“My Possessions Are Mine and Your Possessions Are Mine Too.” Using Hong Kong Chinese Consumers’ Narratives to Illuminate the Boundaries Between Extended Possessions and the Extended Self

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This paper investigates the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions (including potentially extended possessions) for Hong Kong Chinese consumers. Eastern research has suggested a different set of boundaries and cultural interpretations of the concept of self and possessions compared with Western findings. Our findings showed that informants narrated stories not only about the gifts that they themselves had received as being their important possessions and thus constituting part of their extended self; but they also described objects that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions and thus these extended possessions potentially constituted part of their own extended selves.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988) have received extensive attention in consumer research. Belk (1984) has suggested that there are different cultural interpretations of the concepts of self and possessions. Western studies have focused on objects that demonstrate consumers’ interpersonal ties (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988, Csiszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, Dittmar, 1989, Richins, 1994, Schultz et al., 1989). Eastern research, in contrast, has suggested a different set of boundaries between the self and possessions compared with Western findings i.e.: “a little of you in me and a little of me in you” (Yang 1994: 297).

In this paper, we aim to address this research gap in our understanding of what constitutes both the extended self and potentially extended possessions in Hong Kong Chinese culture; and investigate the nature of the boundaries between the extended self and possessions for Hong Kong Chinese consumers.

Chinese consumers tend to place more emphasis on the interdependent view of the self-constructual that focuses on togetherness and embeddedness with significant others or in-groups (Triandis, 1989, Markus and Kitayama, 1991). The Chinese sense of self is defined mainly by webs of relationships (Morris, 1994) and is constructed by the connectedness to and interpersonal relationships with significant others, family and friends (Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997) so that an individual with the interdependent self-construal becomes “a single thread in a richly textured fabric of relationships” (Kondo 1990: 33).

Possessions are artefacts of the self (Kleine et al., 1995). “Self-artefacts help narrate stories of the self and reflect self-development tasks similar to those underlying life narratives” (Kleine et al, 1995, p. 341). People reveal different aspects of their selves by retelling stories of their possessions. According to Schultz et al (1989) and Kleine et al (1995), possessions involve many aspects of people’s self-development tasks, e.g. affiliation, autonomy and temporal orientations. Affiliation possessions are related to the interdependent self where people establish interpersonal connections with others in their culture through shared meanings. Autonomy possessions are often associated with the independent self, where people seek to establish autonomy from others and also to maintain a personal and unique identity. In addition, gift-receipts are often regarded as people important possessions “as a positive extension of self” (Belk 1988: 150). Gift-giving plays a substantial part in Chinese culture in terms of maintaining, harmonizing and enhancing interpersonal relationships in social systems (Wong & Ahuvia 1998, Belk and Coon 1993). As Yang (1994) noted the importance of gift-giving in Chinese society as “primacy and binding power of personal relationships and their importance in meeting the needs and desires of everyday life” (p. 6).

In the present study, informants were asked to share stories about their meaningful and important possessions. Their selves and identities are embedded in their stories as Georgakopoulou (2002) says that “if selves and identities are constituted in discourse, they are necessarily constructed in stories” (p. 428). The snowball technique was used in identifying twenty informants (ten males, ten females). Data analysis yielded a number of themes that revealed how informants interpreted what constituted their important, often extended, possessions and their extended selves.

Our findings showed that informants narrated stories not only about the gifts that they themselves had received as being their important possessions and thus constituting part of their extended self; but they also described objects that they had given as gifts to close others as part of their own possessions and these extended possessions thus constituted part of their own extended selves. Possessions create different layers of symbolic ties to other people. We examine informants’ stories about their personal relationships with close others in relation to two dimensions: firstly “Gift-receipts as part of the informant’s important possessions”; and secondly “Gifts to close others still regarded as part of the informant’s important possessions”.

The objective of this research was to explore the boundaries between the extended self and extended possessions i.e. what constituted ownership of what might be called extended possessions among Chinese consumers. Against the backdrop of Chinese interdependent culture, Hong Kong informants narrated stories about their important possessions ranging from objects that they owned to objects that actually belonged to close others, not to the informants themselves. Our research findings reveal that a broader interpretation of possessions and the extended self (as seen from these Hong Kong stories) could contribute to and enhance the existing literature on possessions and the extended self.

REFERENCE


