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ABSTRACT

Three methods are used to explore how consumers maintain and construct a part of their identity from past experiences as American soldiers in Korea. The author uses text analysis, photographic analysis, and introspection to identify and discuss emerging themes that help our understanding of how individuals reach into their past for material to feed their present identity and how this may relate to consumer behavior. Specific examples are presented suggesting that an individuals’ past experiences influence their present day consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers construct and maintain their identities in many ways: in the clothes they wear (Solomon 1986), the cars they drive (White 2003), the possessions they acquire (Belk 1988), and the pets they own (Hirschman 1994). This paper examines another possible behavior in identity maintenance and construction and how it is linked to specific consumer behaviors. By reaching into our own past experiences to recycle events that may not have been salient then, but may be now we sometimes use the past to build who we are today. Barclay and DeCooke (1988) suggest that past experiences can reflect our past identities, reinforce our current identities, and aid in the construction of new identities. Many times we look to the experiences of our youth to communicate who we are today. This revisiting of the past is not the traditional nostalgia of ‘...a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance...’ (Davis 1979, p 18), nor is it a just a fondness for the past (Holbrook 1993) or the more postmodern nostalgia of Brown, Kazinets, and Sherry Jr. (2003) that incorporates a sense of loss and yearning for the past, although there may be elements of these types in this revisiting of the past. It appears to be more than that.

The meaning of persons, places, things, and experiences can be shared or individualistic (Belk 1987). Early research by Belk (1987) had consumers sort 96 items as to importance. Of interest to this research is that Belk found that older people (28 +) listed U.S. Armed Forces as an experience that was an important component of their self. The importance of self-concept has not been overlooked in marketing where researchers have focused on product image and it’s link to self-concept. In addition, consumer behavior researchers have focused on parsing self-concept into an ever growing list of dimensions which include actual self, real self, basic self, extant self, situational self, ideal self, social self, ideal social self, and a variety of other dimensions including the gestalt driven concept simple stated as the self. As Sirgy (1987) states: “There is an ambiguity and confusion…” in the literature as researchers examined an issue most agree is somewhat simple in its original conception. That is, the individual’s cognitive and affective reflection of themselves as an object (Rosenberg 1979).

Self-concept theory (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967) suggests that individuals will act to protect and enhance their self-concept. This paper adopts this notion using a specific past experience (i.e., U.S. Army service in Korea) and an individual’s memory of it. As we age, these place and experience memories that help define our self-concept, may fade. One question to consider is how consumers cope with a deterioration of their self-concept? Some, the focus this research, re-experience their past by a vicarious approach of discussing it with others who have been there, looking at photographs of past events, places and, people or, by pilgrimages to the sacred destinations of their past.

My own personal experiences in Korea in 1962-1963 form the impetus to examine this subject. Over the years, I have shown my collection of Korean photographs to my two sons. This was “dad’s” adventurous years. This was “dad” defending our country. “Dad” the tough guy. I tell others of my Korean experiences as a GI (Note: GI is slang for “Government Issue”). I used my MOS (i.e. military occupation specialty, aka my job), which was commonly called the “bomb squad,” to impress others of my courage. Over the years, my Korean experiences have become a part of me. I would not be who I am today were it not for those days in Anyang and Seoul, but my children grew up and others became less interested in my Korean adventures. I suspect part of my identity began to erode. While surfing the Internet last year looking for the Korean village where I was stationed, I found a site dedicated to the 83rd Ordinance Battalion in Korea, the unit I was attached to for 13 months. There were also links to personal web sites that contained hundreds of photographs of Korea in the 1960’s. It is the photographs and text of these Internet sites that are examined for identity construction and maintenance. In addition, I use introspection by reviewing my personal photograph collection that I took when stationed in Korea in 1963, then recording the “stream of consciousness” text that emerged.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to begin to examine the importance of the link of past experiences to self-concept and how it might influence consumer behavior today. I present the results of analyzing my own experiences and the behavior of other U.S soldiers who were stationed in Korea in the 1960’s by using the text and photographs from my own life and those of others found on Internet message boards and web sites.

