

Who Am I Really? Concept of the Self, Body Image, and Buying Behavior

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Abstract. Linking the symbolic value of goods purchased in the marketplace with the psychological construct of an individual's self-concept can be seen as a specific means of developing a theoretical approach to consumer behavior. Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are affected by our sense of who we are, and the label we put on ourselves, and our self-concepts become parts of our identity as soon as we begin to strive to 'be' that person (Reed et al. 2012). The purpose of this article is to develop relational hypotheses based on a synthesis of earlier research to explain how perceptions and the concept of the self have an impact on consumer behavior. Alongside, the proposed model advances a premise that consumers' self-identity is tightly connected to their body images, which in turn is shaped by other factors such as culture and media.

Keywords: self-concept, body image, buying behavior

1 Introduction

“An individual's evaluation of himself will greatly influence his behavior” (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Who are we? It's not an easy question and most likely one that we can never fully answer. For a long time, researchers and marketers have tried to understand what determines and influences consumer behavior and how to use this information to the best of their knowledge. Researchers generally agree that the self-structure is an active one, whether they define the self-concept in terms of networks, prototypes, spaces, hierarchies, or schemas (Markus and Wurf 1987). In an attempt to explain consumer self-concept, researchers have created several constructs to explain the effects on consumer choice (Sirgy 1982). On this basis, we argue that being exposed to different stimuli can change the perception of the self and essentially change behavior. But are these constructs linked to each other, or do they function independently? An individual's self-presentation to others, in combination with how they wish to see themselves, is referred to as the social self. An individual's actual working self-perception is described as the actual self - who one really is (Sirgy 1982). The purpose of this article is to develop a set of relational hypotheses synthesizing earlier research to explain how perceptions and concepts of the self have an impact on consumer behavior. In parallel, the theoretical proposition advances a premise

that consumers' self-identity is tightly connected to their body images, which in turn are shaped by other factors such as culture and media.

No given identity is possessed in isolation; each identity is rather one of many held identities that must be integrated into someone's general self-perception. The self can be divided into the actual self, ideal self, social self, and ideal social self. The actual self is a realistic appraisal of the qualities we possess or lack - an inner, private self that we maintain. The ideal self refers to how we would like to be - the outer, public self. The term social self refers to how individuals actually perceive themselves to be seen by others, while the ideal social self refers to how individuals would ideally like themselves to be seen by others (Sirgy 1982; Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). According to Reed et al. (2012), these identities are not always consistent with each other - rather, they can be in conflict. This in turn motivates cognitive activities and behaviors that attempt to resolve such conflicts.

Dunning (2007) suggests that in consumer behavior it has often been noted that people buy to compensate for perceived shortcomings. This means the ways in which people act as consumers are linked to external factors connected to the ideal self. Moreover, people often buy products to impress themselves rather than others. The goal is to conceal imperfections that they perceive within themselves privately, regardless of what others think. People can also change over the course of their lifetimes both in terms of their preferences and their self-concept. It is natural to assume that we form our self-concepts based on our knowledge about ourselves, which can change as we grow. The present study explores this idea and proposes that being exposed to different stimuli, such as body image in the media, can change the perception of the self, and in turn change people's behavior.

Based on a review of earlier research, a conceptual model through relational hypotheses is proposed, which constitutes theoretical contributions toward the exploration of this complex topic, while also opening a path for further research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Interpreting the Self

The concept of the self is the "me" at the center of experience (Markus and Kitayama 2010). People usually change over the course of their lifetimes, both regarding their preferences and their self-concept. It is natural to assume that we form our self-concept in light of the knowledge we have about ourselves and adjust this as we grow. Markus (1977) claims that by organizing new and old knowledge together, the self-concept integrates new information and experiences with existing knowledge to maintain a consistent and stable sense of self in the face of change. The concept of self dynamically responds to changes in the social environment and social roles (Markus and Wurf 1987). According to Markus (1977), the concept of self is built on past experiences and encompasses everything that an individual claims as "mine" or "me," and includes values, beliefs, goals, social roles, preferences, emotional states, personality attributes, and even physical appearance. This involves a person's attributes and the beliefs and assessments a peer assigns to them (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). Markus and Kitayama (2010) state that these beliefs and assessments serve to guide our actions and constitute a continually developing process in both the brain and the body, always shifting gears to suit various lived environments.

