The Pursuit of Identity Augmentation: Self-Expansion and Self-Extension As Distinct Strategies

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In this research, we argue that two theoretical constructions of augmenting identity, self-extension (Belk 1988) and self-expansion (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Aron et al 1991), are cited similarly by two different literatures (Belk in consumer research, Aron in psychology), but actually represent two distinct strategies for growing identity beyond the corporeal self. We find that consumers extend their identities by making active attempts to share their consumption relationships with close others (Belk framework), and can also expand identity by enveloping a close other’s consumption relationships and making them their own (Aron framework). Finally, we offer the term identity augmentation as a term to encompass the two different strategies.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
As consumers are active identity seekers and makers (Arnould and Thompson 2004), they sometimes engage in attempts to grow identity beyond the corporeal self (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Aron et al 1991; Belk 1988). Scholars in both consumer research (Belk 1988) and in social psychology (Aron et al 1991; Aron et al 1991) have produced impactful frameworks for how individuals engage in identity augmenting behavior. Belk’s (1988) framework, originally appearing in the Journal of Consumer Research, was written in the context of possessions, and a large percentage of its many citations are within the realm of business or consumer research. Aron’s framework (1991, 1992), originally appearing in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, was written in the context of close relationships with other people. Similarly, a very large percentage of the citations for this research are in psychology journals. While these two parallel theories have similarities, there are important differences between them as well.

In Belk’s (1988) paper on possessions and the extended self, he asserts that individuals cathect objects with meaning and extend their identities from themselves into objects. Two papers by Aron and his colleagues (1991, 1992) offer a theoretical framework for how individuals envelope aspects of a close other’s identity into their own identities and a scale to measure inclusion of other in the self. However, consumer researchers have tended to neglect the Aron framework and psychologists have tended to neglect the Belk framework. This is not entirely surprising, given the focus of the Belk framework on possessions and the Aron framework on relationships. In this research, we argue that neither framework is superior to the other. Rather, we believe that the Belk framework is also useful in the context of human relationships, and the Aron framework is similarly useful in the context of consumer behavior. We parse out the differences between these two theories and suggest that they actually represent two distinct strategies for growing identity beyond the corporeal self, and we offer the term identity augmentation to encompass the two different strategies.

We conducted depth interviews with 36 informants and find them using distinct strategies of self-extension (Belk) and envelopment/self-expansion (Aron) in pursuing their identity projects. Because we were interested in how individuals either seek to extend their relationships with objects of consumption to others or envelope aspects of a close other’s consumption relationships into their own identities, we conducted nineteen of our interviews with individuals from nine different families. In these cases, we separately interviewed both parents and children in order to gain emic perspectives of both relationship partners when identity augmentation attempts are made.

We find that individuals indeed engage in attempts to both extend their consumption relationships to close others as well as envelope/expand aspects of consumption relationships from close others. Identity extension (active attempts to instill a consumption behavior in another) was commonly observed among parents when interacting with their children. Behavior ranged from subtle attempts to influence the child’s consumption to unapologetic, overt consumption mandates. In contrast, identity expansion (enveloping aspects of another’s consumption) was commonly observed among children (minor or adult) toward their parents.

When conducting our interviews, we found several instances where the identity extender’s attempt to augment was met either enthusiastically or without resistance from the potential identity expander/enveloper. In this case, both parties were satisfied, as both were able to augment identity simultaneously, and shared consumption was at best extremely satisfying for both parties or at worst uneventful. We also observed instances in which the extender’s attempt to augment identity through consumption was rejected. If the object of consumption was not important to the extender’s identity, the augmentation attempt was typically abandoned. However, in cases where the object of consumption was indeed very important to the extender’s identity, he or she was forced to negotiate with the relationship partner about which aspects of the consumption the other was willing to absorb.

We also found instances in which heavily involved partners in an identity augmentation project left others out. In this case, (1) extension was not attempted and (2) some individuals were not successfully able to self-expand/envelope aspects of identity from close others. In these cases, those left behind often felt resentful or abandoned, while those engrossed in the identity augmentation project tended not notice the feelings of the person left behind, and chalcked their lack of involvement in the identity augmentation project as disinterest in it.

In summary, we find evidence that consumers engage in distinct strategies of augmenting identity. We find that neither Belk’s nor Aron’s framework is superior to the other in describing identity augmenting behavior, but rather describe two unique strategies of doing so. Further research could possibly reveal other distinct augmentation strategies. Finally, we observe that while successful attempts to augment identity generally yield positive results for all involved, failed attempts can lead to potential damage to close relationships.

REFERENCES