528) is also an important component of role theory. The audience represents the generalized other in the society (Mead, 1934/1959). In particular, the imagined audience guides the actor's actions while he or she is rehearsing for a role. This imagined audience is of certain importance in this paper. The imagined audiences are the reference groups for the individual consumer. They will be studied to gain a clearer understanding of how reference groups influence the individual's role preparation process.

It is important to note that role theory can be used to study a more complex picture of role enactment by the individual. Often, the discussion of the role theory is on a single individual portraying a single role. However, Sarbin and Allen (1968) also took the time to discuss multiple roles that individuals may possess. Over time, the individual builds up a role repertoire that allows him or her to successfully interact with various social groups. These multiple roles can be either achieved (doctor, lawyer, teacher) or ascribed (woman, Hispanic, brunette). Some roles are constantly active, while others may be latent for a period of time until they are actively needed. The coordination of simultaneous roles or the transition across roles may not always be smooth or easy for the individual. Role strain and role conflict may arise when the individual has trouble deciding on which role is more appropriately salient. The individual must learn how to juggle these multiple roles throughout his or her life. By studying actor role rehearsal associated with imagined audiences, it is argued here that consumer researchers can gain a better understanding of how successful individuals manage their reference group role repertoire.

### **Literature review**

Reference groups are an important aspect in the study of consumer behaviour. Extensive research has shown that individuals often make consumption choices that are influenced by their various reference groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Reference groups can also influence how the individual feels towards certain products or brands (Ramanathan and McGill, 2007) and can even influence the consumption choices the individual makes (Tanner *et al.*, 2008). Some reference groups may exist solely around the consumption of a certain brand or product (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). However, they more typically are composed of friends, co-workers and family members (Epp and Price, 2008; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012). These groups are not mutually exclusive, and therefore the individual may be influenced by multiple reference groups at any single

point in time (Luna *et al.*, 2008). Finally, it is important to note that there are reference groups that may have dissociative influence on the individual's behaviour. Called *out-groups*, the individual consumer may engage in certain behaviours as a means to avoid being associated with certain reference groups (White and Dahl, 2007).

Reference groups supply the individual with various social identities, which combine with the individual's self-concept to complete his or her total identity (Hogg, 2003). Individuals strategically engage in certain behaviours during social interactions as a means to continually attach themselves to certain reference groups and to certain people within those reference groups (Goffman, 1959). By managing his or her impression in front of others, the individual is seeking to stabilize his or her identity. In consumer research, impression management is often discussed in terms of individual responses to social comparison. Recently, consumer researchers have been specifically focusing on threats to one's sense of self (Gao *et al.*, 2009), and how the individual copes with these threats to one's identity via consumption (Kim and Rucker, 2012; Shalev and Morwitz, 2012).

Swann (1987) described this impression management as a process of self-verification. Three sub-processes of self-verification are:

- (1) Selective interaction.
- (2) Displaying identity cues.
- (3) Interaction strategies.

During a selective interaction, the individual chooses which public atmospheres to enter, which, in turn, will bring him or her into contact with specific groups of people. Then, while the individual is in these social settings, he or she may display certain cues that communicate to these social others information about his or her identity. These cues may be signalled in the way the person dresses, their hairstyle, the type of car they drive, the type of cell phone they use, etc. As one can see, this is an indirect form of communication. Finally, interaction strategies describe the behaviours and expressions of the individual, while he or she is directly communicating with another person. Through the way that the individual speaks, gestures and responds to another person helps to verify the individual's sense of self. The self-verification process has also been emerging in contemporary consumer research studies. In particular, the tendency of the individual to strategically display identity cues that associate them with those of a higher social rank (Mead *et al.*, 2011), and, in turn, those with higher social rank strategically distancing themselves from those who have less social status (Irmak *et al.*, 2010; White and Argo, 2011; Dubois *et al.*, 2012). On an aggregate level, there is a swirling of attachments and detachments as individuals continually attempt to self-affirm their place in society.

Goffman's (1959) impression management theory uses a theatrical metaphor. This identity theory also grew out of social psychology and its framework also allows the researcher to study the individual out in public as if one were studying an actor putting on a play. Although Goffman's impression management framework is heavily cited in the consumer research centred on identity formation and communication, the specific use of the theatrical metaphor is often a marginal aspect of the discussion. The role theory introduced by Sarbin and Allen (1968) is an extension on Goffman's theory. It fleshes out the construct of the actor and the processes associated with the actor's role portrayal. Role theory has seen even less use by consumer researchers. Although research on identity formation and

communication is one of the increasing interests among social scientists (Cote, 2006), a gap in the current literature exists. Therefore, the research questions for this study ask:

*RQ1.* How do imagined audiences impact the actor's role rehearsal stage?

*RQ2.* How do reference groups influence consumer identity signalling?