To gain knowledge about ourselves requires learning. Such learning might originate from the narrative of our successes or failures, the string of various choices we make, and our experiences interacting with others. This may help each person to understand more about themselves, and with each piece of self-knowledge gained, individuals come closer to defining who they truly are. For most people, the newly

acquired self-knowledge is accepted and incorporated into their self-concept and daily behavior, which is a necessity for self-discovery to be beneficial (Wu, Cutright, and Fitzsimons 2011). However, people might not always accept what they learn. Campbell et al. (1996) argue that the establishment of a consistent and stable sense of self tends to vary among individuals; this has been referred to as self-concept clarity. This is to the extent the concept of the self is internally consistent, temporally stable, and clearly and confidently defined (Campbell et al. 1996). What characterizes individuals with low clarity is that they are less stable and have a more malleable, and less clearly and confidently defined self-concept. According to Lewandowski and Nardone (2012), they demonstrate lower levels of self and lower accuracy in predicting their own behavior and other concordance in personality assessments and outcomes. This suggests that individuals reporting high clarity “know” themselves better than those with low clarity. Does this then mean that knowing who we are is more important for some than for others? This could certainly be one plausible explanation for how different levels of clarity may manifest through consumer behavior.

Grubb and Grathwohl (1967, p.24) state that “The individual will direct his behavior to maintain and enhance his self-concept because the self-concept is of value and central importance to the individual.” The self-concept is formed in the process of interaction between the individual and others. This means that self-enhancement will depend upon the reactions of these individuals. Furthermore, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) argue that the conception we have of ourselves will be strengthened by recognition and reinforcing reactions from others. We consequently strive for self-enhancement in the interaction process and to obtain a positive reaction from our significant referents and direct our behavior accordingly. The positivity of a person's self-concept is self-esteem (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). This is often related to acceptance by others and can be influenced by comparing our actual standing in terms of a given attribute to some perceived ideal (Sirgy 1982). The tendency to seek experiences that improve the self-concept refers to the self-esteem motive, while the tendency of individuals to behave consistently with their view of themselves refers to the self-consistency motive. According to Sirgy (1982), self-consistency will predict that a purchase is motivated by an image (positive or negative) which is in line with the self-image belief. When operating from a self-esteem perspective, on the other hand, the consumer will be motivated to buy a product that is highly valued to maintain a positive self-image, or to improve themselves by approaching this ideal image.

2.2 The Ideal Self: an Elaboration of Social Identity

Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg (2019) state that the gap between the actual and ideal self can be larger for some than for others. “Identity can be defined as any category label with which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what a person in that category looks like, thinks, feels and does” (Reed et al. 2012, p.310). People’s social identities have a powerful impact on their perceptions, emotions, and behavior (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2001). We play different roles in different situations, and we all have multiple selves. We behave differently around our family than when we are socializing with our friends (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). We all have a range of different, cross-cutting, social identities (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2001). An essential point in social identity is that we have to consider the broader social context when looking at the impact social groups have on the way we see ourselves and the people around us. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2001) argue that the social self can be as varied as the groups to which we belong.

It is our understanding that our social self is how we would like others to perceive us and it is linked to how we act, look, and feel. It could therefore be natural to assume that since we evaluate our social self based on looks and features visible to others, the way we feel about our bodies is closely connected to what we believe is acceptable. Our belief is that the way we view our body is dependent on- and consequently connected to -our social self.

