Home Confined Consumers: Identity Continuities and Discontinuities

Hilary Downey, Queens University Belfast
Miriam Catterall, Queens University Belfast

Consumers confined to the home through disability or long term illness are unable to access the marketplace directly and consume through the socialization process. The consumption situation of home bound individuals is the concern of this study, specifically, issues of consumer (re) socialization and consumer identity post home confinement. The research focuses on possessions, with respect to meanings, role and the process of socialization in relation to identity. Findings indicate that the nostalgic consumption of possessions offers the ability to (re)construct the self-identity after confinement. Additionally, possessions afford opportunities to maintain continuity with former ableist identities after the discontinuity of enforced marketplace withdrawal. An individual case study illustrates this point.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13780/eacr/vol7/E-07

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Home Confined Consumers: Identity Continuities and Discontinuities
Hilary Downey, Queen’s University Belfast, United Kingdom
Miriam Catterall, Queen’s University Belfast, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT
Consumers confined to the home through disability or long term illness are unable to access the marketplace directly and consume through the socialization process. The consumption situation of home bound individuals is the concern of this study, specifically, issues of consumer (re)socialization and consumer identity post home confinement. The research focuses on possessions, with respect to meanings, role and the process of socialization in relation to identity. Findings indicate that the nostalgic consumption of possessions offers the ability to (re)construct the self-identity after confinement. Additionally, possessions afford opportunities to maintain continuity with former ableist identities after the discontinuity of enforced marketplace withdrawal. An individual case study illustrates this point.

INTRODUCTION
Postmodern theory acknowledges the central role of consumption of the social world in general and individual identities in particular (Baudrillard 1998). Most individuals learn the meanings of consumption through the socialisation process, via families, friends and especially through direct interactions in the commercial marketplace (Miller 2001). Consumers who have very limited or no accesses to the commercial marketplace are as such disadvantaged in their ability to utilise product cues and consume symbolically (Belk et al.1982). The consumption situation of consumers confined to the home due to disability or long term illness is the central focus of this study with particular emphasis on consumer identity (re)construction as a consequence of their withdrawal from the marketplace. The study focuses on possessions, in terms of their acquisition, maintenance and disposition as a key factor in identity (re)construction. The paper begins by locating the research in the literature on consumer identities, possessions and nostalgia. This is followed by a brief explanation of the research approach employed in the study. It is argued that identity (re)construction amongst home confined consumers is an active, complex and nuanced process whereby earlier lives as well as current situations are interconnected through possessions. The study of ‘extreme’ cases, in this instance home confined consumers reconstructing and maintaining their identities through products and consumption rituals reveals the deliberative and thoughtful nature of the identity creation process. In order to capture this complexity, the findings from the study will be illustrated by discussing a single case in some depth.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Firat and Dholakia (1998) argue that identity construction, or construction of self-hood is increasingly dependent on consumption. In order to define oneself to others, even to one’s self, requires greater and greater use of products and consumption experiences. The construction of identity or self-hood is a highly paradoxical process in contemporary culture (Breen, in Brewer et al. 1993), as such individuals find relatively greater freedom and control in the sphere of consumption. Self-identity in other words, is not something that is just given, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained. This reflexive process, the mobilising of self-identity is not confined to life’s crises but is a general feature of modern social activity in relation to psychic organisation (Giddens 1994). Bearing in mind this inherent need to create and construct, not only singular but multiple identities through the medium of consumption, it is important to incorporate the sociological phenomenon of nostalgia as part of preference in the consumption of goods and experiences (Holbrook 1993). The nostalgic experience provides reassurance of past happiness and accomplishment and has an integral role to play in the construction, maintenance and reconstruction of identities. Nostalgia, as Davis (1977), suggests is the key consideration in relation to identity continuation that Belk (1988) extends to embrace the consumption of possessions. Although possessions may evoke the past, it is only when interpreted that they have meaning, but the ultimate composition and selection of such consumption experiences remains firmly in the domain of the consumer. Possessions not only extend the identity but the competencies and capabilities associated with securing such consumption is further empowered and developed in the pursuit of the extended self. The most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour is that we are what we have; the metaphor “extended self” is used to comprise “not only that which is seen as me (the self) but also that which is seen as mine” (Belk 1988).

