**Introduction:**

looking-glass self is the idea that “our self-concepts are formed as reflections of the responses and evaluations of others in our environment” (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). I will
discuss this concept not only in relation to the passive view used in many textbooks but in relation to the active role given by Cooley in which the individual forms or reshapes others’ perceptions in order to be seen in a particular way. I will then relate this concept to modern day consumption and the new phenomenon of the virtual self.

**Socialization and the Looking Glass Self:**
Socialization is the process by which we learn the meanings and responsibilities associated with certain social roles through our interactions with others (Campbell, 2013). Our identity, various attitudes and self-concept our shaped through socialization. Before birth, we are given social roles that we are expected to fulfill based on what society wants. For example, a girl is expected to wear dresses and like the colour pink, and a boy is expected to wear blue and like football. Certain social roles and responsibilities are expected from us based on gender, class etc.

Although our beliefs and attitudes may seem individual to ourselves, our self-concept is actually “maintained and enhanced by positive response from significant others,” (Grubb & Stern, 1971) through social interactions. Through our constant exposure of the socialization process, people are increasingly aware of how they are viewed by others. In an independent study carried out at Trinity College, Dublin, it was shown that 93.33% of respondents cared about how others perceived them (Survey Monkey, 2013). Perception is critical to this discussion in that, it is not what people actually think of us that is important but our perception of how they view us that affects our consumption choices.

In basic terms, the looking-glass self is the idea that we see ourselves through someone else’s eyes. When trying on a pair of jeans, we immediately think “how do others see me in these?”, whether we are conscious of this or not. Following on from this, it was seen that over 70% of respondents in the independent survey bought clothes either based on what others thought or based on branding, while only 30% said they would consume and wear clothes, regardless of these factors. Taken on its own, the looking-glass self is “a passive and conformist view of human beings, one which emphasizes an external source as the locus of content or substance upon which we construct our self-concepts” (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983).
Many accounts of Cooley’s looking-glass self have looked at an individual internalising the perceptions they believe others have of them and start to take on the social role associated with these perceptions. For example, in a classroom setting, if the individual believes that that the teacher and other classmates perceive him/her as intelligent, they too will begin to see themselves in this way, taking on this positive self-image. Thus, many accounts note the importance of interpreting these perceived responses as failure to do so can result in false self-images (Kyriacou, 2012).

Other accounts look at the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. It is to be remembered that the self-fulfilling prophecy works not only “because of the belief of another, but also because one accepts a false definition of oneself from which real consequences emerge” (Reitzes, 1980). If there is a false perception of a student being intelligent, the student may decide to work harder to live up to this characteristic, making the false perception come true.

**Cooley’s Looking-Glass-Self:**
Cooley goes beyond the basic definition of the looking-glass self and contrasts the basic idea that other people have the largest influence over our self-concept. He focuses on “the active participation of the individual in forming his/her self concept and the self processes in motivating behaviour and social interaction” (Reitzes, 1980). There are three aspects relating to Cooney’s looking-glass self.

1. The active role of the individual in interpreting the perceived responses of others
2. The individual’s selective application of the looking glass self
3. The uses of the looking-glass self to control and manipulate responses and evaluations of others.

Cooley’s looking-glass self is more realistic than the overly socialized looking-glass self which was given before. Firstly, it shows that the individual has an active role to play, in that they must perceive how they are seen by others. In Reitzes critique of Cooley’s looking glass, he highlights the importance of Cooley’s “active organisation and interpretation of the perceived responses” and discusses how Cooley disregards this “one-way internalization of the perceptions of others,” (Reitzes, 1980) that other textbooks focused on.
The looking-glass self concept is linked to the idea of the real and ideal self. The real self is seen as “an individual’s perception of how he/she actually is and the ideal self is that perception of how he/she would like to be” (Dolich, 1969). The looking-glass self is linked to the real self in that, an individual can internalise others’ perceptions and take on this characteristic, making it part of one’s real self as discussed earlier. Research done by Reeder, Donohue and Biblarz “demonstrated the close correspondence between self conception and perceived generalized other i.e. the looking glass self, implying the importance of reference groups as an intervening variable” (Mannheim, 1966).

Reference groups are very important when understanding the looking-glass self. Individuals do not internalize all perceptions people have of them. Instead, “the individual actively selects which others will be influential” (Reitzes, 1980). It is important to note that “Cooley did not assume that all people affect us equally; some mirrors are more important than others” (Stewart, 1978). Individuals select their reference groups based on different characteristics - they could be friend groups, social clubs, or those people who are similar to that of their ideal self.