2.3 Body Image - a Fixed Schema?

“Body image refers to a consumer’s subjective evaluation of their physical self-concept” (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019, p.140). Theoretically, what describes body image is multidimensionality and complexity, and includes cultural, individual, social, biological, and historical factors (Taleporos and McCabe 2002). In earlier research, body image is seen as influencing people’s behavior and is treated as a relatively fixed schema (Gleeson and Frith 2006). Although a person may not have an “accurate” image of their body, Gleeson and Frith (2006) assume that what guides an embodied behavior is using and thinking about the body through the image that an individual has of himself or herself. Rudd and Lennon (200, p. 153) define body image as “...the mental image we hold of our bodies, including both perceptions and attitudes. The perceptual component refers to how we ‘see’ our size, shape, weight, features, movement, and performance, while the attitudinal component refers to how we feel about these attributes and how our feelings direct our behaviors.” Our body image plays a significant role in our quality of life and has emerged as a core aspect of both mental and physical well-being (Dittmar 2009; Thompson and Stice 2001).

Body image might influence people’s behaviors and mental health and is now being discussed by both the general public and body image researchers as an entity that individuals possess (Gleeson and Frith 2006). One of the most consistent and significant precursors of negative self-perception, unhealthy body-related behaviors, and negative emotional states is dissatisfaction connected to the body (Grabe, Ward, and Hyde 2008). Women seem particularly affected by picture-perfect bodies portrayed by the media, and how women relate to the images to which they are exposed is the predominant factor in how they are affected by these images (Dittmar 2009). As a result, perfect body ideals are a core risk factor for negative body image among women. (Levine and Smolak 1998) argue that females who do not have the ideal body shape agonize about their bodies, especially during late childhood and early adolescence, when social comparison plays a significant role in self-perception. Family, peers, schools, healthcare professionals, businesses, and athletics are all social influences that convey and reinforce the thin ideal (Thompson and Stice 2001). However, when it comes to how these images make women feel, media images may be processed very differently. How women perceive and rate themselves in relation to the ideals they are exposed to has an impact on how they judge their bodies (Dittmar 2009). This could mean that the way we view our bodies may affect both how we feel and how we act.

Drawing on the assumptions that people have a body image and that it may be dysfunctional, the discussion of body image in the media includes moral panics about the use of “skinny” models to advertise products (Gleeson and Frith 2006). There is a psychologically salient gap between how women's ideal body and actual bodily self is perceived - it will most likely cause a negative effect and body dissatisfaction when exposed to thin body ideals (Dittmar 2009). On the other hand, if women imagine that they are the model portrayed, the images may generate positive emotions. Dittmar (2009) argues that this is because women are able to identify with the thin ideal during exposure, and they don't compare themselves to the model. This leads to a lack of focus on the differences between the actual and the ideal body. Nevertheless, research suggests that these processes can occur simultaneously. Dittmar (2009) assumes that it may explain why, even if unrealistic media images might ultimately have negative effects on body image, women continue to be attracted to these kinds of images. However, Gleeson and Frith (2006) state that this is only one plausible explanation for this observable phenomenon, given that “body image” is a hypothetical construct.

2.4 The Role of Culture and Media in Body Image

Communication studies have shown that when it comes to influencing body satisfaction and body image, media consumption plays a crucial role (Field et al. 1999; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002; Tiggemann, Martins, and Churchett 2008). The mass media, which refers to a variety of technologies,

is seen as the most aggressive and loudest purveyor of images and narratives of ideal slender beauty (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002). Visual media such as magazines and television are emphasized in current theories and studies. Shaw and Waller (1995) find that magazine advertisements are often used as a standard for social comparison. A study conducted by Eisend and Möller (2007) investigated the influence of TV viewing on perceived body image and related consumption in both female and male consumers. They found that TV viewing biases social perceptions of body image, but that men's consumption behavior was not impacted. However, TV viewing increased the real-ideal self-discrepancy for women and was in turn something that led to consumption to achieve ideal bodies. Also, general beliefs about body image influence-related behavior and TV viewing were found to increase body dissatisfaction for both groups.

Influences on body image are not well understood when it comes to the mechanisms which the media represents (Gleeson and Frith 2006). Media images have been suggested as providing a reference point for social comparison. Myers and Biocca (1992) claim that; "television images that are fixated on the representation of the ideal female body immediately led the female subjects to thoughts about their bodies. This in turn led to measurable fluctuations and disturbances in their body image. In their mind's eye, their body shape had changed." Seeing as women's perceptions of their body changed after watching advertising and programming for less than 30 minutes, they argue that the body image is "elastic." Encouraging examination of the role of cultural beauty standards in the individual's perceptions has treated "ideal" body image as socially shared rather than idiosyncratic and influenced satisfaction with their own body (Gleeson and Frith 2006). This is often referred to as the sociocultural theory.