The objective here is to understand how consumers present certain identity cues in their outfits as they rehearse for roles that are associated with various reference groups. As fashion allows the individual to signal aspects of his or her identity to others (Han *et al.*, 2010; Howlett *et al.*, 2013), then depending on who the individual is going to interact with may cause adjustments in how the individual would like to dress. Here, fashion is operationalized as consisting of clothing, shoes, accessories such as sunglasses, jewellery, purses, cell phones and tablet computers. An outfit is the complete ensemble the individual is wearing and/or carrying with him or her as he or she is walking out of the door. By studying the fashion that the participants created, and by studying their role preparation narrations that guided the creation of each outfit, consumer researchers can begin to see the impact of imagined audiences via references groups in guiding consumer behaviour.

### Methodology

Qualitative inductive inquiry has gained steady momentum in consumer research over the past few decades (Denzin, 2001; Deighton *et al.*, 2010; Kapoulas and Mitic, 2012). In fact, many qualitative consumer researchers now frame their discussion under the umbrella term *consumer culture theory* (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Arnould and Thompson argued that the four main research categories encompassing consumer culture theory include consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historic patterns of consumption and mass-mediated ideologies. The current study is seeking to understand the consumer identity projects by studying role preparation narratives. In addition, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) classic framework on qualitative research helped to guide the research methodology design for this study. These authors developed 14 major characteristics of what they termed naturalistic research: natural setting, human instrument, tacit knowledge, qualitative methods, purposive sampling, inductive data analysis, grounded theory, emergent design, negotiated outcomes, case studies, idiographic interpretation, tentative application, focus-determined boundaries and trustworthiness. All of these characteristics were taken into account for the design of this study.

### *Study protocol*

Face-to-face interviews took place with 20 research participants. Each interview occurred in the participant's home. The interviews were audio recorded with a digital voice recorder. Each interview lasted for about two hours, and participants were paid \$10 per hour for their time. After reading and signing a consent form, the interviewer first asked respondents about their life histories, personal hobbies and interests. This was to gain an overall snapshot of each individual's sense of self. Next, participants were asked to create five outfits. Each outfit was designated for a specific social situation. The five social situations that participants were asked to create an outfit for were:

- (1) Their favourite outfit that they can wear anywhere.
- (2) An outfit for a typical workday.
- (3) An outfit for going out with friends.

- (4) An outfit for an evening meal with one’s family.
- (5) An outfit for date night with one’s significant other.

One-by-one, each outfit was assembled by the participant. Then, the researcher laid out the outfit on the floor and photographed it with a digital camera. Next, the interviewer and the participant again sat down to discuss each outfit. Participants were asked why they choose that outfit for each social scenario and what meanings come to mind when they think of that outfit (How do they feel when they wear that outfit?; What are they trying to express about themselves in that outfit?). Finally, respondents filled out a brief demographic survey, which can be seen in [Table I](#). Pseudonyms are provided for each participant to secure anonymity.

*Population sampling*

A non-probability, purposive sampling method was utilized to gain a sample of 20. With an intentional focus of applying naturalistic inquiry, a combination of maximum variation sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling were implemented ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). Maximum variation sampling attempts to capture as much cultural complexity with a relatively small pool of participants. In this study, both men and women were interviewed from a variety of ages, ethnicities and levels of educational attainment. Snowball sampling and convenience sampling was also utilized. Therefore, the author began by drawing up a list of potential interviewees from her known acquaintances. She then eliminated individuals who were immediate family members and close friends. After that, she began contacting extended family members, friends who were acquaintances and associates at her place of employment. After interviewing

Informant	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Education	Marital status
Hannah	19	Female	Caucasian	Some college	Single
Elizabeth	21	Female	Hispanic	Some college	Single
Brooke	24	Female	Caucasian	Some graduate school	Single
Ashley	24	Female	African American	Some graduate school	Single
Maya	25	Female	Caucasian	College graduate	Single
Lauren	25	Female	Hispanic	Some graduate school	Single
Leah	28	Female	Caucasian	Some graduate school	Married
Madison	28	Female	Caucasian	Some graduate school	Married
Samantha	28	Female	Caucasian	College graduate	Married
Claire	42	Female	Caucasian	Some college	Married
Allison	51	Female	Caucasian	College graduate	Married
Benjamin	18	Male	Caucasian	Some college	Single
Gabriel	19	Male	Asian American	Some college	Single
Ryan	26	Male	Caucasian, Hispanic, & Native American	Some graduate school	Single
Luke	27	Male	Caucasian	College graduate	Single
Jacob	29	Male	African American	Graduate school graduate	Single
William	32	Male	African American	Graduate school graduate	Married
Michael	34	Male	African American	Graduate school graduate	Married
Ethan	36	Male	Caucasian	Some graduate school	Single
Aaron	55	Male	Caucasian	High school graduate	Married

**Table I.**  
Informant information

about 6-7 of these participants, the author asked these participants to recommend another individual that the author could interview. Several of these individuals were contacted and were asked to participate. Therefore, some of the interviewees in this study were known to the author prior to the interview, and some of them were not known prior to the meeting for the interview. This process continued of requesting interview participants from known and unknown individuals until a level of saturation was reached. A saturation threshold is achieved when the majority of new information that would be obtained from additional participants is no longer novel or unique (Weiss, 1994). As the interviewer was approaching 20 respondents, she was experiencing a level of saturation in the data collected. New information was becoming redundant, and efforts to collect additional data were perceived as diminishing returns.

