Alternative Conceptualizations of the Extended Self

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Belk’s formulation of the extended self is an influential model of the way we incorporate persons, places, and things into identity. This paper compares extended self to four established alternatives: expanded self, extended mind, multiple selves, and actor network theory. They are found to provide unique emphases, assumptions, and applications.

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ABSTRACT
Belk’s (1988) formulation of the extended self is an influential conceptualization of the relation between people and possessions. It has recently been updated (Belk 2013) to include digitally mediated ways of constructing, co-constructing, and expressing self. The updated conceptualization adds brand attachments and virtual possessions to the original specification of possession and person attachments as the foundation for self-extension. But this view of the relationship between the self and the material world is not the only possible view. In this paper I outline alternative formulations that have been proposed for conceptualizing the uses and effects of real and virtual objects in establishing and communicating a sense of self. To keep the task manageable I focus on four alternative conceptualizations and compare them to each other and to the formulation of the extended self by Belk:

1. The Expanded Self (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson 1991; Connell and Schau 2013)
2. The Extended Mind (e.g., Clark 2003, 2011; Clark and Chalmers 1998)
3. Multiple Narrative or Dialogic Selves (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010)
4. Actor Network Theory (e.g., Callon 1986; Latour 1987, 2005).

These perspectives do not exhaust the alternative possibilities, but are arguably the most fruitful to consider with a focus on implications for consumer behavior. By examining these alternatives we can see what may be added or lost in adopting one of these different perspectives.

In order to save space I will assume familiarity with Belk (1988, 2013), but will bring in elements of this formulation as points of comparison for the other four models. By framing the four comparisons as alternatives I mean to recognize their differences from the extended self formulation, but I do not mean to imply that they are all wholly incompatible with the extended self formulation or each other. As will be seen, none of the five perspectives are simply restatements of each other and each has different implications for researching and understanding our relationship with things.

1. The Expanded Self
The formulation by Aron and Aron (1986) was initially proposed as a model of “including other in the self.” That is, Aron and Aron proposed that close others such as our mother and close friends are viewed as a part of self. The inclusion of others as part of self is an element that was included in Belk’s (1988) formulation as well and both perspectives were developed empirically by having people rate whether certain people were “me” or “not me.” However, Belk’s extended self also includes material and non-material objects and places as potential parts of self, while Aron, et al. do not. Nevertheless, as Connell and Schau (2013) observe, some consumer researchers have used the Aron and Aron (1986) framework to also include love not only for people, but also for consumer objects incorporated as a part of self (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Fournier and Mick 1999). They also note that most consumer researchers cite Aron, et al. (1991) as only involving incorporating other people as a part of self. And they also note that when psychologists cite Belk’s extended self, they only refer to the inclusion of objects in self rather than people, thus differentiating the two approaches based on whether the discussion involves objects or people.

In developing and testing their IOS (Incorporating Other in Self) scale, Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) had students identify their closest other. The researchers then represented self and this close other through a Venn diagram composed of two overlapping circles. The subjects were asked to respond to a series of scales pertaining to the diagrammatic representation, including “the degree to which I have expanded myself through being in the relationship with the other person” (p. 608). Reimann and Aron (2009) have recently used the self-expansion model in the realm of consumption by focusing on incorporation of brands within the self, and have developed another scale, Inclusion of the Brand in the Self (IBS). Besides its scale approach, this expansion of the self-expansion model differs from that of the extended self (Belk 1988) by only including abstract brands rather than the singularized possessions that they may become after they leave the marketplace and enter the consumer’s life (see Appadurai 1986). In fact Reimann and Aron (2009) posit that the longer the consumer-brand relationship lasts the weaker it becomes (but also that the brand is more likely to be seen as a part of self), whereas Belk (1989) contends that for possessions to which we have become attached (e.g., a home, a pet, a wedding ring), the longer the attachment to this specific object, the stronger it becomes.

At a more basic conceptual level, Connell and Schau (2013) aptly note that while the extended self invokes a metaphor of outward extension, the expanded self invokes a metaphor of inward inclusion. Ahuvia, Batra, and Bagozzi (2009) characterize the expanded self as incorporative. As Belk (1988) recognized, the extended self is a masculine metaphor. The expanded self is characterized as a feminine metaphor by Connell and Schau (2013). Ultimately they call for a fusion of the two perspectives.

