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Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Belonging in Consumer Research

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The sense of belonging construct remains to be fully conceptualized in consumer research, despite the centrality of social connections and consumption in life (Mead et. al 2011). This presentation reviews belonging research and develops a theoretical framework to understand how individuals consume to fulfill belonging goals (Yuval-Davis 2006).

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Contemporary Perspectives on Consumption and Belonging

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Paper #1: Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Belonging in Consumer Research

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Paper #2: Products as Pals: Engaging With Anthropomorphic Products Mitigates Effects of Social Exclusion

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Paper #3: The Perfect Lunchbox: Social Class Identity and Everyday Mothering

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Paper #4: The Joneses Don't Live Here: Conspicuous Consumption in a New Urban Neighborhood

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Much of our identity is rooted in how we belong to different social entities such as our families, ethnicities, nationalities, political and religious affiliations, and professional classes. All of these contribute to who we are and what we do. In his seminal work on human motivation, Maslow (1943) positions belongingness needs immediately after physiological and safety needs. Baumeister and Leary (1995) compile a preponderance of evidence to support a construct they identify as the "need to belong" (NTB), one they argue is universal. Empirical evidence affirms the NTB as one of the most fundamental human needs, suggesting it developed to increase chances of survival (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Buss 1990).

Disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and education express interest in how people develop their desires to belong (Yuval-Davis 2006; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Baumeister and Leary 1995). Yet despite the centrality of social connections and consumption to daily life, links between belonging and consumption receive little empirical attention in consumer behavior (Mead et al. 2011). Moreover, most consumer research in belonging examines how consumers react to belongingness threats (e.g., social exclusion). This research stream primarily develops from the state-based construct of the Need to Belong (NTB) (Baumeister and Leary 1995), which they define as a "need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships, [and] is innately... human" (p. 499). Though this theoretical framework offers clear value, there are facets of belongingness in consumer behavior that remain unexplained and require alternative theoretical perspectives. For example, the NTB definition (1) does not account for cases outside of the interpersonal context such as belonging to larger imagined communities (e.g., nations, religions, political parties) or physical environments, (2) is not conducive to studying the processual nature of building a sense of belonging, and (3) is not helpful when to examining consumers' conscious efforts to belong within various entities.

This special session places the study of belonging front and center, investigating the complex relationships among belonging, exclusion, identity, and consumption from diverse approaches. James Mourey, Jennifer Olson, and Carolyn Yoon study how adverse effects from belongingness threats may be mitigated via interactions with

anthropomorphized products. Robert Arias examines how belonging is studied across disciplines, leverages empirical data, and develops a theoretical construct to better understand how individuals *proactively* consume to pursue processual belongingness goals. Meredith Thomas and Dr. Thomas O'Guinn investigates how physical design and urban planning strategies impact feelings of belonging within a community. Drs. Benedetta Cappellini and Vicki Harman examine how middle-class British mothers display their social class belonging through the everyday mundane practice of making lunchboxes for their children. Collectively, we provide a multifaceted approach to how belonging research may be advanced in the consumption domain. In addition to including a more traditional approach to consumer belonging (i.e., by examining social exclusion), we promote an alternative perspective that acknowledges consumers' conscious efforts to pursue belonging. This session is likely to appeal to scholars interested in identity, brand/consumption communities, experiential consumption, among other domains.

Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Belonging in Consumer Research

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Much of our identity is rooted in how we belong to different memberships. In fact, a preponderance of evidence suggests belongingness is an innate human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The notion that humans possess an inherent need to belong is not new by any means, however (Maslow 1943).

Belonging, however, remains to be fully explored and utilized in consumer research, despite social connections and consumption being central facets of daily life (Mead et al. 2011). Though research streams such as those relating to identity and brand communities employ forms of the term "belonging," in fact these constructs are often peripheral and remain unexamined or even undefined (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). The minimal consumer research relevant to belonging mostly examines how consumers react to belongingness threats to the state-based construct, the Need to Belong (NTB) (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

Consequently, the objective of the current presentation is to critically evaluate the current status of the belonging construct(s) in consumer behavior research, illuminate valuable research opportunities, and leverage extant research and empirical data to develop a consumer-conducive definition of the "sense of belonging" construct. Through this strategic review, I contribute to our conceptual understanding of belonging by uncovering a novel approach to investigate consumption/belonging linkages. Given the nature of the contribution, this analysis may be classified as a theoretical advancement via identification (MacInnis 2011), revealing dimensions of the consumption/belonging research domain that are previously unexamined.

