

# Narratives selves in the digital world: An empirical investigation

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## Abstract

The digital era has led to the extension of self into virtual space, resulting in changes to consumption patterns. The existing academic landscape in this area focuses on Western perspectives, in the context of early-stage digital interventions. However, the dynamic digital world demands a constant exploration to understand the corresponding influences on consumer behavior across varied cultural contexts. This research focuses on unraveling newer dimensions of the digital self from non-Western perspectives. We adopt an interpretive lens to understand the evolving nature of self through a grounded theory approach. The study establishes the presence of multiple independent narrative selves, co-created with people, and technology. Each narrative addresses different segments of personal audiences, enabling new modes of self-expression to overcome the challenges of digital expressions. Additionally, we highlight the exclusion of the digital presence of family in the formation of the narrative self. From a theoretical perspective, we extend and contrast the existing conceptualizations on self, such as dialogical selves, self-extension and expansion, and the unified core self. Further, the practical implications emphasize the need for narrative analytic approaches to understanding consumers and avenues for brands to decode narratives, develop strategies to gain consumer attention, and become part of consumers' narrative selves.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

"From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art."(Foucault, 1982, pp. 351)

The human desire for validation and acceptance has led to constant efforts for new avenues toward the expression and recreation of self-concept, the latest being in the digital world. Foucault's (1982) view of self-concept as a practice is fundamental to the notion of self in the digital world. The digital screens, which once constructed a wider universe beyond us, has transmogrified to a platform to parade our lived moments to others, creating new realms of self-extension. The endeavor to express self in the digital space is not only a process of re-discovery but also an improvisation of who a person can

be. Marketing and consumer behavior disciplines have debated the horizons of self in a variety of contexts (Ahuvia, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Belk, 1988, 2013). However, the dynamic digital world is unlocking new opportunities for marketing and media to be a part of consumers' sense of self. Hence, continuous research and theorization on self within the frame of reference of the digital and technology ecosphere is paramount to advancing the consumer behavior knowledge. The objective of this paper is to broaden the views self-concept of consumers in the digital space.

Consumers' relationship with technology is continuously transforming, inciting variations of self in the digital space (Epps, 2014). On an ever-ongoing basis, consumers populate their online profiles and with others through digital activities that contribute to shaping and reshaping of their personas. Others also tag them, follow them, comment on their posts, and add likes that serve as "digital patina" for the online presence of these consumers (Davies, 2007). In Foucault's (1982)

terms, here, the technologies of production enable the technologies of the self. In short, our digital interactions and the surrounding digital environment is leading to the co-creation of a more fluid and dynamic self-concept, which demands a constant stream of reformulation.

The existing academic literature focuses on self (James, 1890), extended self (Belk, 1988), the extended digital self (Belk, 2014a), expanded self (Aron & Aron, 1986; Connell & Schau, 2013), extended mind (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) and dialogical self (Ahuvia, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010) along with a host of other conceptual treatments of self in the digital world. Furthermore, past research focuses on the formation of self, involving consumer desire, wants, and needs in a digital era (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2013; Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2012) and concepts of personal branding (Khedher, 2019; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). Eminent scholars have contributed toward exploring multiple aspects of the nature of self in the digital and non-digital worlds (Aron & Aron, 1986; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Belk, 1988, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Cushman, 1995; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Turkle, 1999, 2005; Zhao, 2005). These studies either do not actively feature the role of technology or consider earlier static websites and anonymous users. However, the technological advancements, interactive-self learning interfaces, and enclaves of self-extension available today is much beyond what scholars pondered upon during the earlier explorations. Hence, there is an imperative need for ongoing research in this arena.

Moreover, Western conceptualizations of self and the corresponding perspectives form the basis for the previous studies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While these studies have contributed toward a firm foundation for the self-concept of consumers, growing Internet and smartphone usage globally points to the relevance of studying the non-Western perspectives. These circumstances demand contextual research, from non-Western and Asian perspectives.

This paper focuses on developing an empirical and conceptual understanding of the evolving nature of self in the digital world. We use a grounded theory approach based on in-depth interviews and rigorous analysis to develop key insights. First, we establish the existence of multiple narrative selves in the digital world, thereby extending and contrasting existing theorizations of the self. We define the narrative self (NS) in the digital world as a form of open-ended self-expression, conveying a combination of experiences, aspirations, and fantasies, co-created with peers and technology. It includes posts, comments, likes, tagging, others' digital activities, and other self-related activities online. A consumer can have multiple narrative selves; for instance, the self, expressed through the professional platform, LinkedIn will vary from that on Instagram. Second, we elaborate on some of the key features of NS, including its ever-evolving nature and transformational aspects. We explain how the specific nature of narrative selves subdues the challenges to self, identified by previous studies. Third, we elucidate the active role of brands and peers, along with the diminishing role of the family in the formation of the narrative selves of the digital world. Further, we compare and contrast the narrative selves in the digital world to the earlier findings around consumer narratives from the offline space (Ahuvia, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Belk, 2013; Cushman, 1995; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The main

findings lead to further exploration of the opportunities for brands to decode the consumer narratives and be a part of the ever-evolving, malleable narrative selves.

In the next sections, we explain theoretical perspectives, research methodology, findings, implications, and limitations.

