

**How do consumers express their identity through the
choice of products that they buy?**

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2003.17	Catherine Phillips	How do consumers express their identity through the choice of products that they buy?

**HOW DO CONSUMERS EXPRESS THEIR
IDENTITY THROUGH THE CHOICE OF
PRODUCTS THAT THEY BUY?**

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that what we consume defines who we are. This paper begins by describing traditional theories of consumption, which propose that consumption is based upon utility. These theories are compared with the alternative idea that people consciously or unconsciously base their consumption activities upon identity construction.

The idea that possessions are important because of the role that they play as extended consumption items is then discussed with reference both to how people traditionally display their possessions and how the loss of possessions affects the self.

Belk's (1988) work on the 'extended self' is presented to highlight the important link between identity and consumption, particularly in terms of how people incorporate items into their personal identity. This leads to a discussion on multiple selves and the potential for an identity to be changed via consumption, along with the relationship between group membership and consumption.

Finally, in order to illustrate and explain the relationship between consumption and identity, the role of food in identity formation through consumption is presented in detail.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption is changing. Recent literature suggests that the economic idea of maximising utility is dated with consumers increasingly participating in symbolic shopping. It is now just as important to buy things for what they mean as what they do. Consciously or unconsciously, consumers make decisions about their purchases based upon their identity or the identity they wish to project or communicate to others.

In order to investigate these ideas further, the concept of the 'extended self' (Belk, 1988) is discussed with reference to literature on consumption, possessions and identity. Possessions are considered with reference to, and as an extension of consumption, thus continuing to reflect identity. Traditional consumption rituals are compared and contrasted with modern idolisation of possessions such as cars and the feelings of grief at the loss of a sacred possession.

The paper examines identity construction, development and transformation both as an individual expressing singular and multiple identities and as part of a group. Group identity may take many forms, including a family, a national/ethnic group, an age group (for example, teenagers) or people with similar interests, such as skydivers or motorbike enthusiasts.

Finally, an illustration of the link between consumption and identity is provided through a description of 'food identities'. Research in this area to date has been minimal, but this section considers identity construction and development in terms of food choices, changes in food preferences through life stages, the importance of food and food preparation in defining one's identity within the family and food as a reflection of national and ethnic identity.

CONSUMPTION

Consumption is the “search for, choice, acquisition, possession and disposal of goods and services” (Hogg and Michell, 1996, p629). According to Veblen, consumption can be explained by a trickle down effect in which people of a lower social status envy and emulate those of a higher social status (Dolfsma, 1999). In turn, wealthier people and those of higher status change their consumption habits in order to remain distinguished. This helps to explain the never-ending quest for more consumption items and is described as the “Fetishism of commodities” by Marx (1961, p72). As far as producers are concerned, the cycle also has the advantage of a regular demand for products both from the mass market (lower status individuals) and innovators who wish to distinguish themselves from the mass market (see Trigg, 2001).

Veblen is criticised for a number of contradictions to his theory including a ‘trickle-up’ of fashions from lower to higher status, a current trend for subtlety in consumption habits and the low impact of social class on consumption habits, compared to ‘lifestyles’ (see Trigg, 2001). However, the theory can help to explain ideas of identity construction through emulation, for example of peers and celebrities.

Identity construction is an increasingly important area in consumption theories. Explanation of how consumers make choices between products and services may help to explain the relationship between identity and consumption. Demand theory suggests that consumers should choose the product which provides maximum utility for the disposable income they have (Worthington et al., 2001, p79) where utility is the “satisfaction or pleasure derived from consuming a good” (ibid.).

An alternative to this view is that consumers choose products which closely match their current or aspired personalities. Post-modern theorists such as Sartre would suggest that possessions (and thus our consumption habits) are important to knowing who we are and provide a “sense of being” (See Belk, 1988, p146). Consumers may still choose products based upon their value but given the variety of choice in the market may, for example, choose a pink kitchen appliance because they feel it fits in with their warm personality. Levy (1959) suggests that choosing products is relatively easy because one object is likely to strike us as “symbolically more harmonious with our goals, feelings and self-definitions than another” (p120). Choice of products and

services provides us with the opportunity to express our own originality (Donovan, 2001 in Arnould, 2002, p361) and thus acts as a means of communication with others (Levy, 1959). A clear example of this is provided by Slama et al., (1999, p135) who suggest that the purchase of a watch may communicate one thing, such as need for timeliness, but the purchase of a Rolex watch demonstrates far more, potentially including status.