### *Analysis*

Post-positivistic methods of analysis were utilized to analyse the interview data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The author engaged in an inductive analysis of the interview transcripts according to the four-step method outlined by Weiss (1994): coding, sorting, local integration and inclusive integration. The first step, coding, describes the conceptualization of thematic categories that emerged from the data. For this study, the author went through the interview transcripts and coded the data according to several themes that inductively grew out of the data. Step number two is to then sort the data points into thematically matched piles. The author made a copy of her coded data and with this copy, separated the data points into thematically matched piles so that she could see similar data points lumped together. Local integration is when the researcher examines each thematic pile to generate a solid understanding. Finally, inclusive integration looks across themes and holistically interprets the data. This stage primarily occurred as the author wrote up the results section discussed below. As one will see, several of the inductive themes that arose through the consumer identity narratives aligned with several of the main constructs associated with role theory. Each theme is presented below, and sample narratives from the data are supplied to substantiate each theme.

## **Results**

### *Emerging themes in consumer role rehearsal narratives*

Depending on the social event, and depending on the anticipated reference groups that the individual will interact with, the audience-actor dynamic may display certain role theory dynamics. In this study, one's favourite outfit triggers the actor to focus on his or her role location. Work and friend scenarios highlighted more rigid and relaxed levels of perceived role expectations. Time with one's family places emphasis on what roles one has already learned. Finally, the date night scenario may cause the actor to focus on communicating his or her role skills. Figure 1 summarizes the results in this study.

### *Favourite outfit and role location*

First, as the research participants discussed their favourite outfit, several participants discussed how this outfit supplied them with a sense of role location. In role theory, role location is a spatial metaphor that helps the actor answer the reflexive question, "Who am I?" It is important for the individual to feel like he or she can accurately locate his or her sense of self in society. Three major themes inductively arose out of the participant

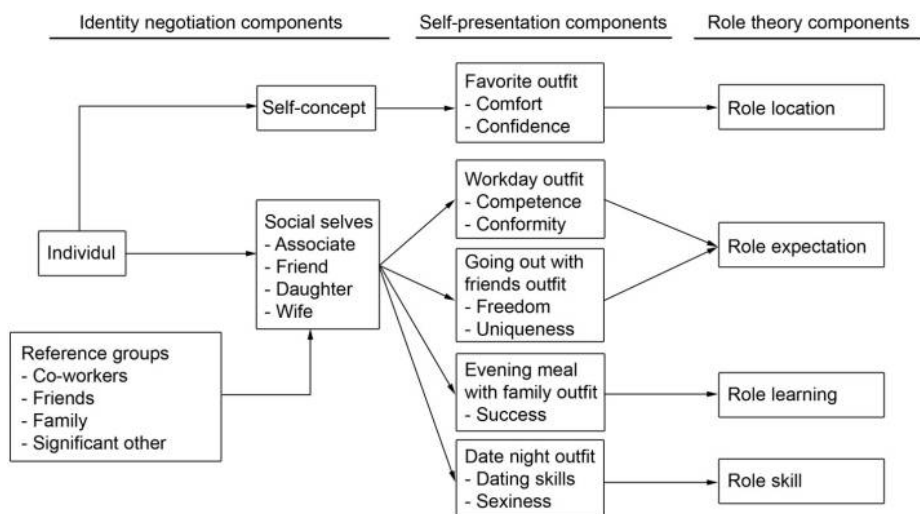


Figure 1.

narratives focusing on their favourite outfit: comfort, confidence and relaxation. All of these themes describe an individual actor with a sound understanding of their role location, and therefore a sense of ease. In other words, their sense of self is strong and accurate. Table II displays these narratives and themes.

For example, the theme of comfort describes the adaptability of this outfit to several social scenarios for several participants. For example:

I feel like with that outfit I can really take it from school, to work and out for drinks. It is just so joyous and free spirited. I do not have to worry about anything. It is comfortable; at least the shoes are (Lauren).

Because Lauren can wear the same outfit at work or while going out for drinks with friends, she then enters these social interactions with a feeling of comfort as she has already established her spatial position in each social realm. She knows who she is, and in this outfit she does not enter social interactions with as much trepidation as others who are not as comfortable as her. By locating her role through previous social interactions that occurred while she was wearing this outfit, Lauren can feel like this outfit provides a continuation of her social position.

Another way to discuss this notion of role location achievement through one's favourite outfit is the theme of *confidence* that a few other participants mentioned. For example:

Whenever I think of this outfit, I feel really good. I feel super-confident. With that confidence, I feel like I am in this position of power. I am definitely standing out (Elizabeth).

With that I am sociable, I am cute, but I still feel powerful. I am relaxed, but I still feel confident (Ashley).