When a particular object provides such an intense emotion that one must possess it, there is little doubt among consumer researchers that the consumption of said possession will in some way reflect the world of the consumer (Belk 1995). The possessions we consume act as mirrors that not only reflect ourselves to ourselves and as such affirm our own identities but also to project the self in its experiential reality for confirmation and support from significant others. The relationship between possessions and the sense of self, will aid understanding of how consumer behaviour contributes to the broader existence as human beings and by extension our identity. The life-cycle of the consumer tends to suggest a shift in tendency to cite as “special” possessions those that symbolize other people. This further suggests that possessions are regarded not only as a part of self but also as instrumental to the development of self. Special possessions play an even more important role in easing life transitions and are instrumental to maintenance of the self-concept (McCracken 1987). The home-con fined consumer by inference is highly connected to these suggestions in the context of major transitional life experiences having played a significant role in their current identity situation.

Integral to who we are, is a sense of our past, possessions are a means of storing memories and experiences that represent the past and inherently take account of the relevance of nostalgia. Implications for the socio-historical grounding of the self-identity are woven into the fabric of consumption in all its facets. In direct response to this understanding it would seem understandable that possessions regarded as being particularly strong in attachment to oneself would be deemed to be more closely held to the proximal self and as such offer deep insight into identity building components integral to the maintenance and extension of self. Possessions offer a medium of interaction through which parts/metaphors of self are assembled, created and extended. Material possession attachment defines the relationship between specific person and object and by doing so reflects the extent of “me-ness” associated with that possession (Kleine et al. 1995). The extension of this thought to include the concept of identity formation through interaction and involvement with possession consumption is highlighted. The
importance of this form of interaction helps to narrate a person’s life story, past, present and future, where the socio-historic aspects are brought into play as an extremely informative and necessary guide from which to extend the self. In direct contrast to the former considerations those possessions held in rather a negative light and whose attachments are somewhat weak, represent a period in life from which a person wishes to disassociate. The implications of this removal of certain identity facets lends much to the present understanding of the self in relation to past identity construction. It is generally agreed that individuals use attachments to define and maintain their identities (Belk 1988; Schultz et al. 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Identity is reflected in one’s life narrative, or life story, capturing various roles including past, present and anticipated future selves.

People are motivated universally to establish and maintain a personal and unique identity (autonomy seeking), while at the same time they are motivated to maintain interpersonal connection that also defines the self (affiliation seeking). The underlying assumptions running through this theme advocate the use of social networks in the form of significant “others” to fulfill the links to socialization and as a consequence the attainment of maintenance and extension of identity.

Schultz et al. (1989), suggests, that possessions reflect autonomy seeking when they evidence individual accomplishments, distinctiveness, uniqueness, independence, self-control or other aspects of individual integrity. Affiliation seeking, by direct contrast is apparent when possessions reflect connections with others, one’s heritage or tradition, or reflect being in touch with or cared for by others. This is very pertinent to the home confined consumer, specifically the significant “others” who are an essential component in the realisation of self-affirmation in terms of support and by extension the future of the self-identity when the corroboration of these self constructed “others” provides the medium in which the reflexive mobilisation of an identity can be created, nurtured and sustained. Indeed the constant struggle to negotiate affiliation and autonomy seeking proponents of identity “may be our experience of the unitary, restless, creative motion of life itself” (Kegan 1982).

Another theme in the identity literature is the evolutionary character of life stories, life narratives include an individual’s current understanding of the present self (McAdams 1985). The self narrative captures the output of a person’s progression through various life stages. It is an integrated, socio-historical self-construal, weaving together stories that portray significant life episodes, reflecting self-change and self-continuity. No single facet of the narrative is more authentic than another because one’s life story is identity. A possession’s potency for self-significance arises directly via its link to a meaningful life narrative episode. Thus possessions are not literally the self but artefacts of the self. Self-identifying possessions reflect who I am as a unique individual and consequently positions identity within its socio-historical context. People use possessions, events, or places to infer the meaning of self when those entities are connected to a developmental episode in the life story. The home confined consumer is in a major developmental episode in their life story, the transition from socialization to non-socialization of interaction directly in the marketplace. People use external objects (of self) to infer meaning of self when they are especially useful for telling stories of the self.