The ideal self is an idea upon which “the individual is constantly trying to improve upon his self concept,” (Landon, 1974). He/she has an idea of the way in which they want to be perceived and strive towards not only achieving this ideal self, but making others realise they have reached it too. The ideal self is therefore linked towards the third aspect of Cooley’s looking-glass self - the idea of controlling and manipulating responses and evaluations of others. This is perhaps, the most intriguing and interesting dimension of the three as it is the primary aspect that affects our consumption patterns.

Cooley made specific claims, which was backed by the research conducted by Yeung and Martin, “regarding how the self concept is internalised from the perspectives of those we see as ascendant over us. That we may internalise the views of others, however, does not rule out the possibility of individuals persuading others to accept self-presentations” (Yeung & Martin, 2003). Before, accounts looked at the looking-glass self as a way of forming one’s self-concept through others’ perceptions of them. However, Cooley introduces another element to his looking-glass framework - the idea that we can actively form and reshape people’s perceptions. At a very basic level, this is seen when a young boy cleans his room but no one sees him perform this task. In order to be perceived
positively, he will go and tell those in his reference group (in this case, parents) what he has done.

From independent research done, it was seen that the looking glass self was not just a “passive” process, as earlier suggested, but individuals could actually form and reshape others’ perceptions, like in Cooley’s analysis. This can be seen with 61% saying they would not dress the same at home as they would at college and a further 25% of respondents dressing up for college, admitting “you never know who you may meet” (Survey Monkey, 2013). They are “actively controlling and manipulating the responses and evaluations of others” (Reitzes, 1980), in order for others to perceive them in a particular way. Individuals take active control over different scenarios in today’s world through consumption and the virtual self, which we will now discuss.

Consumption and the looking glass self:
Although we consume many goods for our own enjoyment, some goods are consumed to express who we are or more importantly, display to others a false perception of ourselves, encouraging them to perceive us in a particular way. “It seems an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions” (Belk, 1988). Possessions can be very personal to the individual or in many cases can be an attempt to encourage others to perceive him/her in a particular way. Many individuals consume goods in order to “achieve his ideal self concept” (Landon, 1974). In other words, possessions can be used as a prop in order to convey a certain social role. This can be seen in the case study “Prams are not just for Babies” where Dorothe consumes a high-end pram in order to fulfill her social role as a good mother. The pram is seen as a lot more than a simple commodity, but represents the type of mother Dorothe wants to be, striving towards achieving her ideal self. “I guess I realized that it is with prams as it is with a lot of other things: they say a lot about who you are as a person. Just like clothes do” (Brandi, 2013).

In this case study, symbolic interactionism is also evident. Symbolic interactionism is the idea that symbols are values learnt through socialization (Campbell, 2013). A symbol must be part of a socially agreed consensus and all individuals have to recognise the symbol, though may have different interpretations. For Dorothe, the “Odder Pram” was a symbol of class and style and depicted how good a mother one was. Through consumption of goods,
individuals depict the kind of person he/she is, or the kind of person he/she wants to be perceived as.

Symbolic interactionism can be used in order for individuals to alter the way in which they are perceived. In modern times, this has become even more prominent due to an increasing number of individuals being influenced by branding, over 40% agreeing, in an independent study carried out, that brand is a major factor to consider when consuming goods. Symbolic interactionism occurs when “consumers acquire a specific good or service for what it signifies, based on the symbols attached by society” (Leigh & Gabel, 1992). People choose which symbols have the most importance to them based on that of their significant reference groups, whether it to be friend groups, social groups etc. It can be seen that those in role transitions, as well as those who want particular membership to certain social groups are most prone to using symbolic interactionism in order to be perceived in a particular way.

Individuals believe that brands are a symbol for something much deeper. For example, no one would wear Abercrombie if it wasn’t a known brand as it would not have a socially valuable meaning. When people wear brands, they are aiming to transfer the meaning of the symbol on to their own identity, in order for people to perceive them in that way. In the case of Abercrombie, individuals consume this brand in order to convey to others that they are young, thin and prestigious. This aligns with Cooley’s theory of the looking glass self by which individuals are actively trying to take control of how others perceive them.

Without branding and communication, symbolic interaction would not be possible. In modern times, there is an increasing number of marketing and advertising campaigns due to the relatively new online platform available. “Advertising and other marketing communications can effectively serve as vehicles for this process of symbolic meaning transfer.” (Leigh & Gabel, 1992). They view the consumer as a constant project - one that can constantly be improved and work on the basis that individuals are constantly trying to achieve their “ideal self.” Marketing makes the consumer focus on the difference between the real and ideal self by using celebrity endorsements and air-brushed models to depict what one’s ideal self should be. In turn, the individuals try to live up to these expectations, consuming the good and hoping to transfer the qualities expressed in this marketing campaign onto themselves to adjust others’ perceptions. Individuals buy into these
campaigns, consuming these goods, and make the possessions part of their “extended self” (Belk, 1979).