INTROSPECTION NARRATIVE

I draw upon the introspection method (e.g., Holbrook 1987; Hirschman 1990; Gould 1991; Brown 1998) for examination of my experiential memory. In introspection, researchers examine their own experience and emotional state during a specific time period or event. Yet, the method used in this paper does not focus on past experiences or states of mind, but how they influence the author’s current behavior. This method is not without controversy. For example, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) suggest a number of concerns. Perhaps the most important is that there has been no explanation of the method. Another concern is the reconstructive nature of long-term memory. To begin to overcome these method concerns, the introspective process will be detailed in a stream-of-consciousness narrative. To moderate the effect of memory loss, I use personal photographs to stimulate my thinking of those times. As Holbrook (1987) explains, this method might be called “autoautodriving.” Autodriving leads to a more enriched narrative by encouraging the viewer to explain their behavior depicted in the photographs (Heisley and Levy 1991). Nevertheless, because the events covered in the introspection narrative occurred 40 years ago, the reader should approach my personal narrative with caution. They are the author’s reconstructed memories of the events and places of 1962-1963. Interested readers should read Brown (1998) for a strong defense for the introspective method. As Brown (1998, p25) states: “Just because introspection fails to meet the
formal criteria for scientific acceptability, does not mean that the technique is uninformative. In addition, this introspection narrative does not stand alone in this exploratory study. It is one of three methods used to triangulate emerging themes.

My “Stream of Conscious” Narrative

My 1960’s memory of Korea is that of a country recovering from war. Our army base had buildings with many bullet holes in the concrete walls. Most roads were dirt and badly rutted, telephone service was scarce, the Korean people were destitute, their country destroyed, and with the exception of the base PX (i.e., store), few American products were available, most on the black market. Yet, my memories are almost all positive. I stare at the “Gateway Bar” photograph titled “Korea, 1963” (Figure 1) and smile. Here are some of my thoughts.

“I ask myself why am I there? What was I doing? What do I remember? I try to remember posing for that photograph and it floods my mind with other memories. I look at myself, a 21 year old GI and I look at the young lady next to me. We both lean on the sign. The Johnny Walker scotch logo is between us. The same logo they use today. It is a symbol of the American way of life and how Koreans used it to attract American GI’s. I am still partial to that symbol today. Our world was made up of drinking, women, thinking about home, and being a soldier. We partied a lot in those days.”

I recently showed this picture to my sons, stating how I had continually tried to have sex with the young women and was never successful. I suspect I was reaffirming my masculinity, also suggesting that “you don’t always get what you want.” I was using this picture as a tutorial for my own children. Look at the photograph titled “Queen Beer Hall, 1962” (Figure 2) Here is some of what I see and remember.

“We are all smiling on this sunny late Sunday afternoon. We were at the Queen Beer Hall every Sunday. We drink Korean whiskey and Korean coke. Two awful tasting products that rumor had it, could make you blind if you drank out of the wrong bottle. My taste memory could easily remember that taste today. We were all comrades in a far away strange place. I see Tommy Kwan in the photo. He always wanted to come to the United States. To this day, I hope he made it. I see Jim Thompson. I last saw him in O’Hare airport after we had been discharged. He walked off into the night and I have not seen him since. I ask myself why I have these memories about an Asian civilian and a Black GI. I have “googled” both of their names but found nothing. There are women in the background. They are prostitutes and will soon start to flirt with us. I know I slept with one of them that night. We were young and that is what young people do.”

Is this a reconstructed consumption experience memory to support my decision to be a civil rights activist in the late 1960s? Or was it lost friendships that leave psychic scars on us? Some of those GIs in the picture were tough guys. They had been in the Korean war. This somehow made me a tough guy, because I socialized with them. I got drunk with them. I whored with them. I was a part of a group of guys back then, something I have never been since.