The dialectic tension between stability and change is another motivator of development of self. Possessions create a tangible residue of the past, present and possibly anticipated future identity development. Special possessions therefore could facilitate self-continuity by connecting a person with a desirable past self (memories), a present self (me now), or a future self (who I am becoming). Individuals possess portfolios of attachments, each attachment reflecting different combinations of affiliation, autonomy seeking or past, present and future temporal orientation. Temporal orientation helps identify whether a possession reflects self-continuity or self-change (Ball and Tasaki 1992). Present-oriented possessions reflect tasks in the here and now; they reflect issues of who I am now that are currently being cultivated. Particular importance is attached to the home confined consumer, whose present possessions have added reflections in respect of a stronger motivation to cultivate and maintain their own identity in terms of invisible socialization connections.

Consumption and possession practices have perhaps been the most widely studied range of phenomena identified with Consumer Culture Theory (Belk et al. 2003; Joy and Sherry 2003). These studies have highlighted the impact of such consumption practices on consumers’ roles and identity transitions (Bonsu and Belk 2003; McAlexander et al. 1993). Kleine et al. (1995), suggest that periods of transition offer opportunities to explore and understand consumption and possession practices in relation to self-identity. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is concerned with socio-historic influences and the social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in doing everyday life (Holt 1997, 1998; Thompson et al. 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

CCT has developed to show how consumer culture is sustained, transformed and shaped by historical forces and marketplace systems. In keeping with these thoughts, this research explores the socio-historical consumption experiences afforded by nostalgia in relation to the home confined consumer. The consumption of such special possessions and the subjective experiential reality created as a result of such “interaction” will essentially be the basis for building knowledge in relation to identity construction, currently not afforded by a direct socialization process. The significance of the consumption experiences of the “particular” (the home confined consumer) in relation to the “general” is an all important consideration for the further development of CCT. This group “in extremis”, as part of consumption society need exploration and understanding in relation to their “invisible” socialization process.

**METHODOLOGY**

Given the challenges in understanding the consumer identity creation amongst consumers confined to their homes through disability or long term illness, there was a need for a methodology that was sensitive to the research agenda of discovery and the research context. As one of the purposes of this research is to understand the consumer experiences of home confined consumers within their own social contexts as opposed to that of a consumption society, the experiences should be described as they are lived and originate from the perspective of “person-in-the-world”.

The approach adopted stems from the understanding that human beings have the ability to create understandings that help them navigate life, regardless of whether or not these match an external reality. Radical constructivism emphasizes such ability. Von Glaserfeld, (1995) asserts that human perception is adaptive; it evolved to help people survive. Humans’ sense of continuity is preserved because we construct, and manage to believe in a relatively smooth narrative of events. To the radical constructivist, discontinuities in action are to be expected at every level of social living, from the individual to the communal. Furthermore, the self as a locus of experience is an active agent rather than a passive entity.

The term “intersubjective” denotes the highest most reliable form of experiential reality (Von Glaserfeld 1984). This level arises through the corroboration of other thinking and knowing subjects. The introduction of “others” might seem in flat contradiction of the
constructivist principle that all knowledge is subjective. Although the others are the individual subject’s construction, they can nevertheless provide corroboration of that subject’s experiential reality. The individual has a need to construct others and to keep these models of others as viable as possible because only viable others can lend the highest level of support to the subject’s experiential reality (Von Glaserfeld 1995).

As the “intersubjective” consumption process in relation to building knowledge of the experiential reality of the home confined consumer underpins this research, a small number of research subjects were selected for in depth study over a long period of time. To date, a year into the research, this has involved weekly ‘interview’ sessions with each research subject. For the most part, each session has focused on the consumption of possessions since these are found to be central in the exploration and understanding of the home confined consumer’s “social world” and hence the ongoing construction, maintenance and extension of identities. Some of the findings in relation to one of the research subjects, Jay, are now discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Jay is an individual whose direct marketplace interaction was instantaneously severed, as the result of an automobile accident. For a period of 24 years, interaction and consumption processes have been “invisible” to mainstream society. As a quadriplegic, Jay’s position in terms of consumption experiences and decision-making competencies, were primarily constrained due to the initial eighteen months he spent in an institutional rehabilitation environment after the accident. Although the subjective nature of consumption experiences and the experiential reality created is essentially as a consequence of self, and not position, the curtailed freedom in relation to consumption of possessions was noted. In keeping with Brownlie and Horne’s (1999) study of inmates in a penal environment, a period of approximately three years was found to be the time span that reflected “inactivity” in terms of identity construction. It was only after this period that wish lists and self-gifts were formulated. The year of Jay’s release from “institutionalized” living was spent alternating between the homes of his two sisters. After this period Jay took control of his life in terms of setting, and accomplished, with much effort, independent living.

