Considering the Role of Identity Cultivation Stage in Symbolic Self-Completion and Self-Retention

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Consumer research has yet to consider implications of identities evidencing cultivation stages. This investigation examines how identity cultivation stage (rookie vs. veteran) impacts symbolic self-completion and self-retention. Evidence indicates that consumers with more identity-related resources, such as relevant possessions, are less likely to self-symbolize individuals with fewer resources.

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Identities affecting consumer behavior most directly often stem from social positions that a person inhabits and to which he or she is committed. These identities change over time in a process characterized by transition and unfolding. Identities can be actively cultivated “projects,” remnants of the individual’s past, or an aspired-to future. New identities are explored, constructed, and/or dismissed. Established identities undergo active development and maintenance. Many of these issues are recognized by consumer research, but the field has yet to consider the theoretical implications of identities evidencing discernible cultivation stages (rookie vs. veteran). This is problematic because identity cultivation stages differ not in degree, but in kind. “Rookie” vs “veteran” represent distinct experiences in how an identity is experienced and enacted. The cultivation process manifests through accumulation and deployment of identity resources such as possessions, social connections, and relevant expertise.

This investigation examines how identity cultivation stage impacts symbolic self-completion and self-retention. Employing a survey methodology in a well-established identity context, respondents reported on identity resources and stated importance for six concurrent identities. Via recruitment, individuals indicative of rookie and veteran cultivation stages were incorporated into the study sample. All respondents provided information about such factors as possessions owned, description of favorites, and extensiveness of social network. Respondents were also queried about their views on appropriateness of using various identity-related items in differing social contexts.

Patterns in collected data were examined to test basic predictions of differences between rookies and veterans. We generally predicted that veterans in an identity domain possess more identity supporting resources than rookies. Individuals early in identity disposition will also have more identity related resources available than further along individuals. Rookies were predicted to self-symbolize a new identity more often than veterans due to a symbolic self-completion effect. Rookies were also predicted to self-symbolize a past identity more often than veterans, reflecting a symbolic self-retention effect.

Evidence indicated that identity cultivation stage is an important moderator of self-symbolization. Rookies and veterans had different self-structures with multiple identities differing according to cultivation stage. Consequently, identity resources were variable based on identity cultivation stage. Veterans had larger and higher quality social networks suggesting more well-developed identity supporting infrastructures. A similar pattern was evident with possessions. Veterans had more possessions with which to self-symbolize than rookies, even though identity importance did not differ significantly between the two groups. These findings are the first to provide evidence of this variation in the context of multiple identities; others have observed support only for a single identity.

In addition to identity resource variability, symbolic self-completion and symbolic self-retention were evident in the data. While veterans owned more identity related items, rookies deployed such items more often. This was the case even after controlling for importance and size of possession inventory. The result pattern is consistent with rookies engaging in symbolic self-completion. Rookies also reported more frequent use of possessions related to a past identity, reflecting a symbolic self-retention effect. This evidence suggests that generalizations should not be made lightly from rookies to veterans within an identity domain, or vice versa.

The study briefly described in this abstract provides evidence of identity cultivation stage predicting usage for favorite identity-related possessions across contexts. Results were consistent with the observation that favorites are not always used instrumentally, but are retained for contemplative and/or emotional purposes. Rookies and veterans did not differ in their perceived appropriateness of favorite current identity related possessions across contexts. However, rookies did perceive that their favorite item related to a current identity as more appropriate for public display than veterans, suggesting a symbolic self-completion effect. Rookies also viewed their favorite possession related to a past identity as appropriate to use in more contexts than veterans, consistent with symbolic self-retention.

Results overall indicate identity related social ties, ownership of related possessions, self-symbolizing with relevant possessions (including self-completion and self-retention uses), and perceived appropriateness of favorite identity possessions varied according to identity cultivation stage. These results support the assertion that individuals deploy identity resources differently as they move through cultivation stages. A general implication is that identity cultivation stage is fundamental to understanding the person-possession linkage in future research.

## REFERENCES


Burke, Peter J. and Jan E. Stets (2009), Identity theory, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.