“The picture in Figure 3 is of the street near the entrance to our army base. There is a tailor shop to the left. Many GIs had their clothes tailored to fit. It was “cool” to have skin tight fatigues. A lone GI walks down the street. I think it is Jim Thompson. I know he is going off to meet with his “yobo” (i.e., honey) and spend the night in her “hooch.” return to my consciousness that have not been accessed in thirty years. Women, in those days, did what they had to do to survive, including prostitution. The Koreans are a strong resilient people. It comes as no surprise
to me that the Korea of today is as it is. I have walked this street many times in my dreams. I dream of the good times and the women I slept with. It reinforces my masculinity. I regret that my mother threw out my old army fatigues. I would wear them today. I still have my army boots and long-johns which I wear in the winter always telling my sons that they are forty-years old.”

I also have a few sacred objects from those days which I keep in a special place. I displayed them in the past, but few are interested in looking at them. So they are just for me now. My dress uniform name badge, my Explosive Ordinance Disposal patch, my collection of photographs, the two Korean drums I purchased, the Japanese swords we dug up, and the Henry Miller books I smuggled back into the states. Every now and then, I take them out, I touch them, I remember, they are a part of who I am today.

Belk (1988) suggests that possessions are a part of our constructed selves and that understanding our selves helps us understand our consumer behavior. We use our possessions for memories, but we also use them as teaching tools for children, socializa-
In summary, my introspective narrative can be analyzed by the reader as well as the author. I invite the reader to do so. The object of this narrative is not to identify exactly how I use my possessions to construct and maintain my self-concept, but that it is the process of introspection of past experiences that does this. This stream-of-consciousness writing suggests a few themes related to the maintenance and construction of my identity: my masculinity, my courage, my consumer attitudes, and my adventurous youth. It also suggests some current consumer behavior on my part. I always have a bottle of Johnny Walker scotch in my liquor cabinet. Every time I shop at our local grocery store, owned by a Korean, I thank him in Korean, which adds to my shopping satisfaction. I roll my socks and underwear. I sometimes use the army salute when I say hello to people. It is code to my fellow soldiers. I was in. I did my duty.

**PHOTOGRAPH ANALYSIS**

In this section, photographs posted on the Internet by ex-GI’s are examined. Photographic research is quite rich in other disciplines (see Heisley and Levy 1991 for a history of visual research) while in consumer behavior, researchers are just beginning to examine the possibilities (e.g., Holbrook 1987, Wallendorf and Arnold 1988, Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry, Jr. 1990, Anderson and Giovanna 1992).

Holbrook (1987) took photographs of his own jazz record collection as a method of autobiodriving himself. He used the photographs as a “vehicle for self-revelation.” Wallendorf and Arnold (1988) suggested that the objects in our lives are like benchmarks, reminding us of who we are and what we have done. These objects contribute to our self-concept. Using a structured analysis approach, Collier and Collier (1987) examined physical closeness to “favorite objects” in photographs finding that those people who had social or experiential attachments to the objects were closer than those who were attached to the object for some intrinsic reason. Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry, Jr. (1990) presented a photographic essay of a farmer’s market to document their observations. In addition, they used the photographs for a time comparison to a later date of the same event. Heisley and Levy (1991) like Holbrook (1987) used photographs for “autodriving” to develop a richer interpretation by their interviewees. They too found that photographs were a useful tool to motivate informants to explain themselves. Last, Anderson and Giovanna (1992) examined photographs in annual reports finding orientation toward camera, smiling, and head cant as indicators of sexism.

This study will neither examine the photographs for visual cues such as gender roles (e.g., Anderson and Giovanna 1992), nor will it be a tool for documentation (e.g., Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry, Jr. 1990). The method used in this study will be a content analysis (Kassarjian 1977) of the type of photographs posted using the structured analysis approach of Collier and Collier (1992). What is important for this study is that, although these are the pictures that GI’s took while in Korea, it is more important to think of them as the pictures they chose to post on the Internet. This posting behavior suggests an importance to these photographs and that they may have meaning for their past experiences.

A search of the Internet suggested that the amount of Internet web pages and posted photographs about Korean experiences was quite large. Three separate Internet sites containing photographs were chosen for analysis as exemplars. They all contained photographs from Korea taken by GIs in the 1960s.

