

The Self and Symbolic Consumption

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores theoretical concepts regarding the relationship between the self and consumption. In consumer culture, consumption is central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. That is, we make our consumption choices not only from the products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings. Basically, we employ consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society. Nevertheless, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through symbolic consumption may also enslave us in the illusive world of consumption.

INTRODUCTION

[In the postmodern world] Our Identity is moulded as consumers.

Sarup 1996, p.120

Consumption moved from a means towards an end – living – to being an end in its own right. Living life to the full became increasingly synonymous with consumption.

Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 7

Endeavouring to create the self in contemporary society is presumably inseparable from consumption (Elliott 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Gergen 1991; White and Hellerich 1998). Indeed, contemporary society is first and foremost a consumer culture – where our social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Giddens 1991; Slater 1997). That is, our “social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets” Slater (1997, p.8). Consumption is thus central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. Basically, we employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society (Elliott 1994b, 1997; Kleine and et al 1995). Products (e.g., low-calorie corn flake, natural-based cosmetic, leather jacket or Victorian house) that we buy, activities (e.g., Oxfam's Big Fast, fly-fishing or travelling) that we do and philosophies or beliefs (e.g., astrology, religion or political ideology) that we pursue tell stories about who we are and with whom we identify. Certainly, we do not consume products, activities or beliefs only to satisfy our needs but also to carry out our self-creation project. In order to feel ‘alive’ in this saturated world (Gergen 1991), we crave for a sense of meaningfulness in our pursuit of ‘being’ (i.e., the self-creation project). And it seems that we can symbolically acquire it from our everyday consumption. Slater (1997, p. 131) asserts, “Consumption is a meaningful activity.” Indeed, all voluntary consumption seems to carry, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings. By this, I mean if we have a choice, we will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings. These meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. For example, using recycled envelopes may symbolise ‘I care for the environment’, going to classical concerts may represent ‘I am cultured’, supporting gay rights may signify ‘I am open-minded’, or even buying unbranded detergent may mean ‘I am a clever consumer.’ Much literature suggests that we are what we have, since our material possessions are viewed as major parts of our extended selves (Belk 1988a; Dittmar 1992; James 1892; Sartre 1998). Material objects embody a system of meanings, through which we express ourselves and communicate with others (Dittmar 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Gabriel and Lang 1995; McCracken 1988a). Since all consumption holds some kind of expressive meaning, we endeavour to incorporate into our self-creation project those meanings we aspire to, while struggling to resist those we find undesirable. Observably, we sometimes avoid particular consumption in order to create, maintain and advance the self (Gould *et al* 1997; Hogg and Michell 1996). Nevertheless, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through symbolic consumption may also enslave us in the illusive world of consumption.

IN PURSUIT OF MEANINGFULNESS IN THE WORLD OF GOODS

There is no self outside a system of meaning.

Gergen 1991, p.157

As the self is perceived as encountering “the looming threat of personal meaningfulness” (Giddens 1991) or the possibility of dissolving into the ‘no self’ (when fully saturated) (Gergen 1991), it struggles to resume a sense

of 'being' by actively looking for meaningfulness in life. In fact, the quest for meaningfulness does not loom exclusively in the contemporary epoch; rather such a quest seems to be a fundamental of human existence. Considered from the perspective that the self emerges momentarily from emptiness or nothingness (Watsuji in Odin 1996; Sartre 1998), in order to achieve a sense of the existential self, it is essential that we continually fill up this emptiness with the meanings which we believe can symbolically constitute a sense of who we are. We also use these symbolic meanings to bridge the "betweenness" (Watsuji in Odin 1996) between our selves and others in society. Indeed, the pursuit of meaningfulness is vital to the creation, continuation and communication of the self. Nevertheless, I maintain that the meaningfulness we pursue may not necessarily be the 'grand meaning' of being; rather we look for 'micro meanings' that can accommodate us in our everyday life.

A considerable body of literature suggests that we vigorously appropriate symbolic meanings for our self-creation project from consumer products (Dittmar 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Elliott 1994b; McCracken 1988a). Gabriel and Lang (1995, p. 17) remark, "Whether one is looking for happiness, identity, beauty, love, masculinity, youth, marital bliss or anything else, there is a commodity somewhere which guarantees to provide it." McCracken (1988a) explains that products hold an important quality that goes beyond their utilitarian attributes or commercial value, that is, they have the ability to carry and communicate cultural meanings. Symbolically, we exploit these meanings to create cultural notions of the self, to acquire and sustain lifestyles, to demonstrate social connections and to promote or accommodate changes in both the self and society (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988a). Simply put, we consume these cultural meanings to 'live' in this culturally constituted world. McCracken (1988a, p. xi) asserts this point, "Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible."