To understand the current status of belonging in consumption research, one must be familiar with the theoretical construct of NTB (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) were the first to compile evidence to empirically demonstrate that NTB exists. They define the NTB as a "need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships, [and] is innately prepared among human beings" (p. 499). To manipulate NTB, researchers employ a variety of manipulations such as instructing confederates not to talk to a participant in a group setting (Snoek 1962)

and providing false feedback, informing the subject his or her test results revealed a future with fading social relationships (Twenge et al. 2001).

The few studies in consumer research that integrate belonging in its research design often adopt Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theoretical framework, using social exclusion as an implicit proxy for a temporarily-heightened NTB. For example, recent findings demonstrate that after social exclusion, consumers are more likely to express an increased desire for specific consumer goods valorized by aspirational social groups (Dommer et al. 2013), to sacrifice "personal and financial well-being for the sake of social well-being" (Mead et al. 2011, p. 902), and to desire nostalgic products (Loveland et al. 2010).

Though the NTB construct (Baumeister and Leary 1995) effectively allows consumer researchers to study aspects of belonging, it possesses limitations. Importantly, I allocate my focus on the *sense of belonging* construct, one considered to be processual and fluid (Yuval-Davis 2006). Importantly, I do not use the term "feelings" of belonging (Easterbrook and Vignoles 2013) because our empirical findings and extant research reveal the SB involves more than emotions for consumers (Hagerty et al. 1992). Though it has been inconsistently defined (Mahar et al. 2014), core commonalities exist among the "sense of belonging" definitions. I integrate key elements from various conceptualizations in an effort to delineate the construct and develop its conduciveness for consumer research. I employ the term "sense of belonging" to refer to the subjective, context-mediated experience that derives from a personal relationship with an external referent, evolving in response to the degree to which individuals (1) believe the relationship to be reciprocal, (2) feel accepted, (3) perceive their traits and values are shared or complement the referent, (4) believe the relationships to be secure and temporally stable (Hagerty et al. 1992; Levett-Jones et al. 2009; Mahar et al. 2014). In addition to utilizing extant literature, I show evidence for each of the definition's four components using empirical data.

Unlike the NTB construct, this definition of "sense of belonging" acknowledges belongingness experiences beyond the interpersonal context such as belonging to collective identities, imagined communities, or even physical spaces. Because the definition is inclusive, it may act as a springboard to allow researchers to investigate belonging/consumption links beyond reactions to belongingness threats, such as how individuals *proactively* consume to pursue a sense of belonging. Though, prior research contends that the sense of belonging as a theoretical construct has not been well studied and is inconsistently defined, I delineate the construct to facilitate future explicit study of belonging (Meeuwisse et al. 2010). Overall, this close examination of the belonging literature across domains demonstrates that belonging can (and should be) investigated beyond social exclusion.

Products as Pals: Engaging With Anthropomorphic Products Mitigates Effects of Social Exclusion

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

From Apple's Siri to Amazon's Alexa, iRobot's Roomba to Google's self-driving vehicle, there is no question that anthropomorphized consumer products exist in an increasing number of industries. As products feature more characteristics typically associated with "being alive," whether through design, interaction, intelligence, responsiveness, and/or personality, an important question to consider is how these "living" products might influence basic human needs for affiliation. As such, the present research explores whether anthropomorphized products can mitigate well-established effects of social exclusion (i.e., threats to affiliation) and, if so, whether bound-

ary conditions exist with respect to an anthropomorphized product's ability to fulfill needs typically fulfilled via social interaction.

Prior research indicates that anthropomorphism affects moral care and concern for non-human targets, such as the environment or animals, and even trust placed in non-human technological agents like autonomous vehicles (e.g., Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley 2010). Linking exclusion and anthropomorphism, prior research also shows that people who feel more chronically disconnected from others attribute anthropomorphized qualities to a variety of objects and entities (e.g., religious agents, pets, imaginary creatures) more than those who are more connected (Epley et al. 2008). This suggests anthropomorphized products could potentially affect measures of social connectedness in ways that have, to date, remain untested. Waytz and Epley (2012) find that the more socially connected one is (to real people), the more s/he dehumanizes others, suggesting that once social connections are fulfilled, one may have a *weaker* need for social reassurance from others. The present work extends into a nonhuman, consumer product domain to examine whether interacting with an anthropomorphized product could also result in a mitigated need for social assurance from human others. We test this hypothesis in a series of six experiments that feature a broad range of consumer products varying in their anthropomorphism.