The first web page examined is the personal web page of an American soldier stationed in Korea from 1968 to 1969 (http://www.mishalov.com/korean-japanese-photos.html). This soldier was an avid photographer and spent a significant amount of time taking photographs. His site contains 678 photographs. In addition to his period photographs, he also returned to Korea in 2003 posting 473 photographs of that trip on his web site. This event is also chronicled in the text analysis section that follows the photograph analysis. The photos are arranged chronologically and there are special sections of “then” and “now” comparative photographs. The “now” photos were taken by Koreans who also are interested in the web site.

The second web page, titled “A Tour of Duty” (http://atuourfulty.homestead.com/), contained personal stories, poems, links to other web sites, events, mystery words and photos with answers and, a large collection of photographs posted by ex-GIs. This site contained 172 photographs. The introduction to the “personal stories” and photograph pages helps us understand part of the motivation of why ex-GIs visit these pages and why they post the stories and photographs that they do.

“The Purpose of this page is quite simple. It’s a place for all of us to tell our tales of the village. Come on now, we all spent time in a village somewhere. And I’m sure we all had an experience that we can tell about. Whether at a club, walking down the street, at a Tea House or in the back streets, somewhere, something happened that would qualify as a ‘Village Experience’. So send me your tales and I’ll put them here to share with all. Don’t be bashful, we were just a bunch of crazy kids back then.”

“We all went there, for one reason or another, (mostly for one reason) and we all had our favorites. So what could be better than sharing our favorite haunt with others and seeing where we spent our leisure time (and hard earned dollars). Send me your village pictures and we’ll put them up for all to see. It doesn’t matter how many you send or what’s in them (you’d be surprised how many others roamed the same back streets as you). Club pictures, street scenes, the gals, shops, children, GI’s, signs and/or WHATEVER.”

These introductions state “it’s a place for all of us to tell our tales…” and that “…we were just a bunch of crazy kids back then.” “To tell our tales” suggests a level of importance and meaning to these past experiences. The pages speak of “sharing” and “seeing,” which suggests a need to reinforce these experiences. The use of “for us” and “we” suggest a sense of community. This web site also had reunion pages documenting the ex-GIs who met face-to-face after 30 or 40 years of civilian life. These pages had both photos and comments. Here is what one GI wrote after spending a weekend with four of his 1969 buddies from Korea.

“With every meeting, every letter and every photo we view, another small piece of a memory puzzle is added to our bank of knowledge. Things we may have forgotten or knew nothing about are brought to light and the time we spent as young soldiers in the ‘Land of The Morning Calm’ seems to have happened only yesterday. As I read letters and view photos that are sent to me, I for one, am not reading the words of an adult person living somewhere in the USA. These are the words of young soldiers, far from home, talking about things that were having a great impact on their lives. Soldiers who experienced ......... Korea, A Tour of Duty”

As this GI states, “...things that were having a great impact on their lives.” These events aid in reconstructing an individual’s...
“memory puzzle” to help maintain identity as we age. The third group of photographs analyzed, http://photos.groups.yahoo.com/group/83rdOrdBn/lst, were posted by a variety of individuals who all participate in a Yahoo bulletin board. This site contained 82 photographs. Similar patterns emerged.

To begin to understand the posting of these photographs, an inventory of the pictures was conducted. The photographs can be divided into two basic groups: indigenous Koreans civilians and American soldiers. There are many subcategories within each of these two groups. The most common for Koreans were street scenes, groups, cultural events, working, landmarks, comparison portraits of then and now, portraits, vistas, and Koreans and American’s together. The most common for American soldiers were present day reunions, comparison portraits of then and now, portraits now, groups, equipment and buildings, places where American’s gathered (e.g., local bars), and representations of American culture.