## 2 | PRIOR RESEARCH AND THEORY

This paper aims to expand the current understanding of the nature of self from a non-western perspective. This section introduces different nuances of self as proposed by previous theoretical and empirical studies.

### 2.1 | Conceptualizations of self

The late 19th-century revelation, "Between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel about ourselves" (James, 1890, p. 29), focused on some of the basic notions of self and its constituents. Belk (1988) theorized on the extended self and the levels reflecting an individual's family, neighborhood, and nation, each of which is extended by the individual or joint possessions. Our relationship with other people, objects, and places all help shape the extended self (Tian & Belk, 2005). Aron and Aron (1986) focused on the notion of expansion of self, including the identities, attributes, and achievements of significant others in our lives. The self-expansion framework further includes consumer-brand relationships (Reimann & Aron, 2014).

Additionally, the concept of extension of the mind (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) offers yet another view of the role of external entities in the self-concept. Here, the tools we use (e.g., traffic signs, GPS maps) act as agents of cognitive extension of mind into the outside world. While these conceptualizations aid in comprehending how consumers operate in the physical world, we cannot directly superimpose them into digital spaces. Today, an average consumer spends more than 6 h on the Internet every day (We Are Social, 2019). Their networks consisting of peers, celebrities, brands, and thousands of known and unknown entities, are accessible via the smartphone, which has become another extension of self (Belk, 2014a). Thus, the territories of self-extension available today go beyond what scholars could have imagined during the early explorations on self (Sheth & Solomon, 2014).

Reaching different lifecycle stages and other milestone events facilitate changes in self-concept (Minowa & Belk, 2020). Such essential life experiences metamorphose into narratives of the self. These narratives help consumers establish their sense of self to themselves as well as others. Narratives are rooted in the past, molded in the present, and have implications for the future. Narratives may be contradictory, and consumers strive to resolve the conflicts by delimiting, making compromises, or by synthesizing the narratives (Ahuvia, 2005). Bahl and Milne (2010) elaborate on dialogic personas, with differential involvements with possessions. Cushman (1995) points

toward the mismatch between consumers' NS and the sociocultural environment, due to the absence of shared meaning. These conceptualizations do not feature the role of technology, which is vital at this moment. As we know from past studies, the self changes as we adapt and adjust to the transforming world around us (Belk, 2013; Sheth & Solomon, 2014). The next section reviews the scholarly work connecting self and technological developments.

## 2.2 | Conceptualizations of self in the digital space

Turkle (1999, 2005) suggests that technology intensifies exploration of our sense of self as a distributed entity. That is, thanks to digital affordances (Gibson, 1979), people are continually cycling through diverse experiences of self. While these are perfect revelations of early manifestations of self, they are derivatives of the experiences of anonymous users from the multi-user domains (MUDs), whose expressions are limited and follow the structures created by the designers. Zhao (2005) investigated how other people affect an anonymous digital self. Schau and Gilly (2003) indicate the process through which users maneuver their online self-presentation. Yet, the study primarily examines the self-expressions in the early age personal websites, where the contribution of technology is predictable, and the selection of audiences is not within the control of the user. From the perspectives of the emerging technological ecosystem, users can script an entirely different story. Hence, the emerging newer modes of self-expression calls for contemporary research on the nature of the self. Hence, building upon existing studies, this study addresses this gap.

Scholars have studied the conscious construction of self in the digital space in the context of personal branding, wherein users position and present themselves as brands to achieve their professional objectives (e.g., Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). This is akin to the concept of the enterprising self (Vallas & Christin, 2017). Khedher (2019) compares personal branding to modes of self-presentation and argues for the superiority of digital branding of the self in seeking employment. Labrecque et al., 2011 document the challenges in selecting/suppressing content and audiences across platforms to achieve the desired self-presentation to specific audiences. In 2020, many of these challenges may be becoming irrelevant due to platform-specific affordances. It will be interesting to explore how self-branding narratives vary across platforms and audiences. Moreover, the previous self-branding studies revolved around professional objectives. However, with a multitude of platforms and options for self-expression, self-branding today may involve numerous professional and non-professional aims, which demand further exploration.

More recently, it has been recognized that our digital representations also figure prominently in the extended self. Belk (2013) discusses five altered aspects of the environment to which the digital self must adapt: (1) dematerialization involving virtual possessions and digital devices, (2) re-embodiment and attachment to different digital self-representations, (3) sharing in online spaces with offline consequences, (4) co-construction of self, and (5) distributed memory as we

rely on online repositories. Belk (2014b) re-theorizes the concepts of looking glass self (Cooley, 1904) and presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) for the digital space. Here, the co-construction of self is visualized as involving instances in which a person lacks control over the modifications to his/her self-concept by familiar and unfamiliar others in the digital world. However, the conscious co-construction of self, with both human and non-human actors participating in the co-creation, still demands further exploration. Besides, studies of self are mostly immersed in a Western individualistic perspective. Considering the current growth patterns and digital penetration globally, the dimensions of the extended self from a culturally different context will deepen scholarship in the area.