Experiment 1A builds upon prior research (Maner et al. 2007) demonstrating that socially excluded individuals satisfy their desire to reconnect by rating neutral faces as being "more sociable." Participants were randomly assigned to either a social exclusion condition in which they wrote about a time they were socially excluded (Epley et al. 2008) or a control essay condition in which they wrote about their prior day. Following the essay manipulation, participants completed a trivia game and were asked to use either Siri (anthropomorphized aid) or Google (non-anthropomorphized aid) for assistance. They then rated a series of neutral faces on personality factors per Maner et al. (2007). The results reveal that introducing an anthropomorphized product dampens the tendency among socially excluded consumers to view others as more sociable.

One limitation of this initial experiment is that it is unclear how interacting with Google and Siri compares to genuine interpersonal interaction, as there was no human interaction condition. Experiment 1B explores this idea by randomly assigning socially excluded and control essay participants to work with an anthropomorphized calculator, a non-anthropomorphized calculator, or a human partner to solve math problems. Prior research reveals dampened mood effects following exclusion (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2005; Twenge et al. 2001), which can be improved via human interaction. Our results not only replicate this prior research, but demonstrates that engaging with an anthropomorphized calculator has mood restorative effects comparable to those of engaging with a real human being.

Experiments 2A and 2B explore the extent to which individuals compensate for social exclusion. Following the essay manipulation, participants were asked to consider questions regarding their cellular phone (placed in their hand as part of the study). The control group's questions were worded neutrally (e.g., "What is the design of your phone like?") whereas the experimental group's questions had the same meaning but were phrased in an anthropomorphized way (e.g., "What is the body of your phone like?"). The results reveal that socially excluded participants estimate that they have more Facebook friends (experiment 2A) and will send more text messages in the upcoming month (experiment 2B) compared to control essay participants, unless they engage with an anthropomorphized phone.

Experiment 3 tested our prediction with respect to previous findings, suggesting socially excluded individuals engage in prosocial behavior as a means of reestablishing social bonds (Lee and Shrum

2012). Participants completed the essay task and phone tasks from the previous two experiments, but also completed the Need for Social Assurance scale (Lee and Robbins 1995) and indicated their willingness to complete additional surveys without compensation, a measure of prosocial behavior (Mortensen and Cialdini 2009). As predicted, socially excluded participants in the anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized phone condition report a lower need for social assurance, which, in turn, reduces their willingness to engage in prosocial behavior, suggesting their need to forge bonds had been satisfied.

If anthropomorphized products subtly fulfill needs for social assurance, then drawing explicit attention to the fact that an anthropomorphized product is *not*, in fact, actually alive should eliminate the effects. Our final experiment tests this prediction. Following the essay condition manipulation, participants were randomly assigned to view one of three Roomba vacuums: Roomba turned to look like a face (anthropomorphized), Roomba turned 90-degrees (control), or a Roomba turned to look like a face with an explicit reminder that it was "...just a machine, not a real person." As predicted, socially excluded individuals reported a significantly higher need for social assurance in both the control Roomba condition *and* the misattribution condition, but not in the anthropomorphized condition, supporting the misattribution story.

Taken together, our results indicate that engaging with anthropomorphized consumer products can mitigate well-established effects of social exclusion. As more consumer products blur the line between product and person, be it avatars, smart cars, or responsive technology, and people feel increasingly less connected to "real" others, understanding anthropomorphized products and how they affect consumer psychology and behavior is more critical than ever before. We hope the current research inspires future studies further exploring how consumer products and people fulfill innate social needs, sometimes at the expense of one another.

The Perfect Lunchbox: Social Class Identity and Everyday Mothering

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to this special session on belonging by investigating how middle-class British mothers display their social class belonging through the everyday mundane practice of making lunchboxes for their children. As an example of home food being eaten in the school setting without parents being present, lunchboxes present an interesting case for understanding how consumers display their social identities.

Social identity theories highlight how individual identity is framed by membership to social categories including social class, gender and family roles. These categories provide individuals with a set of norms and tools enabling consumers to define their own selves (Schouten 1991). Consumption plays a key part in displaying individual belonging to certain categories, as mothers, for example, use objects to materialize their sense of fitting into a particular way of mothering and their disregard of other forms of mothering (Thomsen and Sorensen, 2006). The marketing literature has highlighted how identities are not static as individuals move between different memberships during their lives (Ulver and Ostberg, 2014) and thus individual identity can contain contradictions. Consumption can provide a solution of such contradictions but can also aggravate anxieties and insecurities (Shankar et al. 2009). For example, the current way of doing middle class mothering, also defined as intensive mothering (Hays 1996), is characterized by intensified consumption practices prioritizing children's desires. This intensified consumption causes identity uncertainties and anxieties in mothers (Voice Group 2010).