All three web sites contained many similar pictures. There are many photographs of ordinary street scenes, people waiting for busses or crossing the street. Koreans are also shown in various work situations either on farms or on the city streets. They also depict Korean culture such as folk dancing, a family eating dinner, a bedroom, and Buddhist statues and temples. In addition, there are a considerable number of self portraits of the photographers and of the young women they knew. There are store fronts with English titles appeared to be a favorite subject(e.g., New York Shoe Shop, Club Stereo). This suggests a search from some connection with where they were in Korea and the American homeland. There were also many Army scenes, which should be expected. These can be seen as a record (i.e., proof) of their presence in Korea and adds to the meaning of why they were there. There were photos of a soldier’s “hooch,” (i.e., where they slept in the village with their girlfriends), the vehicles, and doing the Army jobs. There were also many buildings, signs, and group photos. Lastly, some of the photographs reflected cultural stereotypes. These were photos of “papasans” and “mamasans,” farmers working rice paddies, walking women balancing goods on their heads, and “honey buckets” (i.e., human waste used as fertilizer).

In summary, most apparent is the “everydayness” of the photographs. These are not your typical vacation snapshots. They are the documented proof of a past experience. The content of these photos consist mainly of street and work scenes, of children playing, women walking, men working, trains moving, then and now photographs of places, buses, and farmers. Many are similar to the author’s own Korean experience photographs.

**TEXT ANALYSIS**

The third approach in this study exploring the construction and maintenance of the self was to examine a Yahoo Groups Internet site for email text about American GI’s Korean experiences (i.e., http://groups.yahoo.com/group/83rdOrdBn/). Three hundred and twenty-six text messages from 27 members were examined. All writers had spent a tour of duty in Korea in the 1960s and early 1970s. All of these messages were sent in 2003. Analysis of the messages proceeded systematically using iterative processing (Spiggle 1994). That is, to repeatedly read each of the 326 messages, identifying all themes, until nothing new emerged. Because of space restrictions, two of the many themes that emerged will be discussed in detail.

**Contrasts: Past and Present**

Many of the ex-GI’s have a continuing interest in Korea. They have interests in such areas as the economy, military, sports events, and especially the physical changes that have taken place since they were in Korea in the 1960’s. Below are comments of a GI who reflects on the current images of Korea:

“Yes, I agree, the images are mind boggling. I read that the Korean economy has made great strides, but to actually see examples of the gains that the South Korean people have made is amazing. I also find it satisfying. I always knew that the Korean people were hard working, and it is nice to see that their hard work and perseverance has paid off.”

“….thank you for the posting of the photos. They are outstanding and mind boggling. I can’t believe the transition. Who ever thought that my yobo’s hut would now be the foundation of a high rise apartment building. Keep up the great work, your efforts are appreciated.”

This GI, like many, appear astounded by the economic recovery of Korea. It is “mind boggling,” especially the physical changes. Yet, note the reaffirmation of conflicting feeling by this GI when he says, “I always knew that the Korean people were hard working…” Some of the GI’s appear to be obsessed with changes.

“This morning I received a photo taken in Korea on 17 March 2003. The picture is looking north from the dirt road that went to the MSA. Mr. Sung-Nam Kim took the picture and generously provided me with the image. The photo was taken from a location very close to the place that I was standing when I photographed during August, 1968. The difference in the two images is striking. In Mr. Kim’s photo there are many 20+ story apartment buildings now standing where rice patties are shown in my photo. I hope to have all of Mr. Ho-Shik Lee’s photos of Anyang City, and Mr. Sung Nam Kim’s photo posted by the end of this week.”

These GI’s have mixed emotions about what has happened in Korea. They are in awe of the changes while sometimes regretting that their memory places are no longer there. They appear to be obsessed with exact locations and what has changed. This may be that their ability to use these memories to construct and maintain their past experience-based self-concept has been partially damaged by the construction of an apartment building in place of their old Army base. What they lived is gone. Their direct links to masculinity, courage, and duty are all gone. All they have left are the photographs and Internet bulletin boards.

**Pilgrimages**

The desire to return to Korea also appeared to be a strong feeling among many of the GI’s. This desire appeared similar to a pilgrimage, defined as a journey to a sacred place that leads to redemption and renewal (Mahoney 2003). This desire to return is tied into exact details of where they were, what has changed, and what they did while in Korea. This GI, in Korea, excitedly speaks of his pilgrimage back to some of the “sacred” sites of his youth.

