The Morphing Self: Changing Self-Concept As a Response to Threats

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This research examines how consumers use possessions to “morph” their self from one identity to a new, redefined identity when faced with a threat. Using multiple threat manipulations to achieve a threat to the self, results demonstrated that when the threat is salient, consumers distance themselves from possessions that were once a central part of their self-concept and incorporate possessions that were originally extraneous to the self into the self to create a new identity. Further, results demonstrate that self-esteem and materialism moderate the effects. Low self-esteem individuals and participants high in materialism were most likely to “morph” their self.

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Reminders of mortality regularly appear in the media where consumers are exposed to death counts from events such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina. Research on Terror Management Theory (TMT; e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986) that focuses on how people respond to death related information has shown that such information significantly influences individuals’ actions, thoughts and emotions. In consumer research it has been shown that when mortality salience (MS) is high individuals tend to over-consume, engage in conspicuous consumption, risky behavior, and spend more money (e.g., Arndt et al. 2004; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005). Additionally, threats to the self can elicit reactions that resemble MS effects (Burris and Rempel 2004). While research provides insight into the impact of MS threats on product acquisition and consumption, it has not considered the implications of threats on the retention of possessions which consumers consider part of their extended self. Thus, in the present research we explore the possibility that in the face of symbolic threats, consumers will reconstruct their self-identity (i.e., morph the self into a recreated self) through the use of their possessions. We also test whether the tendency to morph the self when threatened is moderated by two individual differences: self-esteem and materialism.

The self is not permanently defined but rather evolves over time. Changes of the self occur naturally, but also arise during stressful life events such as death or divorce. This process of identity reconstruction is described by the concept of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960) consisting of three stages: separation (disentanglement from a social role), transition (adaptation and change to fit a new role), and incorporation (integrating the self with the new role). One way individuals shape their new identities is by the products they consume (e.g., Pavia and Mason 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000). Indeed, possessions are important for expressing a person’s self because they represent memories and feelings that link people with their historical identity (Belk 1988). For example, following a divorce a woman might dispose of a once sacred Mickey Mouse watch that was related to a fun/independent self-identity in exchange for a new Rolex that conveys a new identity as a strong, independent woman. In the present research we predict that when people are exposed to a threat they will attempt to redefine the self through the possessions they consider a part of their immediate identity. They will do this by both distancing the self from possessions once considered a central part of their identity and drawing possessions once considered to be an extraneous component of the self closer.

Following TMT we expect that this effect is moderated by self-esteem and materialism. First, according to TMT, high self-esteem individuals are able to protect their self-evaluations, as their self-esteem can serve as a buffer against self-threatening information (Harmon-Jones et. al. 1997). We expect that low self-esteem individuals will have a stronger tendency to morph the self in the presence of a MS threat compared to consumers with high self-esteem. Second, TMT predicts that MS should lead to increased efforts to live up to the standards of value from which self-esteem is derived. High material values are defined as the use of possessions to judge the success of others and oneself, the centrality of possessions in a person’s life, and the belief that possessions and their acquisition lead to happiness and life satisfaction (Richins and Dawson 1992). Given this we expect that people high in materialism should be more likely to redefine their self-concept by shifting possessions when MS is high, whereas tendencies to redefine the self through possessions are not expected to differ for those low in materialism regardless of whether a threat is present or not.

The first study was conducted to explore the notion of the morphing self. The study was administered in two parts. During the first session participants either completed the threat or control topic manipulations following previous research (e.g., Goldenberg et al. 2005). The threat was a MS threat, a gender identity threat, or a social comparison threat. After completing a distracter task they were given a piece of paper on which nested circles were printed, the innermost circle labeled “SELF” and subsequent rings labeled “A” to “H”, described as elements in a participant’s life ranging from “very closely related to your self” to “not at all related to your self”. Participants were asked to place as many possessions as they could think of into the drawing, taking into account how closely related to their self they considered the possession. The dependent variable was the distances between the center of the circle and the cross that marked the possession. The dependent variable was the distances between the center of the circle and the cross that marked the primary variable.
placement of each of the possessions. One week later, participants completed the manipulation they were not assigned to during the first session, distractor task and dependent measure (i.e., circle task).

Results revealed that participants facing a threat placed possessions they considered closely related to their selves further away from the self as compared to the control condition. In contrast, possessions that under the control condition were placed far away from the self were placed significantly closer to their self in the threat condition. This effect generalized across all three types of threat.

In the second study we explored the moderating role of self-esteem and material values. This study followed the same procedure with two exceptions: only one threat was used and participants completed both a self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) and material values (Richins and Dawson 1992) scale. The effect of the morphing self was qualified by both individual difference measures. Participants who were both low in self-esteem and high in materialism placed possessions to redefine their self-concept when MS was high (as compared to absent) to a greater extent than participants high in self-esteem and low in materialism.

In general, the results indicate that the presence of a threat can pose a significant challenge to consumers’ self. One way consumers respond to a threat is to redefine the current self through product acquisition and disposition decisions.

References
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A Bibliographic Survey of Experiential Consumption Research
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Two and a half decades have passed since Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) detailed the nature of experiential consumption. The experiential perspective emphasizes the study of consumption phenomena, and consumers’ hedonic responses during consumption and usage experiences. This view suggests that subjective experience, product meaning, and consumer emotions are intrinsic to consumption. In particular, the experiential perspective is concerned with consumption episodes that consumers engage in for fun, enjoyment, and leisure. It is particularly well suited for studying the consumption of experiential products such as movies, concerts, and sporting events. More importantly, more businesses these days are trying to make conventional product use more like entertainment experiences rather than merely meeting functional requirements. Understanding how to create and shape consumer experiences is essential in today’s marketplace, regardless of product category. There is a great urgency to better understand experiential consumption in marketing practice. But after 25 years, what do we know about experiential consumption?

The current research reports the results of a bibliographic analysis of the two seminal articles on hedonic or experiential consumption produced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). The analysis enhances our current understanding of hedonic consumption by providing a taxonomy classifying research that has emanated from these two articles. Citation and abstract information was extracted from three major databases and organized thematically using a word-based statistical analysis and visualization software. Based on 599 total articles that cited one or both of the articles, our initial analysis yielded 24 content groups. Titles and abstracts for each of the computer-generated groups were examined and subsequently classified into one of ten thematic areas.

Each of the ten thematic areas was then further divided based on whether the article was premised on a hedonic or experiential theme, or whether the article merely referenced the seminal article(s) but was actually focused on a broader marketing or consumer behavior issue. The former group was referred to as core themes and the latter as supportive themes. Six of the ten thematic areas were classified as core