Exposure to attractive models in advertising can, according to advertising studies, raise comparison standards and enhance beliefs about the importance of attractiveness (Tan 1979), lower body satisfaction (Martin and Gentry 1997), and physical attractiveness (Richins 1991). Whereas girls learn that their bodies should be used to attract others, boys learn to view their bodies as a tool to master the environment (Stephens, Hill, and Hanson 1994). Boys are not acutely affected, since they are not so caught up in images, body image, and standards of beauty. Pope et al. (1997) found in their study that sociocultural pressure that encourages larger, extensively muscular, and powerful bodies, is usually what causes boys to experience body dissatisfaction. More recent findings also contradict the assumption that body image is a concept largely confined to women (Tiggemann, Martins, and Churchett 2008). Through their research, it became evident that bodies are important to men just as they are to women. Furthermore, cosmetic procedures among men have become more common and they invest more resources and time in their appearance.

We believe that our body image is influenced not only by our social groups but also by the different roles that culture and media play in portraying the ideal. It could be natural to assume that we evaluate our bodies and physical appearance in the social context. As a social comparison standard, the media might play a crucial role, but as we have seen, the body image might be elastic - meaning it is easily influenced and might not be a fixed schema. The media and our culture have an impact on the way we view our bodies and consequently on our mental and physical health. There are also different implications for men and women, but, as seen in recent studies, body image is increasingly becoming more important for men. Based on our assumption that body image and the social self are closely connected, and building on the earlier elaborations, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Our ideal self and body image are closely connected and are both highly influenced by culture and media.

2.5 The Actual Self, Self-Identity, and Self-Image

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are affected by our sense of who we are, and the label we put on ourselves, and our self-concept becomes part of our identity as soon as we begin to strive to “be” that person (Reed et al. 2012). Among consumers, many decisions are influenced by a certain belief about our characteristics and people’s decisions are made to affirm a flattering image of the self (Dunning 2007). People with a positive self-image tend to make decisions in the marketplace based on the belief they hold about themselves. When stimuli are associated with a positively perceived identity, these will receive more positive evaluations and can acquire other identity-related content regardless of any explicit processing of the association (Reed et al. 2012). Dunning (2007) argues that the decisions people reach about their external world are massively impacted by positive beliefs about the self, and this in extension influences decision-making by triggering motives connected to self-image. Based on this, it could be natural to assume that self-image motives play an important role in decision-making, and therefore may also influence decisions in the marketplace. Reed et al. (2012) claim that our identity might be directly related to different stages in life, and our age can affect the ability and intention to adopt a particular identity or to participate in an activity related to our identity. Furthermore, Dunning (2007) claims that the image a person holds of themselves can be of such importance to the individual that he or she is willing to alter their own belief for it to harmonize with their self-image when making decisions.

2.6 Connecting Body Cathexis and the Concept of Self

Self-concept and body cathexis is believed to be naturally related (Secord and Jourard 1953). When referring to body cathexis it means the degree to which we feel satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the various parts or processes of the body. It describes a person’s feelings about their body (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). Secord and Jourard conducted studies in the 1950s indicating that an individual’s attitudes toward his or her body were of crucial importance to any comprehensive theory of personality. They concluded that women cathect their bodies more highly than men. Because of the social importance of the female body, they proposed that women were more likely to develop anxiety concerning their bodies (Secord and Jourard 1953). Markee, Carey, and Pedersen (1990) suggest that to improve our body cathexis, at least temporarily, we may use clothing. We aim to camouflage our perceived figure faults and bring our bodies closer to our perceptions of the norm. Also, tests have indicated that women are significantly more satisfied with their clothed bodies than with their nude bodies (Markee, Carey, and Pedersen 1990). This leads us to think that because we can portray our body to better match an ideal using clothes, it will in turn affect how we act as consumers. If we find this to be true for clothes - what other products do we purchase because of how we feel about our bodies?