Consumption is certainly a significant source of symbolic meanings with which we implement and sustain our project of the self. In our everyday life, we employ consumption symbolism to construct and express our self-concepts as well as to identify our associations with others (Dittmar 1992; Elliott 1997; Wallendorf and Arnold 1988). However, consumption symbolism is not a constant or intrinsic element; rather it is "socially constructed and there is no essential external reference point" (Elliott 1997, p. 286). McCracken (1988, p. 71) points out that consumption symbolism is always in transit since it is "constantly flowing to and from its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers and consumers." Particularly in contemporary world, the more society is saturated with signs and images, which marketers create in their marketing campaigns to seduce consumers, the more those signs and images are detached from their referents (i.e., products), and the more malleable and manifold consumption symbolism becomes (Brown 1995; Baudrillard 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1994). Ultimately, consumption symbolism becomes negotiable and is subject to endless interpretations (Baudrillard 1998; Elliott 1997). Hence, we actively look for symbolic resources in order to help us negotiate, interpret and appropriate meaningfulness in our everyday consumption. Since product symbolism is not absolute, static and unique, we can playfully mix-and-match consumption choices in order to aestheticise our self-creation project. That is, we re-appropriate and re-contextualise consumption meanings to create lifestyles that allow us to experience comfort, excitement, emotional nourishment and ultimately pleasure (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Indeed, contemporary society is where consumption unfolds in the realm of seduction – where products become objects of desire and fantasy (Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 1992; Bourdieu 1984; Elliott 1997). The body project looms large here. Situated in the heart of the self-creation project, the body becomes a consumption site on which we work to pursue salvation (Baudrillard 1998). We consume numerous products and services to construct our body images to match our self-concepts. However, beyond its image, the body is ultimately a symbolic site for socialisation (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Central to the self-creation in contemporary society is the making of consumption choices that can facilitate the self in socialisation, more specifically to situate itself in a diversity of social contexts. Gergen (1991, p. 155) argues, "It is not the world of fashion that drives the customer into a costly parade of continuous renewal, but the postmodern customer who seeks means of 'being' in an ever-shifting multiplicity of social contexts." Basically, we make consumption choices to accommodate our protean lifestyle. "By buying goods, we magically acquire a different persona (Dittmar 1992, p. 2)." A businessman can magically be another person by wearing a leather outfit instead of his business suit and riding a Harley-Davidson instead of driving his BMW. Indeed, consumption is a symbolic ground where we choose an assortment of the self. Consumption choice is also regarded as the means through which we exercise freedom (Bauman 1988). As we try to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self (Foucault 1988a), we pursue an endless making of consumption choices (Giddens 1991). Continually, we

engage in the pursuit of consumption symbolism in order to make sense of our lives and advance our self-creation project.

To Have is to Be – Possessions and The Extended Self

Shopping in not merely the acquisition of things: it is the buying of identity.

Clammer 1992, p. 223

Sartre (1998) maintains that ‘being’ and ‘having’ are intimately intertwined. Ontologically, without ‘having’, ‘being’ cannot be realised. He asserts, “The bond of possession is an internal bond of being” (p. 588). Basically, Sartre states that we come to know who we are through what we possess. We acquire, create, sustain and present a sense of existential self by observing our possessions. The ability ‘to see’ is crucial here. Sartre (1998, p. 581) even expands this point to the extent that “to see it is already to possess it. In itself it is already apprehended by sight as a symbol of being.” Thus, by seeing a beautiful beach, we are able to obtain a sense of possessing that beach, and then accordingly incorporating it into our sense of ‘being’. This conception illuminates how we obtain a feeling of being ‘alive’ just through ‘window shopping.’ The notion of ‘to have is to be’ is also affirmed by Belk (1988) and Dittmar (1992). Exploring the formula, “I am = what I have and what I consume” (Fromm 1976, p. 36), Dittmar (1992, p. 204-206) elaborates:

material possessions have socially constituted meanings ...this symbolic dimension of material objects plays an important role for the owner’s identity. ...This suggests that material social reality in an integral, pervasive aspect of everyday social life, of constructing ourselves and others.

Belk (1988) further examines the intimate relationship between ‘having and ‘being’ by approaching possessions as the extended self. This perspective is also acknowledged by James (1892, p. 177):

a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account.