In societies where there is so much choice and relative wealth, it is hardly surprising that shopping and consumption have become major leisure activities. Much of the literature suggests that society and culture are very important to consumption and identity (see for example, Hogg et al., 1996). Hill et al. (1990, p317) describe the sense of self as being “embedded in the interactions and roles played within a society” and cite the homeless as people who lack the ability to consume in the traditional sense and are thus labelled and seen as failures.

Celsi et al. (1993) suggested various factors likely to affect consumption, in the context of a high-risk sport: skydiving. Although some points may be less relevant to wider consumption, on the whole, these factors are likely to affect many types of consumption. Firstly, mass media and increased literacy provide more information to consumers whilst promoting an homogenous identity to which consumers aspire. Secondly, people’s jobs do not give them a “strong sense of self”, compared to those identities they read about in the mass media (Celsi et al., 1993, p4). A high-risk sport provides them with a sense of release and is important to identity. Finally, in the high-risk sport arena, developments in technology (more reliable and lightweight) have led to greater interest in the sports. These factors, together with internal variables such as “predisposition, goal and psychological states...” (ibid.) help to determine those likely to participate in a high-risk sport. Reasons for continuing with a high-risk sport are slightly different from those for initially trying out the sports. Firstly, the consumers like to try to “develop technical skill for personal satisfaction and social status” (Celsi et al., 1993, p10), termed ‘Efficacy’. Secondly, participants like to be different from their everyday peers and may make the decision to construct a new identity around a new role such as skydiving. Finally, participants like the sense of involvement and community in which money and other forms of status are not an issue.

POSSESSIONS

Possessions are simply products which have been purchased or given and then kept. They are thus an extension of consumption in that they continue to reflect identity. However, the link between consumption and identity can help to explain the importance people attribute to their possessions. Some obvious examples include the way in which some people 'care' for their car: washing it and polishing it or the feelings of nostalgia and regret at disposing of old possessions such as clothing.

Traditionally, there has been a link between people and their possessions. Evidence for this lies in customs such as burying people with their possessions or claiming ownership by licking an object, touching it or leaving a lock of hair upon it (see Belk, 1988).

The link to identity can also be illustrated in the loss of possessions which can result in a lessening of self (Belk, 1988). This may be institutionalised such as the removal of possessions upon entering prison (together with their replacement with non-unique items to engender group identity) or the violation, anger and grief felt by those who have experienced their possessions being stolen. The utilitarian response to such feelings is that the loss of benefits provided by objects is missed, not the objects themselves (Belk, 1988). For example, a photograph is simply a cue to remember the past. However, other literature suggests that objects provide feelings of security, the ability to express oneself and to show connection or lack of connection with other members of society (Wallendorf et al, 1988).

THE EXTENDED SELF

The concept of the extended self considers the idea that “our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities.” (Belk, 1988, p139). According to Belk, the extended self includes things, people, places and body parts. The term can be used literally to mean a physical extension of oneself, for example with a weapon which allows us to do things we could not otherwise achieve. However, the term may also be used symbolically to describe the way in which we convince ourselves and others that we are a different person through our possessions. A clear example of this is the use of a uniform, for example in the classic psychology experiment of the Prison Simulation (conducted by Banks and Zimbardo, 1973, cited by Banyard and Grayson, 2000).

Using the work of Sartre (1943), Belk suggests that there are three ways in which possessions may be incorporated into the extended self. Firstly, appropriation or control of an object. This clearly includes purchasing and consumption of products but may also include gift-giving. In choosing, wrapping and presenting someone with a gift, a part of the self is also given. Ultimately, a gift of poor taste may demonstrate incompatibility in a relationship (see Belk et al., 1991) and may help to explain the time often devoted to finding the perfect gift and the worry felt upon presenting the gift.

The second way in which an object may be incorporated is by creating it oneself. This refers to both physical objects (for example, carving a chair) and thoughts (for example, writing a journal article). The use of patents and copyrights help to codify identity in this sense. The third form of incorporation is in knowing someone or something. Examples of this exist in name dropping, fighting over children in divorce or the sense of loss when someone dies.

A further means of extending oneself is suggested by Belk (1988, p150), based on the work of Marx. He suggests that “money enlarges the sense of self because it enlarges imaginable possibilities of all that we might have and do” – it gives power, for example, power to select purchases and thus to selectively extend ourselves.