**Virtual Self and the Looking-Glass Self:**

In modern times, there is a new “self” emerging i.e. the “virtual self”. This new phenomenon cannot be forgotten when critiquing Cooley’s looking-glass self as in these modern times, it is certainly an important factor to consider. Over the past decade, there has been increased use of social media sites “with the number of online U.S adults who use social media sites has risen from 8% to 72%, with young adults being the most likely to use social media sites” (Olenski, 2013).

In the past, individuals have been reshaping others’ perceptions through the consumption of symbols and possessions that they hold. Individuals are very aware of how they are perceived to others and are well aware of self-presentation using a technique called impression management in order to be perceived in a particular way. In the most basic scenarios, this technique of impression management is used in an interview process, making sure to make the right impression by wearing a suit, shaking the interviewer’s hand, saying what they want to hear etc. However, now, people are not only striving towards their ideal self through consumption and the use of impression management, but are reflecting this “ideal self” in their new virtual self.

Virtual self refers to the “person connected to the world and to others through electronic means, such as the internet, television and cell phones. It is a sense of being and is a particular way of experiencing and interacting with the world” (Agger, 2004). Even online, people are aware of their self-presentation. From the independent survey conducted, this was seen with over 54% admitting that when posting something on facebook or twitter, they think about how others will perceive it before posting and over 37% admitting to think about the amount of likes or re-tweets their post will get. This indicates that people are concerned with their self-presentation and opinions’ of others when posting online.

“Individuals seek to manage expressions given and given off in a manner that simulates offline interactions, so as to make this online performance more convincing and satisfying” (Papacharissi, 2002). For example, an individual who wants to be perceived as outgoing,
with a large circle of friends would constantly be posting links to friends' walls on facebook and posting pictures of group gatherings to instagram.

Goffman’s theory of referring all individuals as actors in a play is particularly relevant in today’s modern world. These individuals are performing different roles. Some roles may be acted out simultaneously such as the role of a mother and the role of a business woman. However, one can also be playing a role online, inconsistent with real-world roles. Because of the lack of verbal elements present, individuals are able to display a perception of themselves that may not be true to reality, choosing to “explore certain sides of their personalities more extensively online, or even invent virtual life personae different from their real life personalities” (Papacharissi, 2002).

In the past decade, personal branding has become a very relevant concept in modern life. Although nothing new, in the past decade it has become more widely used amongst a mainstream audience. “It used to be that successful image and branding were reserved for those individuals and businesses that were in the public eye, celebrities, politicians and elite sports people. These days, it is acknowledged that branding is more important than ever for everyone” (Centaur Communications Ltd., 2007).

Personal branding is linked to Cooley’s third dimension of the looking glass self in which people are trying to reshape or form others’ perceptions of them. Through the use of personal branding, individuals try to be perceived in a particular way. Particularly in life transitions, “people may want to relaunch their personal brand for example, when students start their careers.” (Centaur Communications Ltd., 2007). When students begin to move out of university and into the “real-world”, they start to look for a job. Through application forms and interviews, these individuals take active control over the situation in order to be perceived in a particular way to potential employers. This can be seen by the 85% of respondents that are focused on what the interviewer is looking for instead of whether they were happy with their performance.

Since the rise in social media sites, personal branding has been made easier with this online platform. Not only is this “virtual self” relevant to personal characteristics through twitter, facebook and instagram but professional ones as well, with the use of linkedin. Linkedin is a social media site for those in or seeking professional employment. One can
take control by actively displaying what they believe potential employers will want to see, as they can with a resume or an application form, presenting the information in a way that will look more presentable for employers. For example, leaving out details of your last job from which you got fired.

**Conclusion:**
Overall, it is clear from this critique, that perception is centre to our discussion. This paper not only discussed the basic theories surrounding the looking glass self but also paid particular attention to the third aspect of Cooley’s looking-glass concept. This was of particular interest, being ignored in many textbooks throughout the years. It discussed the active role the individual played in forming and reshaping others’ perceptions of him/her and this was the focus of the paper. This paper applied this third aspect of Cooley’s looking glass self to the modern world, backed up by independent research conducted, theories and modern day examples, in relation to consumption, the “virtual” self and personal branding.

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