2. The Extended Mind
As Andy Clark (1997) put it in one of his earlier books on the subject, “Mind is a leaky organ, forever escaping its ‘natural’ confines and mingling shamelessly with body and with world” (53). He means this quite literally. Not only is the mind seen as embodied, it is seen as extended into the world around us—a phenomenon he calls embedded cognition. Imagine solving a math problem “in your head.” This is the way we usually think about the brain and cognition. Now imagine solving it with the aid of counting on your fingers—an embodied example that is easily encompassed within traditional models of the mind, just as using paper and pencil would be. Now imagine solving the problem with the aid of a computer. If it seems problematic to regard this external prosthesis as a part of the mind, imagine that the computer chip that performed the calculation was embedded in your head, effectively making you a cyborg. But we are already cyborgs Clark (2003) maintains. If we read with the aid of glasses or contacts, rely on our smart phone to “remember” telephone numbers and addresses, or use Google to ascertain or verify information, are we not extending our mind with the aid of mechanical and electronic prostheses? If we remember a travel route with the aid of landmarks and road signs these too might be considered to be part of the extended mind. And if we rely on a GPS or augmented reality projected onto our glasses, the same mind extension should apply.

This version of mental extension is quite different from the extended self and the expanded self. We need not be emotionally...
attached to our paper and pencil or to the road signs in order to have them be a part of the extended mind as Clark conceives of it. In his model artificial intelligence is just the latest development in a process of mind extension that began when we first learned to throw a stone or to reach the bananas with the aid of a stick. Still, it is a rather structural and cognitive model of behavior. It champions reason and instrumentality. The mind is seen as embodied and embedded in its environment, but it is rational rather than being sentimental in the way that the extended self and expanded self are. It also does not much consider other people as a part of our proximal environment. Other people are seen as components of the system in the same way that the musician uses an instrument or a car relies on its component parts. The human is seen as an adaptive responder relying on the “scaffolding” of our external physical environment to guide behavior. Even culture, language, and institutions are referred to as scaffolding for the brain and as part of the external environment that acts upon the brain. Clark (1997) describes language as “the ultimate artifact … Not only does it confer on us added powers of communication; it also enables us to reshape a variety of difficult but important tasks into formats better suited to the basic computational capacities of the human brain” (193). Call it cognitive imperialism with a dose of behavioralism.

3. Multiple and Narrative or Dialogic Selves

A quite different conception of how the self relates to objects is found among consumer researchers who maintain that the self of an individual should be conceived of as involving multiple or plural selves (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010). In this view of the extended or expanded self, we harbor different selves which may feel different attractions, repulsions, attachments, and alienations with regard to a particular objects. For example, Ahuvia (2005) describes Pam whose business woman self purchased a practical dining room table and her bohemian self who loves Bugs Bunny cartoons. Tian and Belk (2005) found that the possessions in professionals’ offices often reflected a tug-of-war between their home self and work selves. And Bahl and Milne (2010) find that Brad’s closed self likes donuts as a comfort food while his critical self sees donuts as making him fat and unattractive to girls and his athletic self resists donuts as slowing his soccer performance.

In such conceptualizations, the self is comprised of either simultaneously orsequentially different personas that are differentially attracted to certain objects. Still, as Ahuvia (2005) sees it, there is a drive toward unity through a constructing a coherent self narrative. He finds that the conflicting selves are resolved through one of three processes: choosing one self over the others and demarcating this self through choice of loved objects; compromising selves by finding middle ground objects that are compatible with conflicting identities; or synthesizing selves by finding objects that allow each identity to be recognized and reconciled. Bahl and Milne (2010) find that different strategies are used in a dialogue between different selves in order to arrive at a meta-self. These strategies involve managing the conflict through negotiation or coalition, avoiding the conflict, for example by compartmentalizing and accepting that different selves will prevail on different occasions, or privileging a dominating self that suppresses the other selves.

If we were to diagram the conceptualization of self and consumer objects within this alternative perspective that sees the self as multiple, we might well find something like the multi-dimensional scaling representations that Bahl and Milne (2010) obtained from their informant data. Such a representation consists of the different selves surrounded by different, but sometimes overlapping, clusters of objects and activities. As Belk (1988) originally recognized, the self is dynamic and ever changing. Likewise these multiple self perspectives also recognize the shifting and dynamic nature of the self and the objects and choices through which it is expressed and transformed. But what these perspectives also recognize along with Belk’s (2013) updated model is that the idea of a singular core self is an illusion. Desirable as this illusion may be, these perspectives also recognize a more complex view of the simultaneous presence of different selves supported by different sets of objects and activities.

