Extending the Self in a Virtual World

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Abstract: The notion of ‘extended self’ has enjoyed a deservedly long and reputable pedigree in consumer research. Essentially, it portrays the consumers extending their sense of ‘who they are’ through ‘what they have’. The advent of Computer Mediated Environment (CME) technologies has provided the current cohort of consumers an alternate platform for extension and expression of self – by offering an array of intangible ‘Virtual Possessions’. This paper examines the characteristic intangibility and fluidity of these new consumables by calling into question the applicability of the extended self-concept, as traditionally formulated, in this seemingly disembodied consumer domain and finds that cyber-psychically digital consumers are still materially oriented.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that contemporary consumption is characterized more by an electronically conducted flow than by embedded heavy commodities. Widespread experimentation with consumption of technology has resulted in the creation of newer modes of consumption and possession. Computer Mediated Environment (CME) technologies have lately become a representative form of technological consumption. It can be argued that every moment spent in a mediated environment entails another given up in the real world; each act of consumption in a CME replaces an act of consumption in the real world; each simulated possession replaces a tangible one.

Technology is changing forms and modes of consumption; objects of possession and collection are being de-materialized. Examples of such replacements are letters by e-mail, cards by e-cards, newspaper by online versions, printed photographs by electronic format and real musical instruments by the virtual. While only some of these consumables in the CME may qualify as possessions on a par with our material possessions, all are nonetheless replacements of tangible possessions, and as such comport the potential and promise of self-extension. Given that a consumer’s sense of self is in part predicated upon relationships with material objects, we ask how the dematerialization integral to new technologies such as CME alters this self-definition process. Using Belk’s original formulation of the extended self, we seek to understand if and how self-extension by means of consumption is affected by virtual possessions in a CME.

The study makes use of a slightly modified version of multi-sited multi-modal ethnography to cater for both landscape localism and flexible modes of netnographic data collection. Seven virtual replacements of tangible possessions represent the main focus of the findings. These are e-mail, e-cards, e-books and journals, pictures/photographs, newspapers, audio/video files and musical instruments.

Findings: The transition from real to virtual is neither sudden nor total; such replacements are progressive and incremental. There is a certain degree of fluidity and interchangeability in the way people make their consumption choices at different times. This context-dependant switching may result in an individual employing both tangible as well as hyperreal modes of consumption and possession for a single product at any given moment.

We found uncertainty a key component of this transition. Our informants found it difficult to replace tangible possessions like pictures with the digital versions. Even the very technologically adept informants wanted to keep a printout as well as multiple copies of digital pictures. This uncertainty was rooted in concerns about ownership and security of digital pictures, which perhaps echo the control aspect of possessions. Social visibility was another dimension of this uncertainty; conversion of self-defining possessions to a digital state reduced the social visibility. Such intangible possessions with reduced social visibility were not as ‘self-defining’ as their tangible counterparts; this ’taking a part out of me’ effectively altered the source and sense of identity for our informants.

We also found emotional attachment as a missing attribute for many virtual versions of the tangible possessions. For example, where in case of real books the reasons of attachment were emotional (pleasure, pride, aesthetics, value), they were purely functional for e-books (cost, ease of use, updates). Very similarly, our informants found it easier to delete an e-card than to tear up a Hallmark.

Collections (Pictures, letters, music, cards): Self-extension through possessions is often manifested in collections. Consistent with the argument presented earlier that consumers tend to experiment with the consumption of technology, we found many of our informants using CME as a platform for collection, parallel to or in addition to the other platforms of collection in their lives. Many self-defining collections—such as those of personal letters and cards, newspaper clippings with personal ties, music and pictures—act as reminders and mementos of the past and containers of identity. With the advent of new media technologies cyberspace has become the ultimate history-book. In the cyberspace, ‘we are what we post’; however, for some of our informants such self-presentation in cyberspace had little self-defining or collectible value. However, digital music emerged as one exception of self-defining collection; many of our informants thought that CME, because of its seamless geographically unbounded interconnectivity, was a potent platform for music collection and consumption.

Collections—as tangible manifestations of identity, as a part of one’s physical environment—are the sources of meanings, creating a sense of past. Intangible collections—such as pictures, letters, songs and cards on hard disk, presented a sense of past that was qualitatively different from the tangible collections for our informants.

Dilemmas of Virtual Possessions: Given their special characteristics, virtual possessions may become a source of many dilemmas for the consumer. Our informants seemed extremely wary of the fact that constant changes to the technological environment may limit continued control and access to their virtual possessions. Beliefs and assumptions that such changes in technological order may necessitate forced and untimely disposition of a virtual possession gave rise to many concerns. Further, since social exhibition is a desirable quality for many self-extending possessions, any dematerialization which alters this visibility also affects its role in self-extension. Finally, because simulations can be duplicated by electronic means, they appeared to be less authentic and our informants found this difficult to accept.

Conclusion

Digital dematerialization in terms of consumption and possession has been portrayed as an indication of gradual abdication of materialistic values in contemporary societies; however, a sizeable body of literature in consumer research views self extension through possessions as almost always materially oriented and external in nature.

Objectification of a possession assumes a central role in the whole process of creation and maintenance of the construct of ‘possession’. We find that even though they might exist and interact in the disembodied domain of cyberspace, consumers are still conditioned to exist and respond to a material world where constructs like possessions, no matter how abstract, still need tangible foundations. The simulations in CME might replace some aspects of the real and tangible, but they do not completely replace them in terms of value and association.
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