Moreover, studies of self and culture view the traditional Western self as independent and the Eastern self as interdependent, which can significantly influence the consumer behaviors of the two (Kitayama & Park, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While the digital world can move people toward a global cosmopolitan culture (Hongladarom, 1999), there still exist many cultural differences that can manifest in online space. Therefore, the main objectives of this paper would be to explore newer dimensions of self in the digital world while probing for any possible differences compared to the Western perspectives.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

Based on the review of existing theoretical dimensions, we feel that the older conceptualizations of self may fall short of explaining the nature and processes of self in the digital world. Therefore, we follow a grounded theory approach to help in addressing theoretical interpretations of everyday phenomena in digital India (Charmaz, 2006). As stated by Belk and Sobh (2018), an approach dependant on existing theoretical frameworks may bar us from considering the new corollaries of the self and the digital culture. Since the objective of this study is to uncover new dimensions of the self in the digital world, we deemed grounded as a suitable approach to analyze different conceptual perspectives.

To shed light on consumer experiences involving the self in digital spaces, we conducted in-depth interviews coupled with observations of the digital activities of research participants. We recruited 20 participants through purposive and snowball sampling from two major Indian cities, Delhi, and Mumbai. The basis for selection included age, education, active presence on multiple social media platforms, and exposure to 2–3 h of digital activity/day. The participants mostly belonged to the millennial and post-millennial generation, owing to the higher affinity to use social media for self-presentation (Doster, 2013b). Table 1 (appendix) highlights a brief profile of the participants. In addition to the 20 participants, we interviewed two to four people from their close circle to understand their perspectives and the specific role of the co-creators. These included 69 interviews from friends, family members, and colleagues (FFC group).

The interviews took place in Delhi and Mumbai, two major cities in India that are to a considerable number of the country's digital

**TABLE 1** Main participant profiles

No	Age	Gender	City	Education	Occupation
P1	24	Male	Mumbai	Engineering	Software engineer
P2	20	Male	Mumbai	Commerce	Student
P3	22	Female	Mumbai	Commerce	Student
P4	22	Male	Mumbai	Commerce	Student
P5	25	Male	Mumbai	Commerce	Financial
P6	25	Male	Mumbai	Engineering	Software engineer
P7	23	Female	Mumbai	Commerce	Student
P8	26	Male	Mumbai	Engineering	Sales
P9	25	Male	Mumbai	Management	Human resources
P10	21	Female	Delhi	Management	Student
P11	22	Female	Delhi	Design	Student
P12	26	Male	Delhi	Literature	Marketing
P13	28	Male	Delhi	Architecture	Architect
P14	23	Male	Delhi	Architecture	Student
P15	24	Female	Delhi	Architecture	Architect
P16	26	Female	Delhi	Literature	Marketing
P17	24	Male	Delhi	Science	Student
P18	26	Female	Delhi	Economics	Analyst
P19	25	Female	Delhi	Journalism	Journalist
P20	24	Female	Delhi	Economics	Student

natives. These are also the two most populated cities in the country (Maps of India, 2018) and among the top digital Indian cities, in terms of factors including digital facilities and innovation. (Digital Indian Cities Survey, 2016). The digital industries concentrated in these cities, together with cheap Internet and affordable smartphones, support the use of digital platforms by consumers in India (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013; Tenhunen, 2018). Government initiatives for digitally smart cities further enhanced the digitization of these areas (Aulakh, 2016; PTI, 2014).

All the selected participants were comfortable in English, and their social media profiles mostly reflected content in the English language, which was the only available option in the initial stages with the leading social media platforms. Though many platforms have started introducing vernacular languages, the adoption rate in these languages is primarily among the older participants. Hence, we conducted all the interviews in English and recorded them. Thematic data saturation helped to determine the number of interviews. The key focal areas for the primary interviews included digital media consumption patterns and frequencies, digital networks, participatory practices and frequencies, expression and management of self in the digital media, expression of self via acquisitions of goods, and multiple versions of self. The FFC group participants discussed their views and roles in the digital life of the main participants corresponding to the broad themes indicated before. Before the interviews, participants shared their social media profiles. The interviewers had the opportunity to scan the profiles of the people across platforms in preparing for interviews. During the interview, participants opened up their

social media profiles from their smartphones to illustrate the discussions of their online activity and representations. During the analysis phase, we compared the social media profiles to examine variations and similarities in the narratives. These multiple modes helped to triangulate the data, strengthen our interpretations, and understand the nature of self in the digital space. The next section details the data analysis methods.

## 4 | ANALYSIS

While employing in-depth interviews as a critical data collection method, the researchers concurrently and subsequently gathered observational and peer details. This helped to shape the data collection processes further. For instance, we compared the participants' comments during the interview, with their activities on specific social media profiles to strengthen our interpretations. The transcribed interviews generated 692 pages of data. This data, coupled with the brief observations of online activity, facilitated our understanding of the entanglements of networks, people, and platforms (Hodder, 2012). The research team shall destroy the transcripts after study completion. Qualitative thematic analysis of the transcripts included involving open, axial, and selective coding. A detailed note-taking and memo development during data collection aided our evolving data collection approach. The memos were of theoretical and methodological nature. We initiated open coding to classify and manage the data as themes and categories. Attributes of each category were noted

along with emerging sub-categories. We organized the selective codes in a tree-like format with main branches and filigree of finer branches (Table 2). This resulted in detecting multiple dimensions of self in the digital space. Notes about the contexts in which these connections emerged

and the online observations were a useful aid in the analysis and selection of themes. Once the team reached a level of data saturation, the selection of core categories, and related categories through selective coding were finalized. Next, we discuss the results and implications.