It is natural to think that because the body changes as we grow and get older, and through different stages in life, there will always be a need for new types of clothes and other consumer goods, to make our bodies look more like what we perceive as the norm. Seemingly the self-concept is fundamentally connected to body cathexis - the way we feel about our bodies is connected to our sense of self. Since we believe that our body image plays a crucial role in the image we have of our ideal self, and seeing as our ideal self and our actual self sometimes can be in conflict, we propose that our self-identity and body cathexis are affected by how we compare our ideal self to our actual self. Based on the foregoing discussion we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Our body image affects our actual self and self-image, which in turn leads to positive or negative body cathexis.

2.7 Consumer Behavior as Symbolic and Physical Exchange

Linking the symbolic value of goods purchased in the marketplace with the psychological construct of an individual self-concept can be seen as a more specific means of developing a theoretical approach to consumer behavior. The concept of the self facilitates measurement and centers on the critical element of how individuals perceive themselves (Baughman and Welsh 1962). The use of self-theory allows the application of the behavioral concept of symbolic interaction; this provides meaning to the association of an individual's buying behavior with his self-concept (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Consumer motivation, the nature of the body, and self-concept offer important methodological and conceptual benefits to consumer research, therefore (Thompson and Hirschman (1995) propose a poststructuralist perspective. Joy and Venkatesh (1994) argue that a poststructuralist perspective on the body offers important insight into the cultural underpinnings of consumers' motivations, desires, and the symbolic meaning they attach to products and services. Using consumption as a means to create self-identity, the poststructuralist account holds important implications for research (Belk 1988).

The styles and images that are conveyed through our possessions produce the desired self through the act of consumption (Belk 1988). The postmodern self-identity is an ongoing consumption project in flight from the past and the status quo, continuously in flux. This differs from the modern self-identity which has been defined by the pursuit of tradition and labor. Our overt actions and the influence of the self-concept will not always be directly connected and can be observed through shifts in self-esteem, in social comparison choices, in the nature of self-presentation, in choice of social setting, in mood changes, and the construction or definition of our situation (Markus and Wurf 1987). According to (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019) many purchases are made because a person is attempting to highlight or hide aspects of the self. Some products we buy because we believe they are in accordance with our actual self, while others we buy to achieve a more ideal standard. (Sirgy 1982) argues that if consumers recognize some convergence between the brand-user image and their self-image, products are more likely to be purchased and consumed. If we believe this to be true, it could mean our consumption is directly linked to our self and the way we want to be perceived.

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) examined the consumption behaviors motivated by the psychosocial meanings and processes that shape consumers' sense of body image. They found that self-perceptions motivate consumption activities and the consumers' satisfaction with their appearance derived from a cultural ideology of the body. Becker and McCall (1990) states that as a means to control the appearance and/or the health of the body, many consumer actions are motivated by culturally sanctioned knowledge claims regarding how the consumption can be used. "If a particular style becomes popular, the behavior of a segment of society will be directed toward the purchase and use of items manifesting this style" (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Therefore, fashion is a prime example of consumer behavior and symbolic classification. In a way, we might feel the urge to buy something to communicate certain aspects of ourselves to others. Many of these "tools" we use to enhance ourselves are consumer goods (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Bagozzi (1975) claims that goods act as symbols, as well as practical merchandise. If we view goods as social symbols it allows us to relate ourselves directly to them, matching our self-concept with the meaning of the good (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). In this way, self-support and self-enhancement can take place through association with goods that have a desirable social meaning and from the favorable reaction of references in our social interaction process.

