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Beyond 'Beyond the Extended Self': Russ Belk on Identity

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In 1988, the publication of Russell Belk's *Possessions and the Extended Self* changed the field of consumer behavior. As Belk pointed out in the second paragraph of his now classic paper, the psychological theory that things in the world – including our possessions – can become part of our self, dates back at least as far as William James (1890). Although Belk (1988) did not invent the underlying idea, *Possessions and the Extended Self* introduced a coherent framework for thinking about the role that consumption¹ plays in the way people create their sense of identity, and supported this framework with citations from around 250 published sources. His thesis met some initial resistance (Cohen, 1989), yet went on to become by far the single most researched topic in Consumer Culture Theory (formerly called "qualitative research", and henceforth abbreviated as CCT), and one of the most researched topics in experimental and survey-based consumer research as well (e.g.).

In a teaching about this topic, I have found that people frequently become confused by what is meant by "the self" in the concept of the extended self. The word "self" is often used as a synonym for consciousness. There is a common cultural metaphor for the self, in which consciousness is like a little movie theater inside one's head, and the self is the tiny person watching the show. If that is one's view of the self, the idea that possession could become part of the self, would be quite confusing. How could your cell phone become *part of* this tiny metaphorical theater goer? Logical problems with this metaphor² aside, the simplest way to address this confusion is to note that the word self has multiple meanings, and the "extended self" is not referring directly to one's

¹ Consumption here is defined broadly to include learning about, fantasizing about, talking about, shopping for, buying, using, owning, and disposing of goods, services, ideas, and experiences.

² This metaphor doesn't actually explain anything, because you would need to posit another even smaller theater in the tiny theater goers head, etc., ad infinitum.

consciousness, but rather to one's sense of identity³ a.k.a. self-concept or self-image. One's identity is, among other things, a mental category that each of us has about ourselves. We classify some things as within the *me-category*, while most things are not included in this mental category and hence are *not me*. One's body and one's consciousness are both charter members of the me-category. But as Belk (1988) points out, they are not the only things people include in their identity, which often also includes one's family, occupation, religion, ethnicity, lifestyle, hobbies, values, favorite activities, and a long list of other things including some special possessions.

This mental category of the self has fuzzy boundaries, is context dependent, and is largely non-conscious. Fuzzy boundaries means that there is a gradual transition from things that are "me", through things that are "sort-of-me", to things that are "not-me". But, just as the existence of twilight does not invalidate the distinction between night and day, the fuzzy boundary around identity does not invalidate the distinction between self and not-self. The self is context dependent in the sense that, for example, one's nationality may become much more central to one's identity when traveling abroad, than when in one's home country. And the self is non-conscious in that people are generally not explicitly aware of each and every thing that is part of their self.

Because people are not consciously aware of everything that makes up their self, the *self-referential emotions test* () can be a useful way of determining if something is part of a person's identity. When someone is praised or insulted, it is normal for them to feel proud or offended, respectively. Pride and offense are self-referential emotions – we experience them when praise or insult is directed against our self, but not when praise or insult is directed against strangers or other things which are not part of one's identity. Therefore, it is telling that if a person heard someone praising or insulting their parents, they are likely to feel proud or offended (), indicating that they consider

³ Belk (Forthcoming A) seems to disagree with this point when he writes:

"We should also make a distinction between identity and self. What digital technologies affect most directly is our identity--who we appear to be, our "identifiers," our nominal affiliations, and our representations. But these things are not the same as our sense of self. Thus, we may worry about identity theft in using digital media, but we don't worry about someone stealing our self.

However, while Belk and I use somewhat different vocabulary, I believe we agree on the underlying concepts. Specifically, what Belk is calling "self" I might call one's *sense of identity*, *self-image* or *self-concept*, or the more general term *identity*; whereas what Belk is calling "identity" I would call one's *public identity*, *public self*, *public image*, or more specifically in the case of identity theft, *legal identity*.

their parents to be part of their self (cite aron on including close others in the self). As Belk (2011, p. 223) noted:

When our key definitional objects are people, we construe the self in a more aggregate way. Thus, our children's accomplishments or setbacks are felt as our own and our parents' behaviors can be a source of pride or shame for us as children.

Similarly, it is very common for people to feel pride or offense when they hear people praising or insulting their country, religion or ethnicity; which reflects the central role that these group memberships often play in identity. This simple self-referential emotions test can be applied to any possession, activity, etc. Just imagine someone was praising or insulting the thing in question, the degree of pride or offense you feel in response provides an indication of the extent to which this thing is part of your self.