**TABLE 2** Sample quotes & coding

Quote	Codes	Categories	Theme
I like to post the brand name when you post something about new purchases that makes me feel good. Because if I am talking about some branded stuff like Calvin Klein, or max, this will create a certain image of me. I like that	Brand Post Purchase	Brands	Brands form part of narrative
Even before posting, I know already that some of my friends are going to like my all my posts. If I see that these people have not liked, then I will call them and ask to do so. Without enough initial likes and shares, the post cannot be trending.	Friends Post Like	Peers	Co-creation with peers
There is an explore page in Instagram where you get more likes and more recommendations. You will get the most recommended posts across the globe. So I now have so much stuff on architecture, like looking at my page, you will know I have a passion for this.	Instagram Explore Recommendations	Technology	Co-creation with technology
Most of the times I post about subjects of interests like about bitcoin and currencies. So many people in my network asks me questions on it and forwards me stuff about the same. So as such, I read a lot on them now, became a habit to regularly keep myself updated about bitcoins. I am even thinking of buying some now.	Subjects of interest Habit	Narrative self and interest areas	Core self and narrative self influence each other
I have a game profile and Avtar; I use to play games with that only. I do not let this profile to intersect with Facebook or other interactions. I do not connect with my non-gaming friends with other social media profiles. It is just for gaming purpose.	Gaming profile SM profiles Purpose	Multiple narratives	Multiple narrative selves
When I was a high-school student, I was addicted to liking pages of all kinds. I have 6–7 thousand liked pages and I am “unliking” them now, slowly. Now if you ask me, I ‘like’ pages that share architectural stuff. I ‘like’ the pages sharing architecture designs, quotations, and drawings.	Student Like Unlike	Evolving nature	Narrative selves and the evolving imagined core selves adapt to each other
It is only when I buy very high and expensive brand I post it to some groups there otherwise I normally do not. I had bought a Vuitton expensive bag in last 6 months so then I posted it on Instagram and Snapchat, its 900+ likes and counting.	Expensive brand post	Brands	The role of Brands in the Narrative Selves
My family members and relatives are on Facebook, but I have not even added them to my group. Because they add funny posts and videos and some spiritual messages, which are not related to me at all.	Family Posts Not related	Family	The role of family in the narrative selves

## 5 | FINDINGS

This study focused on self in the digital world from among young consumers from India. Extensive analysis from the in-depth qualitative data resulted in a better understanding of the process of digital self and the multiple dimensions, as explained below. The key findings are summarized in four key themes. We first elaborate on the nature of self in digital space, focusing on multiplicity, narrative format, the evolving nature of the self, and the cyclical relationship with a dynamic core self. Subsequently, we elaborate on the second theme of the diminishing role of the family in NS. Finally, we address the third theme, highlighting the role of brands in the formation of NS.

### 5.1 | The nature of self in the digital space

Consumer “masks” (Goffman, 1959), along with their relevant performances, facilitate navigation in the worlds of social media. (Doster, 2013a). Although these insights have furthered Goffman's ideas about the presentation of self, we found further implications for the nature of self in a digital age.

#### 5.1.1 | Co-constructed multiple narrative selves

We find that consumers' profiles in various platforms are diverse and feature carefully curated narratives. Participants expressed their self-narratives through visuals, text, networked affiliations with other people, as well as the digital activities of their peer networks. The interactive narratives differed vastly across platforms in terms of expressions, people, and intended audiences. For instance, while the Facebook profiles include pictures with friends/family or casual pictures, LinkedIn profiles feature photos in formal attire and digital workplace objects, as Tian and Belk (2005) found with material possessions in the workplace.

According to our participant P7, “*Different accounts have different purpose[s]...[to] impress different types of people...but one thing is common, you have like a tiny bit of you in all of them.*” We include the posts (Figure 1) from an Indian actor (due to lack of permission from participants) and a working professional (Figure 2) to illustrate the NS. The profile of the actors available in the public domain that illustrates the multiple narratives of self. The actor quotes, “*Insta is my A game, Tinder for the flame, For LinkedIn, one can try to be tame, FB for those throwbacks, no shame. Different personalities, but Sara's still the same. Sara ka Saara*” (Source: @team\_saraakhan, Twitter). Figure 2 demonstrates the narrative of a professional who uses digital media solely for professional objectives. Hence, his narratives are similar across platforms.

The affordances of a platform and the people who form part of each network play a crucial role in the co-construction and maintenance of the multiple narrative selves online. Additionally, there exists a great deal of segregation by platform and by the circle of “friends.”

Participant P16 talked about the role of different audiences and circles of people:

*Even before posting, I know already that some of my friends are going to like my all my posts. If I see that these people have not liked, then I will call them and ask to do so. Without enough initial likes and shares, the post cannot be trending.*

According to P13, the technology further builds up the narratives.

*There is an explore page on Instagram where you get more likes and more recommendations. You will get the most recommended posts across the globe. So I now have so much stuff on architecture, like looking at my page, you will know I have a passion for this.*

Consumers meticulously construct each NS through different sets of actors, including people, affiliations, unique affordances of the platforms, and diverse experiences in sharing.