Holak and Havlena (1992) suggest that smells provide a catalytic impetus for the re-experiencing of emotion associated with nostalgia. Favourite smells evoke a certain security and by extension maintenance of one’s self-identity, in the reliving of past experiences, conjured up through one of the main senses of “being”. The recapturing of past times, memories and experiences for Jay are evoked by his subjective interaction with and consumption of Patchouli Oil. The strong association and bonding as discussed by Holbrook and Schindler (2003) is evoked at its highest level in reference to this olfactory sensation.

For this respondent, a lifestyle embedded and born out of social interaction during the 1970s is forever captured in “Spiritual Sky” Patchouli Oil. This smell reflects the epicentre of this person’s being and essentially represents the core identity from which many extensions of self can be acknowledged. These extensions or linkages include music, friends, culture, clothing, behaviour and attitudes. When Jay was asked what it was that Patchouli Oil reminded him of he responded: “It’s like running down a field, running wild and free through a field of corn”. His facial expression, in keeping with this response, mirrored a sense of freedom and lightness. Clearly this smell brought an uplifting transitional period for the informant.

The word “running”, re-iterated, has a special significance for this informant, the reinforcing of movement and “ableism” is particularly poignant evoking a bitter-sweet memory, so in keeping with nostalgic consumption, that the strength of this feeling is heightened by its individual applicability and intensity of personalisation.

The socio-historical aspect encapsulated in past times represents the building blocks and platform for the extension and furtherance of the self-identity played out in the nostalgic arena by the merest “whiff” of Patchouli. Although this smell is associated very strongly with a specific period in time, the value to the respondent in terms of consumer memories and consumption experiences can not be underestimated in terms of value and specialization to transcend the past, present, and future phases of the identity life cycle.

The collecting or keeping of other possessions associated with this smell is a very visible part of the consumption “world” of Jay. Incense burners, joss sticks, oil burners all “consume” only one variant of Patchouli, the fragrance “Spiritual Sky”. For Jay, the smell is valued in terms of the “calming” and “soothing” qualities that it evokes. In keeping with literature, the most valued possession is the closest to the proximal self and as a consequence of this, ultimately provides the essential ingredients for the construction of identity.

Patchouli creates a certain mood or ambience in Jay’s physical space for himself and for the significant “others” who interact in this setting, (selected or unselected). As Jay’s experiential reality is being actively constructed and determined through such consumption experiences, it is understandable that his self-identity is strengthened and reaffirmed as a direct consequence of such interaction. As Maturana (1988), suggests individual identity is a result of the on-going process of autopoiesis irrespective of the context of the individual, but emphasizes the need for the “corroboration of others” in this very subjective process. The benefits received via the consumption of this special possession are extremely important in the very subjective lifestyle of the home confined consumer. In the absence of direct marketplace interaction the necessity for the presence of significant others is particularly pertinent to sustain and maintain the core identity. The “visibility” of this special possession initiates and forges new channels of interaction with self and “others” and as such keeps the evolving identity visible and strong.

Jay keeps a plentiful supply of Patchouli and the keeping of such possessions in “bulk” shows a fear of “running out” of such a positive aspect or dimension of individual identity. The constancy of smell is cumulative in its desired effect and provides a “solid” structure of support in absence of “others”. The engine of identity creation and self production is kept oiled and running with such consumption behaviour to ground the core identity.

Given that Patchouli is such an important and cherished belonging, it would seem reasonable to assume that its storage would be of interest. Jay has set aside a particular drawer for the safe-keeping of possessions of value. Other possessions kept alongside the Patchouli include Jay’s money. This has particular significance as the smell of the Patchouli permeates the paper money and the saturated or positively contaminated product essentially takes on aspects of the individual’s identity and transfers ownership or “me-ness” to this possession.