It seems self-evident that each of us has a "mind" or an immaterial self, housed in a material body: "This mind observes its body, critiques its appearance and form, and engages in activities - such as exercise, surgery, dieting - to transform the body into a more desired form" (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Throughout contemporary consumer culture, becoming free from unwanted characteristics and constructing one's desired look, through promotional motives, have had a powerful resonance. (Thompson and Hirschman 1995) argue that explicit body focus is pervasive in many industries,

especially in the ever-wider array of products and services using pervasive images of idealized bodies as a promotion. Ad exposure can lead to a social comparison process, and marketing communications can affect consumer self-confidence (Solomon, Askegaard, and Hogg 2019). Thus, a person can try to evaluate and compare themselves to the people in the ads. People associate with products, brands, and consumer behavior that are related to category labels that they like. If consumers see themselves as athletes, they also behave in a way that corresponds to how an athlete behaves. This general drive produces a wide range of identity-driven effects, such as increased awareness of identity-related stimuli. The consumers will have increased attention and evaluate athletic products. They will have a greater preference for identity-linking brands and will have more positive reactions to advertising with a professional athlete as the spokesperson who has the preferred identity. A category label becomes an identity when the purchaser has begun to integrate it into his or her sense of whom he or she is and has begun the process of becoming such a person (Reed et al. 2012).

Our consumer behavior and our self-image seem to be linked and the self-concept is used to develop a theoretical approach to consumer behavior. Consumer goods might be purchased to highlight or hide aspects of the self. These goods may also be used as symbols, resulting in self-enhancement through a social interaction process. Furthermore, we direct our consumer behavior to communicate the desired identity to others. Many industries use idealized and perfect bodies in advertising to affect consumers, often with a pervasive body focus. Assuming that cultural ideology of the body has formed our body image, it is our understanding that the picture we have of the ideal body will influence our behavior as consumers, and thus our choice of products. This discussion leads us to propose the third and final hypothesis:

H3: How we feel about our bodies affects our choice of products.

3 Discussion, Conclusion, and Further Research Suggestions

The purpose of this article analysis is to investigate how perceptions and the affects concept of the self affect our buying behavior. We argue that our social identity is tightly connected to our body image, which in turn might be shaped by factors such as culture and media. It is our belief that who we really are, our self-identity, can be affected by our ideal self. Therefore, we argued that the influence that culture and media may have on our body image can in turn directly affect our self-image. Finally, we discussed how all these constructs are connected to our buying behavior and if the way we feel about our bodies has an effect on our choice of products.

In this article, we have sought to provide a better understanding of how we as consumers direct our behavior in light of the concept of the self and its multiple constructs. Our overall aim was to illustrate the possible consumer behavior that may derive from how we feel about our bodies, and also how this can relate to altering the concept of the self. What we have drawn from the concept of self is that people take part in a learning process throughout life. They gain experience and merge new and old knowledge together, and from this, they arrive at a better understanding of who they are. Self-discovery, self-concept-clarity, self-enhancement, self-esteem, and self-consistency all play a role in determining who people are and how these individuals want to be perceived by others.

As we go through life, we take part in a learning process and develop a better understanding of who we are. Media and culture influence to varying extents the way we view not only our bodies but also our mental and physical health. Previous research has focused mainly on how the ideal body image has had an impact on women, but more recently it has become evident that men are also highly influenced by idealized bodies portrayed in the media. The way we view our body is dependent on and connected to our social self. Both positive and negative body cathexis may affect our behavior as consumers because

we want to portray ourselves in a way that both we and others will accept. We buy goods to “fulfill” our ideal self as well as to fulfill an actual need - we buy products for both their physical function as well as for symbolic reasons. We can try to hide or highlight who we are through the products that we purchase. Understanding this phenomenon helps marketers by providing insights regarding products that can fulfill consumers’ ideal self-image as well as their actual needs.

Throughout this article, we have seen that all the different constructs may in some way be connected, and the alteration of any one construct could have ramifications for others. The paper theoretically contributes by explicitly identifying the link between concepts of self, body image, and consumer buying behavior. However, further empirical research is required to get a finer picture of how the constructs are linked together. The proposed hypotheses-led and nomological framework provides a theoretical contribution toward this interesting and complex topic for further qualitative and quantitative validation. The framework is intended to help obtain empirical evidence as to whether and to what extent the concepts of the self and the different constructs are linked to consumer buying behavior. In addition, social media is one of the most widely used media platforms in recent times, and we deem it plays a significant role in consumer use and purchasing behavior. While social media and the role of social identity are beyond the scope of this article, we suggest future studies to include them. Alongside this, future research could test the proposed hypotheses with the support of empirical data.

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