The sets of actors vary across platforms. One of the participants in an FFC group described how her friend had constructed multiple narrative selves:

*Well, on Snapchat and Instagram, she is restricted to her friends' circle where she is comfortable and express [es] more freely. In FB, there are some of her office friends, seniors, and acquaintances; she needs to maintain some image.*

For each NS, users choose a different set of people, technology affordances, and other sharing tools. Together, these help to create the lens through which others will view the desired narrative. Moreover, the digital activity of the network, such as likes, posts, and shares, also becomes part of the narrative, forming an extended NS, similar to the Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion framework. This goes beyond the co-construction of self, envisioned by Belk (2014b) because it involves not just what the individual focal posts and the directly responsive tags, likes, and comments from within a circle of friends or colleagues or family, but also the posts and other digital activities of these people. This is something that was not lost upon China in setting up online monitoring as a part of their social credit system. Reportedly, your social credit score depends not only on what you post online but also on what your friends post online (Botsman, 2017). These narratives continuously evolve in response to a dynamic core self and external factors, as we discuss next.

#### 5.1.2 | Narrative selves and the evolving imagined core selves adapt to each other

As the core self is illusionary and continuously evolving, digital activities and representations of possessions are digital manifestations of the extended self (Belk, 2013). The NS adapts to this evolving core self.



**FIGURE 1** Different narratives of a popular Indian film actor (Sara Ali Khan) across platforms [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

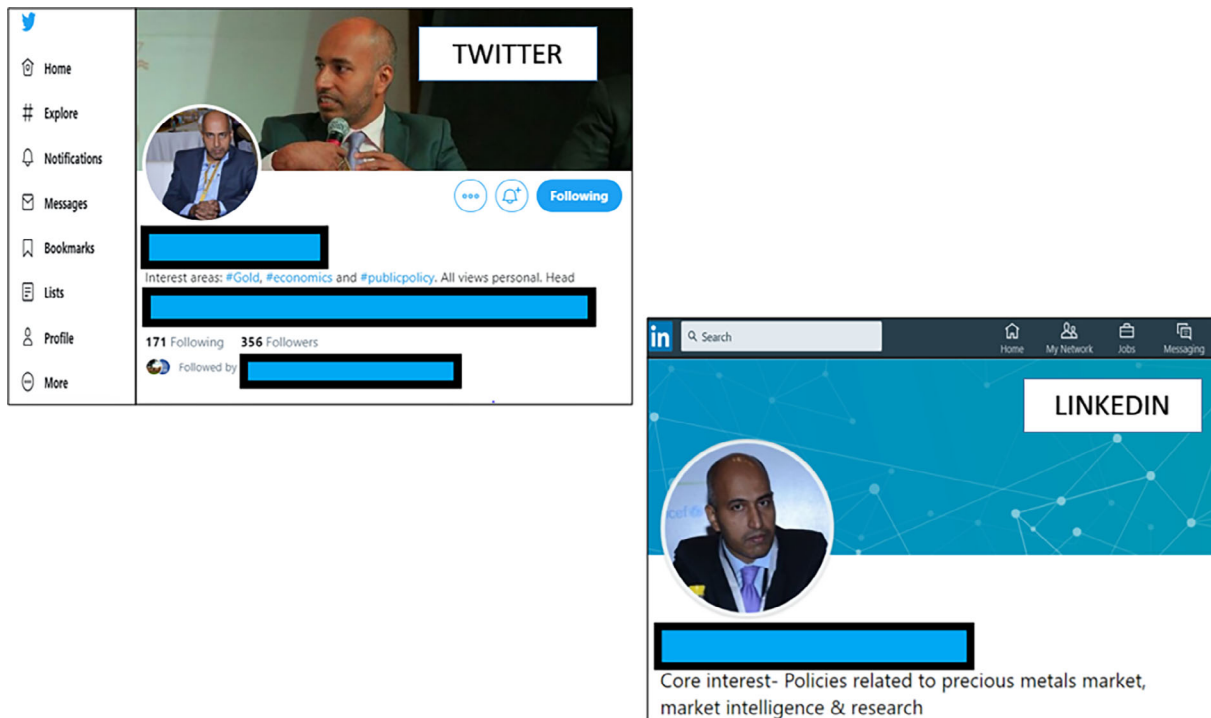
*When I was a high-school student, I was addicted to liking pages of all kinds. I have 6-7 thousand liked pages, and I am 'unliking' them now, slowly. Now, if you ask me, I 'like' pages that share architectural stuff. I 'like' the pages sharing architecture designs, quotations, and drawings. P-14*

When a particular platform and its affordances for constructing the NS cease connecting to the evolving dynamic core self (Belk, 2013), the creation is deleted or abandoned since it is retractable (Tapscott, 1998; Zhao, 2005). In real-life scenarios, it is not easy for someone to change others' perceptions of them; despite changes in the imagined core self. As Tapscott (1998) rightly points out, even an embarrassing childhood sobriquet stays with someone for years, while presented selves can be re-modeled entirely, removed, or

abandoned, making NS "retractable." NS, in-turn influences consumer behavior.

### 5.1.3 | The three-way connection

The Proteus Effect (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009) and Behavioral Confirmation Theory (Snyder & Swann Jr, 1978) offer support for the influence of online representation on offline behavior. However, based on our exploration, we believe there is a three-way connection. First, a person's sense of "who he/she is" form the multiple NS, as explained above. Second, as the selves develop, they, in turn, influence the behavior. People even stage experiences to enhance their NS online. Participant P11's friend shared a funny personal experience:



**FIGURE 2** Similar narratives of a professional across platforms [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

*Once, outside the Infinity Mall, there was a Maserati... in yellow color. He asked me to click a pic. Later he posts - New car. People were asking more details about the car, and then he says, and I will show it someday.*

Third, the process becomes cyclical, and NS, derived from a posed photo, becomes part of a new narrative, at the same time reinforcing this new self. Though the broad nature of the NS appears to be similar across cultures, further inquiries led us to some possible differences between Western and Eastern perspectives on the family's role.