In Belk's early work on this topic (Belk 1984, 1986, 1987) one can see the development of his ideas on identity. Belk (1984) wades into a popular research stream investigating the congruence between a consumer's self-image and their mental image of a chosen product. He concludes that there is more going on than the consumer simply projecting his or her self-image onto the product or service, and calls for continued research understand the mechanisms involved. Much of Belk's later work can be seen as his answering his own call in 1984. These early works also trace his move from experimental to interpretive research methods. Whereas Belk (1984) used traditional experimental methods, Belk (1986) builds conceptually on Rochberg-Halton's qualitative dissertation research reported in the classic book *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). By Belk (1987), he is contributing to the literature on semiotics, and noting how dependent the meaning of objects are, on the cultural, historical, and lifestage context of the consumer. Exploring and theorizing the connections between what products mean to specific consumers, and how these meanings are shaped by wider social forces, would become a primary focus of his later work as well as the entire CCT area within consumer research, which he helped found.

When I was a PhD student in the early 1990s interested in the re-burgeoning area then called "qualitative research," Russ was already a research superstar. His magnum opus on the extended self (Belk 1988), and his work with Wallendorf and Sherry on the sacred within consumer behavior (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr., 1989), provided the

big ideas which fueled much of my own work. Yet, I had a mixed reaction to the tremendous upsurge in consumer research on identity, which followed the publication of Belk (1988). On the one hand I found the topic fascinating, but I also worried that CCT research had become a little self obsessed (so to speak), and might be devoting too much time to this particular topic. Since then, I have realized that this extensive research on the self is fully warranted because of identity's importance for both psychological and socio-historical theories. Psychologically, it turns out that the me-category is no ordinary mental category, but rather has some fascinating special properties. This is because the mental processes we use for thinking about our self are systematically different from the mental processes we use when thinking about the rest of the universe. I have already mentioned above that self-relevant emotions (e.g. pride and offense) occur when praise or insult are directed against the self, but not when the identical praise or insult is directed against someone or something who is not part of one's self. What's more, there are a large number of psychological biases which specifically influence the way people think about themselves (Kahneman, 2011; Reiman & Aron, 2009). As a classic example, in the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris 1967, Ross & Nisbett 1991) people tend to attribute their own behavior to the external situation ("I cut in front of another car on the highway because it was the only way I could reach a poorly marked exit") whereas people attribute others' behavior to that person's internal traits ("someone cut in front of me on the highway today, he was a bad driver and a jerk"). Similarly, people tend to endow products with value after they have touched the product, but not after someone else has touched the product (Belk, 2008; Carmon & Ariely, 2000).

From a sociological and historical perspective, an extensive focus on identity within consumer research makes sense, because identity issues play such a large role in determining consumer choices and behaviors. Belk (1986, p. 202) notes that "during teenage years there is ... growing concern with answering the question "who am I?" Erikson (1959) termed this stage the identity crisis." Today these concerns with identity have become an endemic social phenomenon for many people off all ages, rather than simply an individual quest; so I will refer to these concerns as the *cultural identity crises* (Ahuvia, 2005; Ahuvia & Izberk-Bilgin, 2012). One of the most significant social transformations associated with modernity has been the gradual shift from ascribed to achieved identities (Brown, 1995, p. 137-138). As Baumeister sums up this transition: "To put it crudely, society stopped telling people who they were, and instead it was left

up to the individual to construct his or her own identity" (1991, p. 95). Issues that used to be largely settled by tradition or one's family but are now often a matter of personal preference include: where we will live, who our social network will be, what line of work we will pursue (a choice now for women as well as men), what our religion will be, what gender we will form romantic attachments with (and in a few cases, what gender we will be), how we will appear to others in our dress as well as bodies, whom we will marry (if anyone), how many children we will have, what our political views will be, etc. As Belk (2011, p. 224) notes, "in a society without fixed and inherited roles" possessions are frequently valued for their ability to "help us to envision and enact different selves" as we create "meaningful identities."