“Greetings from Anyang!
What can I say about Suck su Dong? I did not recognize anything! Of course the train traveled on the same tracks that were adjacent to the compound but it was hard to tell where the compound was. All I can say is that there are MANY high rise apartment buildings in the area, and I believe that the compound now has apartment buildings covering the site. I hope to be able to make a more detailed examination of the Suck-su
Dong area within the next few days. I brought a number of 4x6 photographic prints of photos that I took in 68-69 that show the terrain of the area, so I hope to be able to identify the location of the compound. I also plan to view the MSA area and take photos, if possible, of the present day MSA site. I understand that the MSA is now occupied by the ROK Army."

"I am delighted that I have returned to Korea. I recommend that all of you old soldiers give some thought to returning and seeing present day Korea. We all had a small part to play in the development of modern Korea, and it is satisfying to see that the 13 months we spent in Korea was not for naught. I have been taking many photographs, and I have many more to take. I plan on posting the pics on my site so you can all see what changes have taken place over the past 30-40 years. GREETINGS FROM ANYANG to all the old troopers of the 83rd Ordnance Battalion. I will do all I can to represent you and America to the best of my ability!"

Again, this GI appears very interested in the physical places of his tour of duty. He hopes "to make a more detailed examination" using his old photographs. He recommends we all go back. That we were a part of this place and that we played a role in Korea's development.

**DISCUSSION**

This exploratory paper is a first step in examining how consumers construct and maintain their self-concept by revisiting past experiences. It also seeks influences to current consumer behavior. These ex-GI's, by reliving their experiences in Korea vicariously through bulletin boards and photographs, maintain or reconstruct a part of their self-concept. These men were soldiers in the defense of their country. It gave them a sense of purpose, which over the years may have deteriorated. This sense of purpose is reinvigorated by discussing past soldiering experiences. As stated earlier, this is not nostalgia in the ordinary sense because there are no negative feelings about some "present or impending circumstance" (Davis 1979). This paper suggests it is a form of retrospective memory, related to life cycle, in the cause of identity continuity. The GIs who were a part of Korea 40 years ago have spread all over the US and are now a community on the Internet. They appear to be recycling past memory experiences as a coping strategy to maintain their current self-identity.

A number of themes emerged such as using the lessons of the past as a teaching tool in the present (e.g., the showing of these photographs to our children) and membership in a community (e.g., seeing and sharing adventures). Also masculinity, contributions to present day Korea, the focus on both individuals and physical place then and now, and the desire to return emerged. Consumer behavior influences were also present. Products, services, and behaviors that are related to the Korean experience (e.g., brand name liquors, entertainers from USO shows, Brasso metal polish, Zippo lighters) continue to appear in consumer behavior today. Although more research is needed in this area, a few marketers (e.g., Levi's, Charles Schwab) have already taken advantage of this by using specific words such as "scoshi" (i.e., a small amount) in their advertising. Tactics like this suggest these marketers are aware of the large cohort of ex-GIs who might relate the use of these types of words. Words that might be linked to specific memory experiences and identity. In addition, it is interesting to note that the websites on Korea are mostly from GIs who were stationed there in the 1960s. As Belk (1988) suggests, as we age there is a possibility that our identity is weakened (e.g., friends die, our physical skills diminish).

Thus, one method to reinforce one's identity is to recycle our past, not as nostalgia, but as identity nourishment.

There are many communities like the group in this study that appear to manifest the same identity maintenance strategy: veterans from Vietnam, WWII, and the Korean war, participants in Woodstock, those who came of age with 1950's rock and roll, college fraternity and sorority members, and family or high school reunions. Other research areas, that might be examined using photographic, text, and interview analysis methods, include the themes from the current study that were not reported in this paper such as adventurous times, discussion of time elapsed, soldiers vs. Koreans, West(rich) vs. East (poor), soldiering vs. partying, soldiers as consumers, interest in history of place, relationships and reunions. In addition, Davis (1979) suggests gender differences exist.

This paper takes a first step by exploring the important topic of how past experiences are used in the construction and maintenance of self-concept. It suggests that individuals do use the past in this manner.

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