## 5.2 | The role of family in the narrative selves

In his seminal paper on possessions and the extended self, Belk (1988) contemplates the role of the family in the extended self. Ideas of Western digital family networks and “virtual intimacy” have been presented by several scholars in the past (Epp & Price, 2008; Wilding, 2006). However, our research reveals that some of these aggregate selves atrophy when it comes to online NS in the Eastern world. Retaining traces of the Interdependent Eastern culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we found pictures and stories of the family forming part of NS. Nevertheless, surprisingly, the digital activities and profiles of the family were mostly absent, highly restricted, or undesired in most of the narratives. Some of the participants opined:

*What doesn't go on digital for me? Family, I would say, because all other things are there on digital media. –P3*

While some participants included the family in limited platforms, they confessed that they restrict self-expression in “family-inclusive” spaces.

*Whenever there is anything fun or something, I post an Insta story. But like this hookah story here, I cannot post on Instagram. On Instagram, also, my mama follows me. So this goes to Snapchat, only for cool friends (Mama = Maternal Uncle).–P15*

The FFC group interviews also indicated a similar scenario. Participant P2's mother stated:

*I am not on my son's friend list. He does not add me; probably, he thinks I will get to know what he is up to.*

Our interaction with the participants and observation of their profiles indicate their perception that the digital activity of the family does not add value to the NS, which they carefully co-construct with the network to highlight a desired set of attributes. According to participant P7,

*My family members and relatives are on Facebook, but I have not added them. Because they add funny posts and videos and some spiritual messages which are not related to me at all.*

Moreover, avoidance of family was also a strategy to escape the moral and cultural gatekeeping (Lindridge & Hogg, 2006) practiced by Asian



families. From the family and peers interview, participant P9's aunt said:

*Nowadays, people use abusive language online, and yes, sometimes back, I asked her to maintain control over her tone online.*

The digital connections that do exist with the family have functional or obligatory motivations. As stated by participant P16

*I have my family only group with my mom, dad, brother, and my husband. The purpose to create this group is to share pics so that everybody gets instead of sending individually. I do not like the family groups from the in-law's side, but being a bahu, I can't exit, so I just mute it. (Bahu = Daughter in law)*

Thus, while the family forms part of the narratives, the digital activity of the family members is not a desired part of the NS. The next section discusses the role of brands in the NS.

### 5.3 | The role of brands in the narrative selves

Brands form part of the NS. Consumers utilize brands as subtle cues to express themselves online (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). However, these expressions are influenced by the perceived novelty and delight or despair of product, service, or other (e.g., website) commercial experiences. The expression of consumption is a mode of gaining the approval of others, and consumers highlight what they think will garner the best responses (Hunt, Kernan, & Mitchell, 1996) to enhance a particular narrative. According to participant P16,

*It is only when I buy very high and expensive brands I post it to some groups there otherwise I normally don't. I had bought a Vuitton expensive bag in the last six months, so then I posted it on Instagram and Snapchat, its 900+ likes and counting. I cannot share it with family groups or FB, everyone will be like, oh this bag will come for a quarter of the price in this local shop and blah blah*

The uniqueness and status connotations of a brand influence their role in self-expression, as well as the platform. This reflects the collective nature of the self, which yearns for peer approval (Hunt et al., 1996). Moreover, a comparison of multiple social media profiles indicated a differential role of brands. Brands, which form part of one narrative, may not fit into another narrative. The brand -inclusive narratives may further influence the purchase decisions of the peers (Heinonen, 2011).

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The self has long fascinated writers, poets, philosophers, and, more recently, scholars who have begun to consider it empirically and

reflect on the manifestations. The effervescent growth of the digital world and its relevance in consumers' lives has led researchers to re-examine the understandings of the self and its extensions. This research is an attempt to reveal new multiple narrative dimensions of the self in the digital world, enriching the existing scholarship. Given the intricacies involved in delving deeply into notions of self, our study used an interpretive mode of inquiry to revisit self, considering the digital perspectives. We elaborate on four main findings of the study as below.

First, we have developed the notion of the narrative nature and multiplicity of self in digital space. The multiple selves created by consumers are an aggregate reflection of their self-concepts, values, beliefs, aspirations, and fantasies. Consumers consciously curate each NS with a selected set of peers, technological platforms, and modes of expression in mind. The elements of these selves alternate between realities, fantasies, and aspirations, encompassing both the physical and digital world. The tools (people, platforms, forms, and modes of expression) facilitating these digital narratives are more dynamic, personalized, and participatory than their offline narratives, and reflect more varied dimensions of self. As explained by Sartre (1956) and summarized by Belk (1988), there exist multiple ways of inclusion of belongings into a person's sense of self, one of them being created. Creating an object is a manifestation of owning it. Belk (2018) further expands the concept of extended self to digital objects. Thus, each of the NS, carefully designed and maintained, forms part of the extended self-concept.