As a direct result of this form of extension, an individual ritualized behaviour has been established that pulls together the nostalgic link that enhances and cements identity construction. As consumption literature implies, only through consumption can freedom be realised (Firat and Dholka 1997). To this end, it would seem appropriate that the possessions of money and of Patchouli Oil, separately and together constitute freedom, but from very differing aspects. The freedom in terms of “ableism” is provided by the nostalgic element associated with the smell of Patchouli.
direct contrast, the freedom associated with money comes from the power it gives Jay to purchase and consume and, thus, the ability to choose identity construction routes.

When money is required to buy or pay for certain items, the paper notes are lifted and spread over Jay’s face so that the full sensory experience can be inhaled. This immediate consumption experience brings together the two main components of freedom and power that comprise the “ablest” perspective which transcends through time unchanged, despite the changes in identity that have occurred over the same time period for Jay. The ability “to do” in these two respects, represent strong components or facets of an identity that can be carried on past and present components of the self constructing identity.

The paper notes must spend a certain period of time with the Patchouli before they reach the required saturation level and are deemed ready for spending in the marketplace. The implication for extension of self is highlighted by this simple act, everyone who is considered a significant “other” is in no doubt as to the identity of this possession. Since the smell of Patchouli is a particularly strong and lingering one, there would be few doubts as to the origin of this possession should these “others” come across them whilst interacting directly in the marketplace. Indirectly Jay’s identity is filtrated out into the marketplace and interaction occurs but in an experiential reality that is subjectively created.

The continuing cycle of consumption of possessions relies on positive experiences for its regeneration and (re)creation of one’s self. The continual “feeding” of the self, provides the energy, impetus, motivation and interaction essential in making visible an identity (which for the home confined consumer), could easily become an invisibility and hence a non-identity.

Jay’s expression of ritualistic behaviour as enacted out by the example above can be seen to be dramatically scripted, acted out and performed with formality, seriousness and inner intensity. Tetreault and Kleine (1990) make the distinction between ritual and ritualistic behaviour. Solomon (1983) argues that ritualized behaviours are more likely to be associated with the maintenance and/or change in one’s self perception. The mundane repetition of this behaviour occurs in self-time, and accentuates the individual, subjective creation of Jay’s identity through a period of many transitions.

The holding on to, or preserving of this special possession, Patchouli, provides an insight into other “treasures”, stored close by. The last wallet used by Jay before his automobile accident, and whose presence represents the last link to “ableism”, keeps the money that is currently used for purchases in the marketplace. The wallet is a strong link to Jay’s history and as such the nostalgic aspect of this possession is the key to the retention of the core identity. Interaction in the physical, visible sense is shown by the physical presence of the wallet. Furthermore, the contents of the wallet have remained unchanged since the accident. Notes and photographs from the time of the accident remain in place, but the “ableism” associated with that moment in time, is somehow captured, contained and regenerated on with the evolving identity construction.

In keeping with such possessions, “ableism” is maintained not only for the informant to see, but also the significant “others”. It should be noted that nostalgic consumption also harbours a bitter-sweet element, and even the less than favourable associations brought forth by such consumption have a part to play in the construction of the self. These possessions can provide a sense of “being” and be used effectively to strengthen and progress a sense of “who I am” and “where I am going”.

These nostalgic consumption experiences provide an interaction or socialization process for the individual concerned and even though it is not in the external marketplace, it is directly, subjectively interactive and essentially more pertinent and integral to the sense of self and one’s individual identity. The same choice criteria and decision making processes afforded by direct marketplace interaction are available to Jay in respect of consumption experiences, valued, selected or discarded. It is through the consumption of these possessions that the self can be strengthened, extended and continually constructed.

CONCLUSIONS

Few consumer research projects focus on disabled consumers and even fewer focus on those who are confined to their homes, an invisible but growing group. This study has shown that identity (re)construction amongst home confined consumers is an active, complex and nuanced process whereby earlier lives as well as current situations are interconnected through possessions. The sheer efforts that home confined consumers make to maintain their ‘consumer visibility’ and their links with past lives reveals that as consumers they are far from ‘damaged, feeble, passive and dependent’ as is generally assumed (Murphy 1990; Phillips 1990). Indeed, it could be argued that these ‘invisible’ consumers work harder and more deliberatively than other consumers at making themselves ‘visible’. Thus, the study of these consumers reinforces the importance of consumption to identity creation and maintenance not only of these disadvantaged consumers but the findings can be extended to the more dominant members of consumer society.

REFERENCES