Conceivably, we incorporate whatever we perceive as ‘ours’ into our selves. Sartre (1998) explicates that things or people become a part of our extended self as long as we hold a sense that we have created, controlled or known them. Indeed, to be able to create, control or know anything, we need to invest ‘psychic energy’ such as effort, time, and attention in it; and this energy has not grown or emerged from anywhere else but the self (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). As a result, the self symbolically extends into possessions. As extension of the self, our possessions not only enable us to realise who we are but also to accommodate our self-transitions and to achieve or to dispose our sense of continuity from the past (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a). They symbolise “personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed” (Belk 1988, p. 159). Moreover, they also help us to envisage our possible selves. Certainly, our material possessions hold a capacity to keep our life narratives going. They sustain consumption symbolism that we embrace in our self-creation project. This includes symbolic meanings that we have acquired from consumption experience of intangible products. For example, photographs and souvenirs from the place we visited hold meanings of our travelling experience to that place. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) remark that without material objects, meanings are inclined to drift or eventually disappear.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that a particular object holds a particular intrinsic meaning. An object may carry a varied range of meanings since the creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional, and each individual may ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings to an object depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson *et al* 1996). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 173) further elaborate that since objects are “signs, objectified forms of psychic energy,” they become “meaningful only as part of a communicative sign process and are active ingredients of that process.” That is, the symbolic meanings of possessions emerge in the dialectical transaction processes between possessors and objects. Perceptibly, symbolism attached to an object signifies an owner’s image, and vice versa. “Once Rolex watches, real or fake, are seen worn on the wrist of any taxi driver, the meaning carried by them becomes plastic” (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 62). Although there are relative symbolic meanings embedding in all material objects, each object alone may not be able to tell a meaningful life story, rather it communicates together with other objects in order to express an integral narrative of the self (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988a; Solomon and Assael 1987). A Sony stereo playing a classical compact disk tells a different story about its owner from a Sony stereo playing a pop album does. Presumably, by acquiring a new object into or discarding an old one from our possessions, we are able to ascertain, continue or alter the narratives of our selves (Kleine *et al* 1995). By the same token, adding or abandoning one

object may lead to adding and/or abandoning more objects in an attempt to complete a new episode of the narrative self. This includes an alteration of the body. Acquiring a new haircut may lead to altering our wardrobe and vice versa.

Not To Have is to Be – Consumption Resistance

There's no way that I buy pink shoes. Maybe next life in the afternoon!

My sister, Bangkok.

Besides 'what we endeavour to have', 'what we try not to have' is also significant for our sense of being (Hogg and Michell 1996; Gould *et al* 1997). Creating a particular lifestyle for the self may involve disassociating from some other lifestyles. Therefore, our self-creation project may engage in consumption resistance – that is abandonment, avoidance or aversion of particular consumption (Hogg and Michell 1996). In order to achieve a new identity, we often need to forsake the old ones. In doing so, we commonly abandon some possessions that are associated with the old self. For instance, an actor sheds his cowboy boots to wash away his provincial image; a woman throws away a necklace given by her old boyfriend to break off her extended self to him (or his extended self to her); a teenage girl rejects her 'once favourite' Barbie backpack to symbolise her grown-up self.

Avoidance and aversion entail relative resistance to particular consumption choices. This includes several forms of negations: asceticism, altruism, boycott or deferred gratification (Gould *et al* 1997). A committed Muslim refuses to consume alcohol to maintain her/his religious self; a man avoids using his favourite after-shave in favour of his wife's favourite brand; a Greenpeace member refuses to buy genetically modified food to maintain her/his environmentally friendly stance; and a doctoral student abstains from going to a cinema during her/his write-up in order to finish the degree. Consumption resistance also involves opposing consumption choices that symbolise associations with particular social groups. This can be related to the concept of the refusal of taste (Bourdieu 1984) or the idea of 'guilt by association'. Evidently, a businessman declines a particular brand of cigarette which is widely consumed by workers, or a woman refuses to wear a pair of Doc Marten's boots which represent a lesbian's dress code. Indeed, all these forms of consumption resistance can be regarded as vital parts of our symbolic project of the self. Again, it is essential to bear in mind that, like the role of consumption in the self-creation processes, consumption resistance may also be temporal and contextual.

To Have is to Belong – Consumption and the Self-Social Identification

To be a member of a culture or 'way of life', as opposed to just 'staying alive', involves knowing the local codes of needs and things.