The idea of a single identity, with some objects being more or less important to that identity (described in terms of concentric circles) is part of Belk's theory on the extended self. However, other authors have suggested that people are made up of many different identities with different possessions making up different parts of personalities or selves (Kleine et al., 1993).

The idea of multiple selves suggests questions regarding choice of identity. Elliott (1997) proposes that the social consequences of identity adoption are analysed by consumers and a decision is made based upon this analysis. An example might be rejection by a young person's peer group for wearing the 'wrong' brand of trainers. Kleine et al. (1993) also suggest the importance of social connections but also stress that identities that we perform well are given precedence. A more prominent identity for a person will probably have many more identity-related possessions which, if visible, may lead to judgments by others on that identity. An assessment of products may be used to make inferences about commitment to the identity and thus guide behaviour towards an individual (see Ditmar, 1992, cited by Elliott, 1997 p287). For example, someone who sees themselves as a 'gardener' may have many possessions relating to this identity, including plants and equipment and may be assessed by others on his commitment to the gardening identity based upon his possessions.

IDENTITY

The social meaning of the word identity has undergone changes over time. In former years people would probably have described themselves predominantly in terms of their occupations: teacher, mechanic, banker or grocer. Or perhaps their gender, age or marital status. Although many people probably would still define themselves in the latter terms, what they do for a living is no longer as important to individuals, particularly in a world where jobs are supposed to change every ten years or so and people have the money and time to define themselves in other terms, such as leisure pursuits. Cushman (1990, cited by Elliott, 1997, p289) believes that we are in the era of the “empty self” in which alienation and loss of community predominate. A solution to this problem is to construct a “self” through purchasing habits, particularly those found in advertisements.

Detection of customers’ identity constructions is important for retailers, enabling them to advertise to the right people at the right time, targeting their marketing. This is achieved through monitoring shopping behaviour. Incentives such as loyalty cards can be used to collect data on spending habits and try to identify potentially profitable and loyal customers. Additional information including socio-economic, demographic and geographical data such as age, gender, marital status, income bracket and postcode can also be used (Haley, 1985) to further pinpoint customers.

Group identity can be expressed in a number of ways through possessions and other aspects of the extended self, including formal or informal uniforms, tattoos, piercings and ownership, for example of motorbikes or team shirts. People may identify with others through a subculture of consumption, for example, skydiving, spectators at sporting events or common ownership such as a Harley Davidson motorbike (see Schouten et al., 1995). According to Schouten, the Harley Davidson can be seen as a religious icon (see also Belk et al, 1989), worshipped through cleaning and maintenance rituals as part of a “brotherhood” (Schouten et al., 1995, p51). The ownership of a bike can be seen as a barrier to entry to such a brotherhood. Without a bike, entry is not possible but even with a bike, further commitment is demonstrated through tattoos, customisation to the bike, pins, etc. All these symbols help to display group identity and commitment at the same time as distinguishing the group from others (Schouten et al., 1995, p55).

An alternative example of group membership is the household or family. Traditionally, the family is considered as a single unit of consumption in economics. However, as many will know, consumption decisions within a household are rarely unanimous with each member having different preferences for products and services (see for example, Valentine, 1999).

IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

Identity can also be transformed through consumption. The most drastic and symbolic example of this can be found in plastic/aesthetic surgery. Schouten (1991, p413) describes the importance of body image to self-concept in terms of perception and evaluation of size and attractiveness. Surgery can thus make people more comfortable in the roles/identities they already have or act as a vehicle for further identity change. The resulting change can provide greater confidence, feeling of control and even power.

Identity transformation need not be so dramatic. It may be a gradual process which is not even recognised until the decision to tidy the wardrobe is taken and old possessions and clothes are discarded because they did not grow with the extended self (Belk et al., 1989). Landmarks in a person's life may involve identity transformations, for example, a person may purchase a different style of clothes following a divorce (see McAlexander, 1992) or the start of a new job.

Perhaps the most obvious transition period for identity is in teenage years. Teenagers are often very interested in consumption and identity. The products they purchase often have strong symbolism as well as a social function (Abrams, 1959, cited by Dolfsman, 1999). Items often include clothes and music but also the sources of information about what is desirable and undesirable, for example, magazines, advertisements, films, peers, celebrities and music television (Englis et al., 1993). The information from these various sources is used to construct an identity based upon their interpretations of "consumption ideals prevalent in popular culture" (ibid, p21). With time and changes in culture, identity is likely to alter.