Because of this cultural identity crises, the construction and maintenance of the self is one of contemporary life's major necessities (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1977). The act of discovering one's true preferences, navigating choice, and representing the self—both to oneself and to others—suddenly becomes the most significant act around (Baumeister, 1991; Betz, 1992; Featherstone, 1991; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991), and "experience which seems to tell about the self, to help define it, develop it or change it, has become an overwhelming concern" (Sennett, 1977, p. 219). Products are of course still valued for the practical instrumental benefits they provide, but because of the cultural identity crises, products are also increasingly valued for what they say about who we are as people. Therefore, research about the role of consumption in the creation and maintenance of the self, deserves to be a high priority.

In addition to the notion of the extended self per se, there are two other ideas from this body of work which I believe will have a major impact in the future. The first is the notion of the "prosthetic self" (Belk, Forthcoming A; Tian & Belk, 2005) in which information technology becomes a way of expanding our mental abilities. Secondly, one might think that the topics of identity (i.e. yourself) and relationships (i.e. other people) would be at the opposite ends of a spectrum. But the construction of the self is an inherently collaborative and interpersonal process. Belk provides a whole collection of observations all stressing the social and interpersonal nature of identity construction. For example:

- Frequently, it is the combination of owning certain goods and *talking about these products with other people*, which integrates them into one's extended self and creates the desired public image (Belk, 2011 p. 223; see also Holt, 1998).

- "We need Otherness to define self " (Bettany & Belk, 2011, p. 163), and marketing helps create that otherness as well as the self.
- Is not just what we own, but also what we give to (Belk, 1996; Belk & Coon, 1993) or share with (Belk & Llamas, Forthcoming) others, and our attitudes about that giving or sharing, that create our extended self (Belk, 1991; Belk & Llamas, Forthcoming).
- Object relations are "never just person-thing, but always person-thing-person, such that other people's regard for our objects or the objects that we desire determine the meanings of these objects for our sense of self" (Belk, Forthcoming A, c.f. Belk, 1988; Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003)
- "Many of our possessions engage us in a contemporary Western form of ancestor worship" (Belk 1991, p. 117).

Over 20 years, much of my own research has looked at activities, products and brands that people truly love, and what love is in these non-interpersonal contexts (e.g. Ahuvia, 1992, 2005; Ahuvia, Batra, & Bagozzi, 2009; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). I completed my dissertation *I Love It! Towards a Unifying Theory of Love Across Diverse Love Objects* in 1993. The "unifying theory" referred to in the title is called the *conditional integration theory of love* (Ahuvia et al., 2009) and builds directly on Belk's work in arguing that love occurs when a person both desires and achieves a high level of integration of the love object into their self. I sent a paper based on my dissertation to the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1993, and I may subsequently have set the record for the longest active review process in the Journal's history – seven revisions over a decade of active work before it was published in 2005. One reason for this particularly arduous process, was that I wanted to explore and explain *love*, whereas the reviewers were not enthusiastic about introducing love as a new construct within consumer research. Since my ideas about the psychology of love drew heavily on the work of the Arons (e.g. Aron & Aron, 1996; Reiman & Aron, 2009) who saw interpersonal love as a form of self extension, the reviewers and I agreed that my paper would be reframed and retitled *Beyond the Extended Self: Loved Objects and Consumers' Identity Narratives*. Getting published, depended on stressing the differences between my findings and those of Belk (1988), and stress them I did. I hope that the main contributions of Ahuvia (2005) – particularly the insights into how consumers deal with identity conflicts and the psychology of love – provide some lasting value to the field.

But other parts of the paper – such as my critique of the terminology "core" versus "extended" self – seem overblown in retrospect.

In rereading Belk's work on how sharing and gift giving shapes the self (Belk, Forthcoming A, 1987, 1996, 2008, 2008; Belk & Coon, 1993; Belk & Llamas, Forthcoming) I was struck with an image of conjoined (i.e. Siamese) twins, who often have one or more organs in common. When two people have strongly integrated the same object into their identity, they become something akin to semiotically conjoined twins, or what I will call *semiotic twins* for short. This shared element of their extended self a primary basis for brand communities (Belk & Llamas, Forthcoming). In my case, Belk's publications have played such an important role in my thinking that many of them are included in my extended self. Assuming that these publications are also part of Belk's extended self, this makes us semiotic twins joined at the article. Of course there is a significant asymmetry in this twinship, which despite my friendship with Russ, also has a parasocial⁴ quality to it (Fetsherin & Albert, 2011). But be that as it may, semiotic twins we remain.

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⁴ Parasocial relationships, such as a fan's relationship to a celebrity, blend aspects of interpersonal relationships with aspects of person-object relationships.

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