4. Actor Network Theory

Actor Network Theory or ANT recognizes that actions are caused by both human and non-human actants. That the human actants often engage things intentionally and the non-human actants unintentionally is not of great consequence in this perspective. Latour (2005) points out that the following alternative formulations of self and object interactions are not the same and the latter are difficult or impossible to imagine:

...hitting a nail with and without a hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket, walking in the street with or without clothes, zapping a TV with or without a remote, slowing down a car with or without a speed-bump, keeping track of your inventory with or without a list, [or] running a company with or without bookkeeping (p. 71).

Thus, we may properly regard these objects as acting—the hammer hits the nail, the kettle boils water, the basket holds provisions, and so forth. But it takes the whole network of actants, usually including the human for these actions to take place.

In some instances like the hammer and the builder, the musical instrument and the musician, and the computer and the hacker, the symbiosis of the person and the thing allows actions that would not otherwise be possible (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). In other instances however, the object takes on functions that would once have resided with the person alone. Tian and Belk (2005) found in their study of offices that “prosthetic possessions” like computers and phones, “remembered” things for consumers. Dengeri-Knott and Molesworth (2013) found that consumers used software like their Amazon wish lists to “desire” for them. That is, once they put objects on the list, they no longer had to sustain their desire in their minds because the list did it for them. As we rely on our digital devices to do more and more, they become an increasingly indispensable part of our selves. ANT also specifies that as long as networks of people and things are functioning smoothly, “punctualization” occurs—that is the individual parts of the network fades from our awareness and we concentrate only on the whole. For example, so long as our car is working properly, we remain unaware of its individual parts and even our own actions in operating it. But when the engine fails to work, depunctualization occurs and we suddenly become aware of the car and driver as a collection of parts (Latour 1999).

Besides a person and multiple objects, actor networks are also often composed of multiple people. For instance Epp and Price (2010) chronicle the changing role of a dining room table in knitting together the lives of an extended family. This inclusion of multiple people in the human-object assemblage marks an important difference from each of the other formulations considered here. Whereas the focus of the extended self or mind is on one person or mind extending out or incorporating objects and people within itself, and the focus of multiple selves is on connecting different objects to different personas, in ANT the focus is on networks of multiple people and objects which act together in establishing the relationships between
persons and things. That is, from an ANT perspective we are not focused on the internal representation of self as much as the fact that people and things act together to cause behaviors to occur. We might in fact see the entire Internet as being the result of an unseen network of people and things (users, programmers, digital devices, routers, servers, and so forth) culminating in the vast array of information, images, games, and more that we can access online. On a narrower scale, our network of “friends” on Facebook help to co-construct our identity with posts, photos, tags, and other “metadata” that appears on our timeline (Belk 2013). Our interconnections to others are invoked and exploited when we ask online, “How do I…?” (e.g., download photos from an iPhone to my computer). Meaning too is jointly constructed. And while ANT has receive the most attention in consumer research, there are many other perspectives on empowered objects including entanglement theory, vibrant matter, alien phenomenology, postphenomenology, assemblage theory, meshwork, the politico-ideology of things, and trajectories of the technium.

CONCLUSIONS

We can see in these alternative formulations to the extended self an enriched and enhanced set of perspectives for construing the relationship between people and things. There is more to these differences and possibilities than I have been able to summarize here. The table below provides an even more condensed summary of these distinctions.

**Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Differences in Models of Self and Things</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Person Focus</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Object Focus</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Relation to Objects</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relation to Self</strong></td>
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¹Different selves may feel differential attachment or repulsion to an object
²Ahuvia (2005)
³Bahl and Milne (2010)

As noted earlier, these alternative formulations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Ahuvia (2005) has been cited here with regard to both extended self and multiple selves. Tian and Belk (2005) as well as Bahl and Milne (2010) have been cited in the context of both extended self and multiple selves. Connell and Schau (2013) combine extended and expanded self. And Epp and Price (2010) invoke both ANT and extended self perspectives. Nevertheless, the different mechanisms and emphases of the models summarized in the table suggest that they all bring something different to the party. Since much of the exposition of these models, including the present summary, is conceptual, what seems most rewarding and needed is empirical work that looks at the array of options available and chooses the one or ones that seems most capable of enlightening the problem at hand.

What is common in all of these models is that the self does not end with the mind and the body. People, places, and things, including virtual things, are all part of our identity and behavior. The ways in which these entities interact is the primary focus of study in consumer research. To have such an array of options at our disposal for studying and discussing this central consumer research mission should be seen as potentially enriching the original concept of the extended self.

REFERENCES