Similar to comfort, Elizabeth and Ashley perceive their favourite outfit as providing them the confidence to enact certain social roles because they are assured of their sense of self. Similarly, several other participants described their favourite outfits as *relaxing* in that they feel at home in whatever social setting they find themselves in. For example:



Theme	Informant	Role theory theme: role location
Comfort	Lauren	"I feel like with that outfit I can really take it from school, to work and out for drinks. It is just so joyous and free-spirited. I don't have to worry about anything. It's comfortable, at least the shoes are"
	Luke	"Relaxed and comforting, that is my navy polo shirt and my jeans in a heartbeat"
	Leah	"That sweater is really comfortable. I feel relaxed when I wear it. And as far as sociable, I think I would be approachable. I don't think someone would be intimidated. I get intimidated when people are really fancy. I think that is a good, comfortable, approachable look"
	Hannah	"It's comfy, but it is not just shorts and a t-shirt. It's a little bit more stylish. When you walk around in it you are like, 'Yeah, this is comfy'. It is comfy and cute—it'll work"
	Benjamin	"It looks pretty nice, but it is also a relaxed, casual kind of look. It is comforting because I guess I feel good. Sociable because you can be pretty approachable if you just wear, like, normal clothes and still look nice"
Confidence	Elizabeth	"Whenever I think of this outfit, I feel really good. I feel super-confident. With that confidence, I feel like I am in this position of power. I am definitely standing out"
	Ashley	"With that I am sociable, I am cute, but I still feel powerful. I am relaxed, but I still feel confident"
Relaxation	Madison	"That outfit is kind of fun and relaxed. It is not trying to say a whole lot. It is just, kind of, 'This is me'. There is not a lot to that outfit, it is very simple"
	Aaron	"I can wear that outfit anywhere. Out on the town, just anywhere"
	Ethan	"I mean, that is how I feel about myself. It is the way that I want to sign to the world. I am not an ego-driven person. I'm not asking for attention, I just dress casually. I have my own idiosyncrasies with the way I dress"
	Jacob	"It does really put me at peace. It makes me feel like I am being authentic. Because of my conservative nature. It blends in with my nature—the button-up shirt and the boat shoes. That is a style that I have had ever since I was little. It almost feels like home"

**Table II.**  
Excerpts on  
informants' favourite  
outfit

It does really put me at peace. It makes me feel like I am being authentic because of my conservative nature. It blends in with my nature – the button-up shirt and the boat shoes. That is a style that I have had ever since I was little. It almost feels like home (Jacob).

Jacob expresses calmness when he is wearing his favourite outfit. He is more relaxed when he enters social situations in this outfit because it supplies him with role location. This may be one of the reasons why people develop favourite outfits. They realize over time that certain outfits can aid in successful social interactions. Favourite outfits can provide comfort, confidence and relaxation that is conveyed through a sense of self, or role location.

Of the five outfit scenarios given to the research participants, this is the only one where the actor is primarily concerned with his or her own role. The other four outfits inherently supply the actor with role expectations. An imagined audience of various reference groups comprises a role set: a role with a complementary role. Therefore, role expectations and role

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demands exist for the actor as they engage in role rehearsal for anticipated social interactions. These elements are further explored in the next section.

*Work and friends outfit and role expectations*

As defined by Sarbin and Allen (1968, p. 497):

Role expectations are comprised of the rights and privileges, the duties and obligations, of any occupant of a social position in relation to persons occupying other positions in the social structure.

The role expectations the actor holds for himself or herself in a certain role is called role conception. If the actor's role conception does not conform to the role expectations of others, a level of role discord develops among the individuals involved. As research participants were discussing their work outfits and outfits for going out with friends, several themes of role expectations developed. These themes underline the rigidness (competence and conformity) and relaxed (freedom and uniqueness) role expectations placed onto the individual during social interactions. All four inductive themes can be seen in Tables III and IV.

The first theme is the expectation for an actor to appear *competent* for his or her job position. For example, one of the respondents (who is a sports journalist) described how his competence at his job can be expressed through his work outfit:

I always feel confident in my job, and I have to appear that I look confident when I am out in the field. I have to know what I am talking about. The one second it appears that I don't know what is going on, people don't think I am credible anymore. I could be wearing a suit at that point and I can't retrieve how they view me (Luke).

Although Luke is using the word confidence, he is focusing on the confidence in his ability to do his job, not his personal self-confidence. When Luke wears this outfit, he is projecting a social role. He is portraying his work role competency. While engaging in social interactions, the expectations from others of what a journalist should look like and how a journalist should act is satisfied when Luke wears this outfit. Here is another example:

As a substitute teacher, you are supposed to be in a nurturing role. You are an intellectual mentor, even if it is just for a day to these students. With the nice slacks you are very professional. They even tell you at these orientation meetings for substitute teachers, "At other places you can get by with jeans, but for subbing you have to be set apart". Even though I am 21 and they are 18 years old, I have to set myself apart in some way. I do that with my clothing, but obviously with the way I carry myself. Also, with clothing because that is their first impression. You want to look more adult, more in control, more like you know how to handle things (Elizabeth).

