Instrumentality and Emotional Attachment: a Study of Nomadic Consumers' Relationships With Their Possessions

Piyush Sinha, Professor, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India
Rajesh Nanarpuzha, Doctoral student, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India
Rohit Varman, Professor, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, India

Through a naturalistic inquiry, we attempt to bridge a disconnect between two streams of literature related to consumers’ relationships with their possessions. We find evidence that nomadic consumers employ a much richer classification of possessions than has been previously noted. This classification spans from deep emotional attachment to instrumentality.

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Rajesh Nanarpuzha, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, India
Piyush Sinha, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, India
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The importance of material possessions in shaping individual identity projects and meanings of self has been described as “a consumer research staple for over 25 years” (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012, 510). Material possessions have been considered as objects capable of extending the self (Belk 1988). A rich body of consumer behavior literature exists in which possessions serve as a mechanism to bolster one’s self-view (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009) and as a vehicle for identity creation (Thomsen and Sørensen 2006). This literature highlights the importance of possessions in people’s lives and the deep meaning that individuals derive from them. This is also reflected in an associated stream of literature dealing with the importance of possessions in the process of migration (Joy and Dholakia 1991; Mehta and Belk 1991).

However, in contrast to migration which principally involves a single long-term movement, Bardhi et al. (2012) have cited the lack of research in consumer behavior specific to consumption activities shaped by nomadic movement. Salzman (2002) has characterized nomadism as referring to “moving from place to place” (245). Bardhi et al. (2012) have offered a different perspective for consumers they characterize as elite nomads in terms of their attachment to material possessions. For consumers with high paying jobs and “frequent short-term international mobility” (510), Bardhi et al. (2012) find that such consumers form temporary associations with possessions that are situational in nature. Utility and immateriality are the driving forces in these associations. The viewpoint on offer is that nomadic consumers are reluctant to form attachments to their material possessions.

In this paper, we investigate this apparent gap. Using a naturalistic mode of inquiry, we look at two associated research questions in this regard.

1. How do nomadic consumers classify material possessions?
2. How do nomadic consumers form relationships with material possessions?

We selected the sample of participants for the study from the community of married doctoral students at a business management institute in Ahmedabad, India. To ensure variation across the different categories that emerged during the study, the participants were approached personally by the first author. Based on the tenet of interpretive sufficiency, a total of 18 couples were finally chosen and interviewed for the study.

The primary data collection devices were depth interviews of the participants, observation and still photographs taken of the participants’ possessions. 281 single spaced pages of transcribed interviews were generated from the data collection process. Approximately 350 verbatim extracts were chosen from interview transcripts and coded into emerging categories. In line with the idea of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the collection of data and its analysis was done as a simultaneous activity.

Based on the evidence from the study, we conceptualize nomadism as a state of mind. The expectation of future movement is a significant factor in defining nomadic behavior of consumers. We find that contemporary nomads have a complex relationship with their material possessions. In contrast to the findings of Bardhi et al. (2012), we find a stable classification of material possessions in nomadic consumers’ minds. The classification combines elements of deep emotional attachment and instrumentality. The relationship that a nomadic consumer has with a particular possession is dictated by its classification.

We find that consumers tend to classify material possessions into 4 different categories, namely (1) cardinal, (2) expendable, (3) boxed valuables, and (4) boxed buffer. In our conceptualization, possessions considered to be cardinal and expendable have been grouped under a broader category of ‘possessions in custody’. This represents the possessions that consumers live with. They are located in the participants’ current homes and represent the possessions that participants’ interact with on a continuous basis. Boxed valuables and boxed buffer have been included in the broader category of ‘stashed possessions’. These are located outside the participants’ immediate homes and participants enjoy limited accessibility to them. However, their importance in the participants’ psyche is high. Further, we find that there is an element of porosity between the two broader categories. Favorite possessions span across cardinal possessions and boxed valuables.

In summary, through this study, we offer the following theoretical contributions — (1) A deeper theoretical understanding of consumers’ relationships with their material possessions in the context of nomadism, a hitherto under-researched area of consumer behavior literature (2) A linking study that brings together two disparate streams of literature – consumer relationships with material possessions as deeply emotional and nomadic consumer relationships with material possessions as purely situational and detached (3) Inclusion of the nomadic state of mind and expectation of future movement as important theoretical themes in understanding nomadic behavior of consumers better.

REFERENCES