“Possessions and the Extended Self”: A Critical Appraisal

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Aims of Article Workshop

• To reflect on the emergence of the modern, social psychological self-concept

• To define the dominant self-concept model within the field of consumer research

• To critically discuss its scope in understanding relations between self-construction and different forms of materiality (i.e. Tian & Belk 2005; Ahuvia 2005; Belk 2013)
The Extended Self: Theoretical Roots

• Early formulations of self were based on an immutable, internally oriented ‘I’ (the self did not grow or transform over time or situation)
  – ’I think – therefore I am’ / Rene Descartes 1543)

• Later formulations have been based on William James’ (1892) Duplex Self:
  – dividing the self into two discriminated aspects of the same phenomenon (self-as-subject ‘I’ and self-as-object ‘Me’)
  – and locating this ‘duplex’ in the ‘stream of consciousness’ (you could study either the ‘knowing I’ or the various images and sensations of one’s consciousness)
Emergence of the Modern Self-Concept in Social Psychology

• However, James’ original formulation did not survive the post-war surge of phenomenological and constructionist critique:

  a) there can be no direct access to another person’s ‘stream of consciousness’ (e.g. Schutz 1962).
  b) meaning is socially constructed, including identity (Berger and Luckman 1967)

• Subsequently, focus shifts to the concept of self and the conceptualisation of its processes…

  how the ‘I’ **constructs** the ‘Me’
Possessions and the Extended Self

• Self is extended through symbolic incorporation of object meanings (Belk 1988).

• In other words, the Self-as-Subject (I) constructs self-referential object-meanings – that are then assimilated into one’s sense of identity – that is the Self-as-Object (Me).
Summary

1) Opening question - Is the Extended Self model outdated?

2) Defining the Extended Self model:
   - Divided into two parts: self-as-subject (I) and self-as-object (Me)
   - To extend self is to symbolically incorporate meanings of possessions
   - Possessions differ in importance (and hence in their ‘extendedness’)

3) Critical appraisal of Extended Self model:
   - Tian and Belk 2005?
   - Ahuvia 2005?
   - Belk 2013
Reflection note questions

1. **What is this study about (what is the studied phenomenon)?**
   - A simple way to answer this question is by merely stating the object and context of study (found commonly in the title and abstract). However, this is not what we are really asking you.
   - We want you to read the entire article first, and then answer this question on the basis of how **you** have understood the studied phenomenon to be (what is your interpretation?)

2. **Why is this studied context/phenomenon important (e.g. socially/societally/for understanding consumption)?**
   - Again, once you have read the paper once, start thinking about the importance of its arguments in terms of how it might relate to or impact some issue that is socially/societally/commercially/managerially relevant and pressing.
Reflection note questions

3. Why is this studied context/phenomenon important theoretically:

– What important ‘gap’ in existing literature does it address?
  (a research gap refers to the absence of empirically formulated theory on a given phenomenon and in a given established field…. To resolve or ‘fill’ such a gap – is to add to existing knowledge in such a way that it results in an improved, alternative, or, more critical understanding of the phenomenon at hand)

– What is the ‘research problem’, research aims or questions?
  (to answer your research problem is to fill the ‘gap’ / thus, formulate your research problem accordingly / ‘hermeneutic’ & ‘emergent’ design of research)

– Does the study foreground or background particular theoretical arguments? If so, how? (what is the theoretical focus of the research and how might the chosen research context help in bringing this focus into relief?)
Reflection note questions

4. What method does the study use and why is it suitable for this particular research?

5. What did I learn from this article substantially or consider as particularly interesting (i.e. regarding the phenomenon studied)?