Again, Elizabeth arranges her clothing according to the expectations from others of what a substitute teacher is supposed to look like and how they should conduct themselves. If she would wear jeans to work, others may form the impression that she is not as competent for her job. She would not as clearly be projecting the role of an intellectual mentor. The individual's reaction to the role expectations put on them by others at their place of employment displays how they have decided to prepare for their role. Therefore, signalling role competence is a desired action by many individuals.

Sometimes these workplace role expectations put an extensive amount of pressure onto the individual to conform to the types of clothing the individual is allowed to wear. Here, one

Theme	Informant	Role theory theme: role expectations (rigid)
Competence	Luke	"I always feel confident in my job, and I have to appear that I look confident when I am out in the field. I have to know what I am talking about. The one second it appears that I don't know what is going on, people don't think I am credible anymore. I could be wearing a suit at that point and I can't retrieve how they view me"
	Elizabeth	"As a substitute teacher, you are supposed to be in a nurturing role. You are an intellectual mentor, even if it is just for a day to these students. With the nice slacks you are very professional. They even tell you at these orientation meetings for substitute teachers, 'At other places you can get by with jeans, but for subbing you have to be set apart'. Even though I am 21 and they are 18 years old, I have to set myself apart in some way. I do that with my clothing, but obviously with the way I carry myself. Also, with clothing because that is their first impression. You want to look more adult, more in control, more like you know how to handle things"
	Maya	"It is kind of an outfit for being competent. For being in charge of your day and doing your work. I guess you could be a leader in it if you wanted to"
	Brooke	"I like the straight-line skirt. It is very straightforward. And with the bag, you can present yourself as someone who knows what you are doing. Heels always help. (laughs) As much as I hate them, they do"
	Jacob	"I feel like I am going to work, so I do feel confident. Maroon can be a power color. It is one of my best-fitting shirts. I like the way it feels on my body. That particular polo is a more contour-fit Ralph Lauren. It fits in the places that I like, and so that generates the confidence that you feel like you at least look good that day"
Conformity	Hannah	"For work I always feel like my outfit needs to be very organized and set. It needs to match. You have the suit pants and the suit top that go together. When you are at work and you have orders that you have to do—it is very controlled. Controlled and systematic"
	Ashley	"This one is more controlled because it is a work look, and I have to dress according to what they want. But at the same time, it is still me"
	William	"I don't really like that outfit. It is an okay outfit. Someone came up with it. They have outfits for salaried people and hourly people, and that is the salaried people uniform. I don't have to wear it, but when I do I feel as if I am being taken a level down. It is just a polo shirt. The pants are fitted and not necessarily the right fit, so it is like being in the army, you know? Just being given a uniform. That is what I feel"
	Aaron	"It means I work there, and I can help you find what you need. It is a work thing. It's the corporate logo. You have to wear it. People come in with all types of questions, and they know I am going to be able to help them"

**Table III.**  
Excerpts on  
informants' work  
outfit

Theme	Informant	Role theory theme: role expectations (relaxed)
Freedom	William	“For that outfit I am going out with my friends. They already know who I am. I don’t have to define who I am. I am going to be pretty comfortable, pretty sociable. I don’t have anything to prove there”
	Luke	“In that outfit, there are no tight clothes. I don’t feel restrained. Even if I would be wearing a belt, it would be loose. Just loose clothing. Just the way you would probably act around your friends. Hopefully you would act loose. If you don’t, then they are not really your friends. Then you are trying to impress them in some way”
	Allison	“Well, I am going out to have fun. I feel a little more lighthearted when I put that outfit on”
	Michael	“When I am around my friends, it is typically more about having a good time. Just enjoying each other’s company. If a wise thought comes out, that is great, but if we are just laughing about what we saw on the Jersey Shore, that is fine too”
	Leah	“I felt that with the scarf which is very bright and pink, and to me that is pretty fun and happy and joyous. Ready to have a good time with my friends. I am going to be more free than I would be at work. In a different social setting”
Uniqueness	Maya	“It just seems fitting for going out with friends. Interacting with people you enjoy being around. It is a dress, it is kind of a fun dress that I like. It is a cute little vintage dress”
	Ashley	“That is one of my favorite shirts. With the Jessica Simpson shoes—love those shoes. That one definitely makes me feel powerful and ready to hit the night life with my ladies and yeah, just conquer the night”
	Hannah	“It has got the one-shoulder. That is my first one-shoulder dress. It is a little daring. It is something new. It’s fun; it’s out there. When you go out, you want to have fun. You want to try new things. Be daring and witty”
	Elizabeth	“It is confident and powerful, especially the leather. There is a lot of leather. But then again there is kind of this soft, feminine touch with the pearls. So it is an interesting contrast. Kind of like a bad-ass chick kind of thing”
(Exception: Conformity)	Jacob	“When you are going out with friends, you have that other, that social dynamic that you have to fit into. Depending on where we go, there are certain things that I couldn’t wear even if I wanted to wear them. Then, not only do you have to manage your own self and your own portrait of who you are, you have got this social portrait, this social image that you are trying to manage too. You don’t want to stick out. If everyone is wearing jeans and a polo [. . .] there is this social learning that goes on. Even if I wanted to wear my Adidas pants, I wouldn’t. I guess the fact that I feel restraint when I do hang out with other people. That I have to mesh with them”