Second, we highlight the nature of NS, which is evolving, influential, and transformative. Belk (2014a) explains how we endure internal and external changes by incessantly assessing our self for stability. The technological affordances of different platforms enable the NS to adapt to the evolving self though deleting/updating/filtering posts, people, images, profiles, and so on. Conveniently, the digital world offers a horde of boulevards to express several fragments of the evolving self, selected for a specific set of audiences. The nature of the narratives also facilitates personal digital branding. The network, places, products can provide all features in the branding as well as co-branding processes. However, personal branding leads to treating the self as an object rather than as a subject, unlike the other modes of self-representation (Belk, 2014c). Further, our findings indicate that as consumers devote more time, efforts, and importance toward their digital narratives, the NS can influence the behavior.

Third, the NS pave the way for a deeper understanding of the role of brands in the digital space. Escalas (2004) argues that consumers' narratives generate meaning for brands. In the digital world, each platform can host a different independent NS. The brands included in each of them can reveal specific details about consumption patterns and the significance of the brand. Hence, specific NS can drive unique consumption goals in the digital as well as non-digital space.

Fourth, from the family perspective, the unique finding from this study involves the minimal prominence of the digital activities in the context of the family in the NS. While narratives about the family find a role in NS, the digital activities of the family are excluded. Lien, Westberg, Stavros, and Robinson's (2018) study of emerging markets

reveals conflicts in millennials' agreement to conventional family norms. The desire for freedom to follow their aspirations wins out instead. Even in Indian villages, cheap smartphones and Internet access have led to more love marriages because the family can be excluded (Tenhunen, 2018). The digital exclusion of the family allows escaping from traditional cultural mentorship and moral gatekeeping by the immediate and extended families (Lien et al., 2018). The narratives anchored on personal objectives resemble the independent self when it comes to the family participation, rather than relational norms or situational affordances of the traditional Eastern interdependent self. The exclusion of family frees the millennials from the burden of sustaining family expectations in the digital space (Kitayama & Park, 2013).

Thus, NS can be considered as a form of collaborative digital consumption, created via sharing (Belk, 2010) of each other's digital activities. NS is incomplete without the supportive digital expressions of the chosen network. Our findings have implications for our understanding of self and corresponding facets of consumer behavior, as elaborated below.

## 7 | THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

We believe that the academic world will benefit from this theoretical understanding of the digital self across four main areas. First, our findings extend as well as contrast with some of the existing conceptualizations on self. The narrative nature of the online self reverberates with the idea of real-world dialogical selves (Ahuvia, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010). However, unlike the earlier findings, consumers are not "self narrators" of their narratological creation of self (Thompson, 1997). The simultaneity and interactivity with our "chosen" people (as co-creators, friends, and other audiences) define a pattern of inclusion and exclusion. Our digital activities are directed to specific or imagined selected groups of people. This partitioning of audiences differentiates NS in the digital space.

Second, we explain the multiple mirrors in the digital space, surrounding the NS. As explained by earlier scholars, others' perceptions of an individual influence the development of self-concepts as a "looking glass" (Cooley, 1904). In contrast, the multiple mirrors of NS are composed of different sets of the known or imagined audience for each self-narrative. The multiplicity varies from the multiphrenic selves elaborated by earlier studies (Belk, 2013; Turkle, 1999, 2005) as they are non-anonymous, ensembled with visible cues to identity, including name, photo, background, interests, among many other digital artifacts.

Third, our findings contradict Cushman (1995), who argued that consumers strive for a unified or core self. We find that consumers do not aim toward a coherent self in digital space, although they desire coherence for each narrative-self independently. The narrative theory, accentuates this finding, by indicating that the inherent inconsistencies or compartmentalized philosophies of narratives do not stop our self-presentations from providing a sense of continuity in our minds (Gergen, 1991; Thompson, 1997). It is also consistent with Goffman (1959), who proposed that we are the sum of the masks we wear in different situations. These masks are continually changing,

defined less by the situation than by the platform and the audiences who can access them.

Fourth, we highlight the role of NS in overcoming the challenges of digital expression. Prior research (Ahuvia, 2005; Bahl & Milne, 2010; Belk, 2013; Cushman, 1995; Thompson & Haytko, 1997) has posited challenges in maintaining multiple facades. The challenges include the conflicts wrt sense of identity, including segregation of viewers, hitches in memorizing the distinct features. However, as we analyze the self and digital space in 2020, these challenges have disappeared mainly due to the unique affordances of contemporary digital platforms. We have greater control of various identities that can co-exist without maneuvering through complex negotiation processes (Ahuvia, 2005). Not only can we use different Avatars, profile pictures, or shared digital possessions (Pinto, Reale, Segabinazzi, & Vargas Rossi, 2015), but also the entire profile and content string represents a narrative version of self, build with the help of a select group of people and directed to this same group. Each narrative serves as a memory aid, enabling a consumer to develop it further without contradictions. Scholars have also elaborated on the manipulation of Avatars' features to project the desired self-image and avoid contradictions (Papacharissi, 2012). The NS manipulates the technology and the composition of a network to attain the desired narrative, even if this demands the exclusion of "significant others" from the digital grid.