Slater 1997, p. 132

Being a social self, we usually aspire to bridge the "betweenness" in the dialectic of self-others relations (Watsuji 1937 in Odin 1996). We again employ symbolic consumption to obtain desirable connections with others (Kleine *et al* 1995). Like the self, possessions are also socialised objects that may signify different symbolism in different social contexts (Appadurai 1986). Richins (1994, p. 523) notes, "Possessions are part of the social communication system and are sometimes actively used to communicate aspects of the self." Certainly, acquiring personal possessions expresses not only our individual sense of identity but also our sense of belonging to a group and group identity. Similarly, common possessions such as a family's house or a public monument also define both the group identity and self-identity of its members. Indeed, possessions embody a repertoire of symbolic meanings through which we bridge the self with others in the society. Dittmar (1992, p. 11) comments:

the notion that we express our identity through our material possessions, and make inferences about the identity of others, on the basis of what they possess, means that there must be socially shared beliefs about material objects as symbolic manifestations of identity.

That is, buying a Mercedes Benz will not signify the owner's social status unless others in the relevant social groups share the owner's belief that it does. Outwardly, material possessions serve as symbolic mediators between the self and others. Here again, the shared symbolism attached to possessions is not total; rather it can be varied and fluid as it emerges in the manifold processes of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) with a variety social groups. Significantly, we need to develop artful skills in order to present the self appropriately in various social contexts (Goffman 1959).

In our present day, creating a group self is not limited to social circles that we literally contact. Apparently, we can employ consumption symbolically to obtain a sense of belonging to a variety of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) or "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1988). In this way, we consume clothes, hairstyles, shoes, cars, computers, and other products that contribute to the symbolic means of self-identification, through which we align ourselves emotionally with those sharing our lifestyles (Gabriel and Lang 1995). By owning a Harley-Davidson motorcycle or a Macintosh computer, we imagine a sense of

belonging to a Harley-Davidson or a Macintosh tribe. Through common consumption choice, lifestyle and imaginary, we symbolically create a group self.

CRITICAL VIEWPOINT TOWARDS CONSUMPTION

While consumption provides us symbolic meaning to create the self and identity, it may simultaneously enchain us to the illusive sense of self and the endless realm of consumption. Accordingly, from a critical point of view, to have is to be enslaved.

To Have is to Be Enslaved

If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?

Fromm 1976, p.76

To Fromm (1976), endeavour to acquire a sense of 'being' through 'having' inevitably comes with the threat of losing it since 'having' may not be permanent. Instead, he proposes we should realise the self by sharing, giving and sacrificing. Evidently, 'to have' ironically leads us to be enslaved – we become a slave of our own possessions (Fromm 1976). Once a man has acquired a sports car, he may spend a lot of time cleaning and grooming it. Apparently, we become imprisoned (i.e., commodified) in the world of goods (Giddens 1991). Faurschou (1987, p. 82) comments:

[Postmodernity is] ...no longer an age in which bodies produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sport cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, for Coke, and of course, bodies for fashion – total bodies – a total look. The colonization of the body as its own production/consumption machine in late capitalism is a fundamental theme of contemporary socialization.

Indeed, the belief that we can exercise our freedom through consumption choices seems to be an illusion. In fact, "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens 1991, p. 81). Additionally, Elliott (1994a) argues that immediate pleasure derived from consumption experience may enslave us in the realm of addictive consumption. Gergen (1991, p. 74-75) also has reservation about consumption freedom:

Yet this same freedom ironically leads to a form of enslavement. Each new desire places its demands and reduces one's liberties. ...Liberation becomes a swirling vertigo of demands. Daily life has become a sea of drowning demands, and there is no shore in sight. ...Yet as Buddhists have long been aware, to desire is simultaneously to become a slave of the desirable.

According to Buddhism, this form of enslavement is not only due to the desire 'to have' but ultimately the desire 'to be' – the desire to create the self. Viewing the self as emptiness in an ever-changing world, Buddhism asserts that we can at best fill the emptiness momentarily. Thus, endeavouring to create the self is to enchain oneself to the vicious circle of an illusive sense of being. "The desire, the will to be, to exist, to re-exist, to become more, and more, to grow more and more, to accumulate more and more" only leads to suffering (Rahula in Morris 1994, p. 55). To free ourselves from this vicious circle is to realise that 'to be' is an illusion. Therefore, we should not attach to 'the desire to be', let alone 'the desire to have.'

NOTES:

The statement may sound 'politically incorrect', but I believe that it illustrates a relevant example.

Although whether the body should be viewed as a part of our possessions is controversial, we cannot deny that it is the material component of the self that we can act upon to obtain a sense of 'having' and 'being'.

An informal Thai expression that signifies a strong rejection of a particular behaviour. It means we will not do it during this lifetime. Even in the next life, we will not do it first thing in the morning.

My sister said this several years ago. Nevertheless, she now owns a pair of pink shoes.

I assume that Fromm's idea may be influenced by Zen Buddhism. Fromm has written a few books on Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis; for example, Fromm, Erich and Daizets Teitaro Suzuki (1960), *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Harper.

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