**Table IV.**  
Excerpts on  
informants’ friends  
outfit

can really get a sense of how the individual feels constrained by the expectations of others. In fact, there may be a specific outfit or a uniform that the individual needs to wear during this specific role enactment. Several of the respondents, especially Hannah (a Congressional intern) and William (an engineer), expressed the *conformity* of work-role expectations they feel in their style of dress:

For work, I always feel like my outfit needs to be very organized and set. It needs to match. You have the suit pants and the suit top that go together. When you are at work and you have orders that you have to do – it is very controlled. Controlled and systematic (Hannah).

I don't really like that outfit. It is an okay outfit. Someone came up with it. They have outfits for salaried people and hourly people, and that is the salaried people uniform. I don't have to wear it, but when I do I feel as if I am being taken a level down. It is just a polo shirt. The pants are fitted and not necessarily the right fit, so it is like being in the army, you know? Just being given a uniform. That is what I feel (William).

In contrast to the work outfit, the role expectations for the evening out with friends were less constraining for most of the research participants. In these social interactions, the individual senses *freedom* from role expectations. For example:

In that outfit, there are no tight clothes. I don't feel restrained. Even if I would be wearing a belt, it would be loose. Just loose clothing. Just the way you would probably act around your friends. Hopefully you would act loose. If you don't, then they are not really your friends. Then you are trying to impress them in some way (Luke).

In contrast to his work outfit, here Luke expressed a sense of freedom from role expectations when he is in the presence of his friends. He is free to portray his role with more latitude. He does not have to wear a uniform like he does at work.

Participants also used language in their terminology that touches not necessarily on freedom, but on *uniqueness*, which is similar. Several participants discussed how they felt free to put together uncommon clothing combinations without a fear of social backlash. Maya, for example, chose a "cute little vintage dress" to access her more extroverted social role. For Hannah, the item was a one-shoulder dress to feel more daring, and for Elizabeth it was a leather vest with pearls to feel more like a "bad-ass chick". These individual props are a part of a larger costume to communicate the actor's role to others. They are signals that the actor has amplified an aspect of his or her personality. They are temporary, but are meant to punctuate social interactions with friends. With the implied relaxed role expectations, these participants focused more on how the outfit they chose for interacting with their friends impacts their mood or situational state.

There was one notable exception of participant responses to the relaxed role expectations for the night out with friend scenario:

When you are going out with friends, you have that other, that social dynamic that you have to fit into. Depending on where we go, there are certain things that I couldn't wear even if I wanted to wear them. Then, not only do you have to manage your own self and your own portrait of who you are, you have got this social portrait, this social image that you are trying to manage. You don't want to stick out. If everyone is wearing jeans and a polo [...] there is this social learning that goes on. Even if I wanted to wear my Adidas pants, I wouldn't. I guess the fact that I feel restraint when I do hang out with other people. That I have to mesh with them (Jacob).

Jacob's response is more in line with the comments made by others for their work scenario outfit: an overall feeling that the expectations by others were constraining on his role portrayal. Jacob did not feel free to express his sense of self through his friends outfit. There were more rigid expectations by others on his behaviour for this social situation. If he were to wear something unconventional to the role expectations of his friends, he probably would suffer social sanctions and potentially social backlash. He may even fear losing group membership, which would further impact his overall sense of identity.

*Family outfit and role learning*

The comments made by research participants in the outfits they created for interacting with their family hinted at elements associated with the role learning construct of role theory. The family is one of the most dominant sources of information where the actor learns to acquire social roles. Sarbin and Allen (1968) mentioned two processes that occur during role learning: socialization and enculturation. Socialization primarily occurs during childhood. Here, the child must *learn how* to enact certain ascribed roles. One child learns how girls behave, while another learns how boys behave. The child learns how to behave properly when he or she is five years old, and then learns new behaviours when he or she is 10 years old, etc. On the other hand, the process of enculturation begins to occur when one reaches adulthood. Now, the adult must *learn that* certain achieved roles also carry role expectations. In other words, the adult learns that doctors behave one way, and others learn that truck drivers behave another way.

As both the child and the adult continue to learn new roles, they often will practice these expected behaviours:

For the actor simply to study the requirements of the role is not enough; before the role is completely learned the actor must practice in order to perfect his part (Sarbin and Allen, 1968, p. 548).

For the child, this practice can often be observed in make-believe games where the child pretends to be a policeman, a mother, a football star, etc. For the adult, practice and preparation occur through formal or informal training procedures. Apprenticeships, mentorships and entry-level assignments offer the individual the opportunity to learn the aspects of a new role. For both the child and the adult, a role coach is often needed to learn a new role, "The coach frequently serves as a model for the learner. Sometime the coach enacts the role for the novice, explicitly instructing him to imitate" (Sarbin and Allen, 1968, p. 548).