Our findings contradict some of the earlier studies from a Western perspective on the role of the family in the digital life of consumers. For instance, Bakardjieva (2005) and Quan-Haase, Williams, Kicevski, Elueze, and Wellman (2018), describe how, in the Western world, families rekindle their relationships through social media. Our finding also deviates from Belk's (1988) idea of extended self, Aron and Aron's (1986) conceptualization of expanded self, where family and significant others form vital parts of the self-concept. Belk (2010) also elaborates on the greater role of sharing within the family, which forms a critical aggregate domain of self-extension. However, the NS favors users whose digital activity can add more value, irrespective of bonds in physical space. Relatives who form part of the extended self in the real world, maybe wholly ignored in the digital world. Given the context of this study, focusing on the Eastern interdependent self, segmentation to exclude family is contrary to cultural expectations. Based on prior theory (e.g., Kitayama & Park, 2013), those in non-Western interdependent societies should pay more attention to familial connectedness, social context, and relationships (Singelis, 1994). However, the digital NS of the young millennials reveals a surprising distancing from family members and relatives who are routinely excluded or segregated from their friends and social networks. This finding may be a reflection of the changing Asian millennial consumer mind-set.

## 8 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The discovery of the narrative nature of self in the digital world indicates four practical implications. First, the multiplicity and narrative nature of self in the online space opens up a host of opportunities for consumer researchers, brands, and marketers to understand

consumers. Consumer researchers can develop valuable insights from adopting a narrative analytic approach of the digital space. The digital marketers and the e-commerce community would be able to connect easily with consumers if they understand the NS of their present and future consumers.

Second, while brands are placing an immense focus on the consumer footprints across technology platforms, it is also vital to recollect that the reality can be compound and multifarious than the narratives (McAdams, 2006). So all the digital footprints and the big data, which promises to unravel consumers algorithmically, has to be deduced from the mix of imagination and fantasy components of the NS. Thus, brand analytics should cover the study of the multiple online and offline narratives that are inevitable for the bigger picture. We should not lose sight of consumers and their NS.

Third, importantly, each narrative is open-ended, continually evolving, and highly malleable. This implies an opportunity for any value-adding entity to be part of the NS. Brands can apply the insights to become a component of a narrative through their narrator's digital activity, even before the narrator owns the brand. Brands can strive toward becoming a part of our online narratives, but they would need to find the right narrative to fit in or else suggest other narratives involving the brand that the consumer might incorporate into their own NS where the two are compatible. There are also opportunities to feature in consumers' efforts toward personal branding. Additionally, as highlighted by Belk (2014c), consumers choose brands for co-branding, in their efforts to package and present themselves as brands. Thus, the multiplicity and narrative nature of self in the digital world not only provides an opportunity for consumers to express the varied facets of their self-concept but also several windows for brands to be a part of consumers' lives. This inclusion within the self can help shape consumer-brand relationships and corresponding brand purchase and loyalty (Reimann & Aron, 2014).

Fourth, the reluctance to include family and the resulting exclusionary audience segregation can offer vital insights into the development of marketing and advertising strategies. Advertisers may need to consider storylines and display options that may fit their target consumer narratives and interests. Consumers may not prefer advertisements on one platform based on their conflicting narratives on another platform. Additionally, the varying levels of inclusion and exclusion of people and their relationships is a vital piece of information, which can give a sense of the direction of travel of electronic word of mouth (e-WoM) within social media platforms. For instance, e-WoM may not help in influencing families or professional connections largely, but it may help to gain traction within a circle of friends.

Belk (1988) emphasizes that the understanding of consumers is incomplete without insights into the meanings they extend to the possessions. The meanings of consumers' online narratives also depend upon co-creators who add "digital patina" and the affordances of technological platforms. The digital consumer will remain a mystery if we fail to understand the implications of each narrative-self presented and nurtured inline. We should not lose sight of consumers and their NS.

Thus, we believe that this study will be valuable to the industry as well as academia in the future. However, like every research

endeavor, this study includes limitations thrust upon by the methodological, conceptual, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

## 9 | LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Following an interpretive mode of inquiry, we have revisited the conceptualizations of the self in digital worlds and co-constructed NS. The concept of NS deserves much further exploration to understand how and why consumers choose particular narratives. The specific nature of NS across multiple platforms with different intended audiences can reveal a richer understanding of these consumers. Hence, future researchers can study NS across platforms, geographies, and age groups. Moreover, considering the Covid-19 situation in 2020, the analysis of consumer narratives before and after the pandemic would provide a glimpse of changes in consumer behavior. Additionally, other modes of inquiry, based on positivist approaches can examine the influence of important internal and external variables on the formation of NS,

The minimal role of the family in the digital narratives is an area for in-depth exploration. The "why" and "how" of this phenomenon, along with variations in the countries within Asia, may bring more perspective for academics as well as brands. Along the same lines, future researchers can focus on building the digital journey map of brands across consumer narratives to explore how consumers include and exclude brands in the NS across platforms, with a focus on personal branding as well.

This study did not individually examine various consumption scenarios such as online information search, news feeds, dating apps, and consumption of pornography. We believe that future research projects, which can include some of these areas, can further enrich the patterns revealed here. Based on this research, others should focus on NS boundaries of exclusion and inclusion to identify the best approaches to analyzing consumer narratives. That is, the Asian consumers studied identify themselves by who they are not as much as, by who they are. Future research should study multi-platform personas to understand consumer selves in a digital world fully; trying to deciphering these multiple selves based on only a few platforms can be quite misleading.

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