FOOD IDENTITIES

Identity may be expressed in many types of consumption. An interesting area of consumption which has received relatively little attention in this context is food. Some obvious examples of identity expression through food are vegetarians, vegans, eaters of organic produce, dieters and equally, those who do not take up any of these identity variations. Group identity may also be expressed through food, for example, as a family eating together, sharing of food and acceptance of communion.

Literature on the transformation of identity through food is particularly interesting. Kemmer et al. (1998) describe food transitions from being single to co-habitation through interviews with couples three months before and after the date of living together. They found that the effort put into shopping, preparation and eating as well as the overall importance of food often increased for a couple upon living together, with the interesting impact of improving men's diets at the same time as worsening women's! The couples described conflicting aspects of shared consumption with some mentioning the supportive nature of the relationship benefiting their diets whilst others found that mutual appreciation for nice food and drink impacted their diets differently.

Valentine (1999) suggests the importance of food in family identities, together with gendered identities relating to food within the home. Women often choose, shop, prepare and cook the food but select foods that their children or partners would like instead of their own preferences. Thus, their own food identity is neglected. A literary example of such a situation is provided by Slama et al. (1999) who review a play by Nancy Barr entitled "Mrs Cage" about a housewife whose identity is shattered when she realises that her children and husband do not value the attention she pays to their needs, thus causing her own identity to become meaningless.

Valentine goes on to present a number of different case studies on the impact of food within the home and the symbiotic relationship between identity and consumption in which identity effects choice of food but consumption practises also help to construct identity. The case of the Cushings is described in which the action of one daughter converting to vegetarianism caused great changes in the rest of the family. Initially, Mrs Cushing attempted to balance the wants of everyone, which involved cooking

two different meals every night. Eventually this became too much work and the rest of the family gradually began to cut meat out of their diets until ultimately two other members of the family also completely gave up meat. In this case, the altered identity of one member of the group led to the eventual change of others' identities.

A different case shows the impact of life-changing events on diet and consumption. Walter, a recent widower has found a new interest in cookery, an activity in which he never participated due to the traditional division of labour within the household. When his wife became ill, she taught Walter how to cook. He is now fascinated by cookery; he enjoys television programs about it and likes to cook for family and neighbours. However, he sadly does not normally cook for himself as he finds it too expensive and it is inconvenient to cook for one.

An alternative perspective on the importance of food to identity is provided by Askegaard et al. (1999) who investigated food consumption amongst Greenlanders living in Denmark. Food is often an important element in national identity, for example cheese in France (see Roberts et al., 1996), sausage in Germany or pasta in Italy. Traditional Greenlandic food is often seasonal, based on what can be hunted in different seasons. However, the food itself is not as important as the context in which it is eaten. Greenlanders have a great respect for nature and consumption within nature is deemed very important. Although imports from Denmark have helped to shape Greenlandic food at home, the impact is clearly greater for those people who have moved to Denmark. The new context means that the sense of nature is lost and ties with the community are lessened because food was based upon a gift economy and community links. The impact on immigrants is an "ongoing negotiation of identity" (Askegaard et al., 1999, p10) and conflict between cultures. This effect is thought by the authors to be worse than similar issues faced by immigrants of other nationalities because of the ties between nature, community and food found in Greenland.

This section has demonstrated the importance of food to identity, both for individuals and groups at different levels, including families and nationalities. Food as an everyday consumption item can demonstrate a lot about a person's identity – whether they choose a diet option, how they like their meat cooked, whether they choose to

omit certain foods from their diets, etc. Food is not the only way in which identity may be constructed and the identities which are formed may not correspond to identities constructed through other forms of consumption but eating is an everyday activity which is one reflection upon identity.

CONCLUSIONS

The link between consumption activities and identity has been demonstrated through an investigation of consumption theories, the importance of possessions, multiple selves and group membership.

Consumption choices help to define the identities of both individuals and groups either at a conscious or unconscious level. Equally, an identity in itself may influence consumption habits.

The main context in which identity and consumption have been discussed is that of food consumption. A number of different examples have been provided including nationalities, families and individuals to show the impact of consumption and identity.

Although the described link between consumption and identity may be controversial, it is interesting to consider why we purchase certain goods and services over others. Are they cheaper? Do they provide greater utility? Or do they reflect our personalities? Perhaps a combination of all of the above. Further research is inevitably required in this field, in particular focusing on different areas of consumption, for example, clothes, cars, food, tourism, etc. but also on the context in which consumption occurs – as an individual, family, group or nation.

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