For many individuals, their parents were one of their main role coaches. Therefore, when interacting with them, the individual may feel the need to communicate to their coach their level of success in role learning. Several quotes from research participants describing the outfit they created for an evening dinner with one's family line up with elements of role learning. For example, several respondents felt the need to express to their parents the *success* they have achieved in the roles that they have learned so far. Table V summarizes this theme.

As one can see in the narratives from Madison and Jacob, the student-coach relationship endures even after the lesson is over:

It is relaxed and social, comforting, saying that, "I am happy with where I am in my life. I am comfortable with myself". But I still like to look pretty nice in front of my parents so they can see that I am well adjusted (Madison).

It catches your attention. I have to play my role. When I am with my family, I am the only child. All of their hopes and dreams rest on me. So, you wear an outfit like that to show them a couple of thinks. You show them that what they taught you, you understood. That your clothes can reflect who you are. That shirt is actually a little loud for what my parents would wear. So the slacks and the boat shoes – that is them. The loud shirt – that is me (Jacob).

These adults are well-adjusted members in society, however, just the thought of going out to dinner with their parents triggers a need to signal to their former coaches about what they have learned. The anticipated thought of interacting with their former role coaches triggers

**Table V.**  
Excerpts on  
informants' family  
outfit

Theme	Informant	Role theory theme: role learning
Success	Madison	"It is relaxed and social, comforting, saying that, 'I am happy with where I am in my life. I am comfortable with myself'. But, I still like to look pretty nice in front of my parents so they can see that I am well adjusted"
	Leah	"Like, a button-down shirt. I feel that it is reserved, but also you want to impress your parents. You want them to think that you are doing well, and that they should be proud of you"
	William	"I want to be on my best behavior. This is my parents. I like to seem organized, systematic, controlled"
	Jacob	"It catches your attention. I have to play my role. When I am with my family, I am the only child. All of their hopes and dreams rest on me. So you wear an outfit like that to show them a couple of things. You show them that what they taught you, you understand. That your clothes can reflect who you are. That shirt is actually a little loud for what my parents would wear. So the slacks and the boat shoes – that is them. The loud shirt – that is me"
	Hannah	"I like the UNICEF shirt because it says, 'You can make a difference'. The front of the shirt says, 'Believe in zero'. The people who don't have the right amount of water is in the millions, so you can believe that we can get that number down to zero. And kind of innocent and pure because it is dinner with my parents so you want to make sure that you don't have the bad influence. This shirt says I am doing good, so I am still innocent. Even though I am at college"

a response for the individual to continue to demonstrate lessons learned during prior interactions.

#### *Date night outfit and role skill*

According to [Sarbin and Allen \(1968, p. 514\)](#):

A person enacting a role may be viewed as facing a task, the task being to fulfil as well as possible the expectations of the role. How well the person performs the task depends on the relevant skills at his disposal.

In social interactions, the role of being someone's significant other takes a certain amount of skill. The possession of these skills can be communicated in the way one dresses. A summary of the role skill themes for married and single participants can be seen in [Table VI](#).

Some of the narratives of the married participants expressed the effort by these individuals to communicate to their spouse that they still possess dating skills even after the formal wooing dynamic is over. Therefore, they are often dressing in a way to signal their *dating skills* in their date night outfit. For example:

Trying to be more sensual. It is short, it has got a really low neckline, with heels. Yeah, I am trying to play up the sexiness to my husband (Madison).

A little more dressed up. A little more glamorous, dramatic. A little more involved. I'm going out on a date with my spouse, and I have to look good (Aaron).

Madison and Aaron still want to be seen by their spouses as sexy and sensual. They want to look attractive for their spouse so that they make a good impression to them and to others.

Theme	Informant	Role theory theme: role skill
Dating skills (married)	Leah	"I like the glamorous. When you go on a date, you try to look sexy so that your man will be attracted to you and be proud to have you as a date"
	Madison	"Trying to be more sensual. It is short, it has got a really low neckline, with heels. Yeah, I am trying to play up the sexiness to my husband"
	Aaron	"A little more dressed up. A little more glamorous, dramatic. A little more involved. I'm going out on a date with my spouse, and I have to look good"
Sexiness (single)	William	"Hmmm, I've got to impress. Got to look confident. I want to feel good about myself. I want to show my spouse that I'm serious"
	Hannah	"When you go out you want to be confident in what you are wearing. So you will feel like, 'Oh yeah, this looks good'. He'll think you look good. I am the one who like to take charge, even in relationships. So I want to be the one that is powerful and confident"
	Brooke	"I call it my sexy-innocent look, I guess. I am trying to be a little more revealing, but at the same time it—the dress especially—is very innocent looking. That mix of trying to step out of my shell, and being comfortable with who I am which is more reserved and not as revealing. Plus, that dress is fun to twirl in"
	Ashley	"I am single, but when I do go on dates I still feel sociable, relaxed, and comfortable but very sexy. I want to feel sexy in what I am wearing. Definitely important for a date. Not too sexy, but comfortable and cute"
	Luke	"I always feel relaxed when I am with her, but I always feel smarter when I am wearing that shirt"
	Benjamin	"With the going out with friends outfit, that is trying to get more attention to meet women. As opposed to when I would be going out with one, kind of more of a dignified, authoritative look. Kind of, I'm with her"

