Protecting the Portals of Home

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The need to restrict entry (to ensure security and privacy) opposes the need to permit entry (for socialization and maintenance) within the home. The resultant dialectical tension is focused on portals (openings in thresholds or boundaries) where most invited and uninvited boundary crossings occur. Data from depth interviews are interpreted in conjunction with the possession and place attachment literatures. The ways in which consumers protect front doors, hearths and beds with symbols of the supernatural, family, and neo-tribe are examined. This study demonstrates that personalization goes beyond creating and expressing identity, to demarcate and protect the territories of home.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We make many transitions between places, identities, and cultural environments every day—from home to work (Tian and Belk 2005), from one role to another (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate 2000), and from the familiar to the strange (Mehta and Belk 1991). Thresholds, the physical barriers between separate bounded states, are often crossed. Both invited and uninvited crossings of these thresholds usually occur at portals, which are points of entry within thresholds. Portals thus represent particularly dangerous places within the dangerous liminal zones of boundaries (Douglas 1966).

Home, one’s primary dwelling place—representing “inside”, privacy, family, leisure, familiarity, order/structure and sacred—is the antithesis of “outside”, public, stranger (Belk 1997); work (Tian and Belk 2005), journey (Case 1996), disorder/anti-structure (Turner 1969) and profane (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Consequently, the home is the ideal context in which to examine the processes by which consumers control access to their selves and their extended (Belk 1988) selves. Two inter-related essential qualities of a home are the provision of privacy and security (Porleous 1976; Smith 1994). This need for privacy and security exists in dialectical tension with the need to invite others into the home for social and other activities (e.g. maintenance and repair). This dialectical tension between the private and public nature of the home (Korosec-Serfaty 1984) is focused on portals. Thus, it is managed by attempting to control others’ access to the portals of the home.

Consumer researchers have devoted considerable study to possession attachment—consumers’ relationships with psychologically appropriated material objects (Kleine and Baker 2004). Key among these studies is Belk’s (1988) study of how consumers can extend themselves by experiencing their selves “through concrete sets of persons, places and things” (Tian and Belk 2005, p.297). Belk (1988) explains that consumers can incorporate a possession into self through controlling or appropriating its use, creating it, knowing it intimately, and by contaminating it. This stream of research has focused on the meaning of possessions, how they are incorporated into self, and how they subsequently serve to define and communicate self-identity, but has not explicitly examined how self-extensions are protected.

Places, spaces that have been given meaning through personal, group or cultural processes, may vary in scale, tangibility, and familiarity (Low and Altman 1992). Conceptualizing a place usually involves a defined physical (e.g. a house) and/or psychological (e.g. a haven) territory. Place attachment is the bonding between person and place that develops over time due to a series of interactions between person and place (Kleine and Baker 2004; Low and Altman 1992). When attached to a place, people often engage in territoriality. Territoriality is the attempt to influence or control actions, interactions or access (of people, things and relationships), by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific geographic area (Sack 1983). Territoriality can involve erecting and maintaining physical and/or psychological barriers or boundary markers. Thus, personalization of a space can be as much a territorial marker as a wall. Due to the biological basis of territoriality, environmental psychologists have mostly studied territorial demarcation and reactions to intrusion, leaving its potential to explain attachment and self-expression unfulfilled (Brown 1987).

Consequently, as suggested by Kleine and Baker (2004), the extant consumer research literature on possession attachment and extended self was enriched by the extant environmental psychology literature on place attachment and territoriality, to theoretically frame this research.

As part of a larger study, the author conducted eleven videotaped, unstructured depth interviews to explore the theme of protection of home. The videotaped interviews were transcribed and these 150 pages of single-spaced transcripts, along with the original videos, photographs and fieldnotes formed the data set. Open and axial coding (Spiggle 1994), in conjunction with the relevant consumer research and environmental psychology literature, was used to develop interpretations. The resultant interpretations clarify how consumers protect places, people and possessions within their homes by physically, symbolically and ritualistically protecting three important portals of the home: the front door, the hearth, and the bed.

Like the Parisians described by Rosselin (1999), all informants controlled access to their front doors with one or more marketer-derived protection devices such as locks, chains, peepholes, intercoms, and security alarms. However, some informants also resorted to more symbolic protective devices such as altars and family photographs to protect the primary entrance to their home. One home, inhabited by three members of a neo-tribe, utilized a carpet that literally (through its pattern) and symbolically (through its provenance) symbolized family/neotribe. Many women identify, and become identified with, home in general and the kitchen in particular. Consequently, the male role of defender of the family was expressed in the males’ symbolic protection of their wives’ hearths using guns, arrows, photographs of ancestors, and mementoes of a former heroic self. The bedroom door was sometimes territorially marked with signage, but even more critical was the defense of the bed, where consumers are at their most vulnerable. This portal was protected by cultural artifacts, reminders of religious blessing and even a magical Princess Bed that repelled “bad people”.

This study adds to consumer researchers’ understanding of extended self by drawing on territoriality research to explain how self extensions can be protected by drawing on the power of the group. Protective symbols can originate from groups large and small—from organized religion, cultural myths, ancestors, extended family or its post-modern proxy, the neo-tribe. The processes of personalization and accompanying processes of upkeep and maintenance of the home serve to inextricably link the identities of transformer and transformed. The analogy of home décor as clothing for the body of the family (Belk 1988), is extended. Clothing, while serving to convey identity, also can protect the body. Likewise, consumers’ attempts to personalize the portals of their home function to mark and protect their territories, protecting those who dwell within. Finally, this study also demonstrates the value that the literature on place attachment can add to our understanding of possession attachment.

References


