Consumers frequently rely on objects for building a sense of self. We examine if and to what extent the tangibility of objects is related to their self-defining function. Specifically, we argue that proximity to tangible objects decreases the perceived distance between an individual’s self and the object’s meaning.
Tangible Possessions and the Self – How Objects Reduce Perceived Distance to Their Symbolized Meanings
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumers tend to surround themselves with objects that carry self-defining meanings. They wear clothes that suit their personalities, they own furniture that embodies their lifestyles, they keep souvenirs of vacations they like to remember, and they are fond of pictures of people or events that are central to their selves. As Belk (1988) notes, “[t]hat we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (p. 139) – accordingly, a considerable amount of research has investigated the self-extending nature of possessions (e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Ahuvia 2005). However, little theoretical knowledge exists regarding the question of how the tangibility of possessions relates to their self-extension function. Researchers frequently refer to “material” or “physical” objects (Belk 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), suggesting that possessions indeed need to be tangible to fulfill a self-extending function. But they also refer to abstract possessions such as ideas, experiences, or relationships (Belk 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), indicating that possessions forming part of the self do not need to have a solid, graspable form. However, if consumers indeed value possessions because they help them to build a sense of self, then it seems likely that concrete and tangible possessions may better serve this function than possessions that are just as abstract as their owners’ personality.

Furthermore, an increase of intangible possessions such as digital goods (Belk 2013) as well as a growing interest in access-based and experience-oriented consumption styles (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; van Boven and Gilovich 2003) raises the need to understand how the tangibility of possessions contributes to self-extension processes.

Against this background, this research seeks to examine how the tangibility of possessions affects their ability to serve a self-extending function. In contrast to a large amount of literature in consumer research, the meanings of symbolic objects are here not seen solely in their semiotic connection to a signified meaning (see, e.g., Grayson and Shulman 2000) but particularly in the perceived spatial proximity that they establish between their meaning and the body and mind of a person. Building upon construal-level theory (for an overview see Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007), we argue that close, symbolic objects reduce the perceived distance to their signified meanings. We further argue that this reduction of perceived distance results in an increase of self-extension and more positive behavioral intentions towards the signified meaning. We claim that through this process tangible possessions bridge the gap between the self and meanings that define the self.

Four studies support our conceptual framework. Study 1 supports the basic hypothesis that a symbolic possession (i.e., wedding ring) can reduce perceived distance to a self-defining, past event (i.e., wedding). Study 2 refines this finding by revealing that the spatial distance to a symbolic object (i.e., a mug) influences the perceived distance to its signified meaning (i.e., a personal experience that is attached to the mug). More specifically, the results indicate that a decrease of spatial distance to a symbolic object leads to a decrease of perceived distance to its meaning. Building upon these findings, study 3 tests the interaction of object distance (i.e., a tennis ball) and the object’s symbolic connection to a meaning (i.e., Wimbledon Championship) on perceived distance, self-extension and behavioral intentions towards that meaning (i.e., Wimbledon Championship). The results support the assumption that objects only reduce perceived distance to meanings when (1) they are spatially close and when (2) they are symbolically connected to the meaning. Moreover, the results indicate that a reduction of perceived distance towards a meaning results in increased self-extension and more positive behavioral intentions towards that meaning. Study 4 provides further support for the influence of symbolic objects on behavioral outcomes. Results indicate that symbolic objects (i.e., membership card) can increase the self-extension to an entity that cannot be experienced directly (i.e., a club that is yet to be founded). Moreover, the results indicate that this increase in self-extension leads to more positive behavioral intentions as well as actual behavior towards the entity (i.e., the club).

In sum, our results support the notion that objects can reduce the perceived distance to their signified meanings. As postulated, we find support that this effect is moderated by the symbolic connection between an object and a meaning. We also find support for the hypotheses that the reduction of perceived distance towards a meaning results in stronger self-extension as well as more positive behavioral intentions and actual behavior towards that meaning.

Our conceptual framework offers a potential psychological explanation for the personal importance of tangible possessions. It suggests how tangible objects can shape and strengthen the connection between individuals and intangible, self-defining meanings (e.g., relationships, events, organizations, and services). Our approach also provides a possible psychological explanation for why certain meaningful objects (e.g., rings and membership cards) receive their cultural relevance. We encourage a further investigation of the importance of physical properties of possessions, their spatial relation to consumers, and their semiotic connection to their signified meanings. Furthermore, our approach offers a new perspective on the current discussion of the importance of material possessions. Our results support the notion that concrete possessions facilitate the connection between consumers and abstract meanings. Hence, we argue that the tangibility of objects has an essential value in itself that is mostly neglected in contemporary utility-focused perspectives of economic goods (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012).

Finally our research develops a new perspective on construal-level theory. Our results suggest that construal-level might not only be induced by distance to entities per se but also by material artefacts that symbolically represent these entities and therefore make them directly experienceable. This argumentation establishes a further promising avenue for future research in the field of semiotics and construal-level theory.

REFERENCES