**Table VI.**  
Excerpts on  
informants' date night  
outfit

They want to show that they still possess the skills of attracting a mate. The single research participants made similar comments of wanting to communicate their dating skills and, in particular, their *sexiness* to potential mates. For example:

When you go out you want to be confident in what you are wearing. So you will feel like, 'Oh yeah, this looks good'. He'll think you look good. I am the one who like to take charge, even in relationships. So I want to be the one that is powerful and confident (Hannah).

I am single, but when I do go on dates I still feel sociable, relaxed and comfortable but very sexy. I want to feel sexy in what I am wearing. Definitely important for a date (Ashley).

By crafting these date night look, Hannah and Ashely can send signals of their dating skills to others as well. Their clothes provide out outlet of this expression of sexiness and attractiveness. Plus, each social interaction adds to one's sense of self and one's social identities. Therefore, each date with a significant other adds to the role repertoire of the individual for the significant other. It is a build-up of displayed role skills.



### Discussion

As one can see, role theory themes such as role location, role expectations, role learning and role skill emerged as consumers were describing the outfits they created to wear to various social occasions. They are actors who are rehearsing for their future role enactment, and the imagined audiences are influencing their future behaviour. It is important to point out that the influence by the imagined audience on the actor should not always be viewed as undesirable. Even [Sarbin and Allen \(1968\)](#) pointed out that the audience serves four primary functions:

- (1) They validate the actor's role enactment.
- (2) They provide cues to the actor who is confused or not sure what is expected of him or her.
- (3) The audience reinforces an actor who successfully enacts a certain role by providing him or her with positive feedback.
- (4) The audience helps to maintain the social expectations for a particular role by supplying consistency in meaning over time.

In other words, the point of social interaction is the socialization of the individual. The social others give hints, clues and feedback to the individual so that the individual knows what is expected in terms of behaviour, discussion and dress.

In terms of consumer research, the utilization of role theory opens up new avenues of exploration. Consumer identity projects is a topic of increasing interest by researchers, and the theatrical framework of role theory along with the broader impression management theory ([Goffman, 1959](#)) supply consumer researchers with new and interesting terminology to inquire about, understand and discuss this social phenomenon. In fact, this is already being seen in recent publications in the consumer research literature ([Biehl-Missal, 2012](#); [Tumbat and Belk, 2013](#)). In addition, the viewpoint of a reference group as an imagined audience also supplies consumer researchers with new ways of describing and understanding the socializing influence that reference groups can have on the individual. Again, by looking at this phenomenon through a theatrical lens supplies another layer of meaning to social interactions. Reference groups also continue to be a hot topic in consumer research as well as social psychology ([Lalwani and Shavitt, 2009](#); [Berger and Ward, 2010](#)), and this new perspective could continue to provide fresh ideas and insights.

For marketing practitioners, the awareness of role theory and its use in this study on reference group influence could also be of use. Marketers are the ones supplying the consumer with the assortment of brands and products to choose from and to create their costume for their role in anticipated social interactions. Therefore, by understanding the consumer's mind-set in relation to this phenomenon of role preparation and the influence of an imagined audience, marketers may be able to better understand their target markets' needs and wants. If marketers understand that one's attire is a tool used by the consumer during social interactions, they could better create and communicate the value they bring to their particular consumer base.

### Directions for future research

[Sarbin and Allen's \(1968\)](#) role theory can also be viewed in a broader, and more dynamic perspective. The actor does not have one role to enact, but multiple roles. Some may be viewed as more active, others more latent. The actor may transition in and out of roles

depending on the context and with whom he or she is interacting. Or, the actor may have to feel like he or she has to portray several roles simultaneously, which can cause role conflict, role strain and role bargaining. These subtle complexities of role theory are beyond the scope of the current paper, but they could certainly be investigated in future research projects.

Also, in this paper the application of role theory as a theoretical method of analysis was used to study reference group influence on consumer behaviour focusing on the pre-social interaction phase. Role theory could also be applied to the study of consumer behaviour during social interactions as they are taking place, and also after the social interaction has taken place. Role theory is a dense and detailed theory with many interlocking constructs. More areas of this theory have yet to be fleshed out in the consumer behaviour context.

## Conclusion

The extant literature on reference group influence in consumer behaviour has established the powerful nature of this social phenomenon. The current study was designed to expand this discussion by introducing role theory as an analytical tool. It is argued here that reference groups are imagined audiences that influence the actor via role expectations, role learning, role skill and role location. By engaging consumers to elicit role rehearsal narratives in a study on consumer identity projects, one is able to better understand the audience-actor, or reference group-individual dynamic.

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