From the aforementioned literature, we understand consumers are the ones who move from one sense of belonging to another. Without denying the importance of seeing consumers' sense of belonging as an ongoing process, this study takes a slightly different perspective, showing it is not only consumers' identities that are on the move. Rather, norms and conventions change over time and thus they are also mobile and fluid. Historical research on mothering, for example, shows us that what were considered good mothering practices in the past are now perceived as unconceivable way of parenting (Lee et al. 2014). This is indeed the case of feeding children, an aspect of mothering which is subject to rapid changes in norms and conventions (Schor and Ford 2007). Given that norms on how to feed children are subject to such changes, how do mothers maintain the narrative of the self as a 'good mother'? How are mothers' consumer strategies, as revealed through the example of the lunchbox, influenced by their social class identity?

We answer these questions by looking at the everyday experience of 30 middle class and working class British mothers making lunchboxes for their children. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to understand the individual and collective identity of being a mother, and the everyday practices associated with such a sense of belonging. Findings from our thematic analysis reveal that middle-class mothers tend to possess a clear set of ideas and ideals of what constitutes good mothering. Their ideals replicated the aforementioned intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), understood by participants as an intensified and financially demanding labor aimed at prioritizing the children's desires ahead of their own. If mothers were able to describe these classed ideals of good mothering and their aspiration to belong to such a category, identifying the set of practical rules and conventions was indeed more challenging.

The impossibility of listing the set of norms and conventions of doing good mothering through feeding the children was attributed to the rapid changes in the marketplace. For example, mothers highlight the rapidity in which food and indeed brands can be classified as "good" or "bad." Given that bad food is often framed as mass-produced items associated with working class mothering, participants carefully avoid consuming food that could lead to display a 'wrong' identity. Also, they describe the constant introduction of new items, products and rules in the marketplace, making the work of feeding the children 'properly' a very challenging one. Government initiatives, celebrity chefs, supermarkets and also schools and other parents are listed as actors constantly redefining conventions and rules around the practices of feeding the children. Giving these perceived continuous changes, mothers feel anxious as they need to constantly display an up-to-date good mothering, showing they are aware of the new marketplace conventions of feeding children. As one mother eloquently says "I need to check if I am not losing the plot." In order to not to lose the plot, mothers activate a set of consumer strategies including learning about new products (e.g. thermos flasks for keeping food hot) and brands via celebrities and experts, but also activating mechanisms of surveilling other mothers.

To conclude, this research shows how the marketplace is one of the main forces modifying norms and conventions in relation to certain social categories, such as what it is to be a 'good mother' and how to display a middle class disposition in relation to children's food. If the previous marketing literature highlights how consumers might have identities on the move, this study shows how social categories can also change over time. This study has shown how the category of 'good mother' is fluid but with a clear social class positioning. Given such a fluidity, good mothering is a never fully-achieved target, and as such, women's sense of belonging to this category is surrounded by a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. An intensified but

highly discerning type of consumption requiring the constant learning of the market's new options and distinguishing oneself from the 'wrong type' of consumers is seen by middle class mothers as a way of coping with the constant changes in the market.

The Joneses Don't Live Here: Conspicuous Consumption in a New Urban Neighborhood

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The demise of traditional community has been the subject of social science research for well over a century (Marx 1848; Tonnies 1887; Durkheim 1893; Veblen 1899; Simmel 1900; Weber 1922). Sociologists have often pointed to the rise in consumer culture as a main driver in the breakdown of relationship-focused society. Certainly, with the rise of the automobile, suburbanization, television, dual career households, and the Internet, people interact less in person (Putnam 2000). But, in this study, we have found that the desire for that connection is very much alive.

In consumer literature, scholars have passed over traditional, face-to-face community in favor of studying community centered around brands and past-times (Muniz and Schau 2005; Cova and Cova 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), and more imagined (Anderson 1991) or technologically mediated forms of community (Jayanti and Singh 2010; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner, 2010; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Mathwick, Wiertz and de Ruyter 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

This research investigates a neighborhood planning strategy that is built, marketed and sold with the promise that by living there, one can experience belonging in a traditional community. This trend is called New Urbanism and is spreading quickly in popularity across the United States and around the world (Katz 1994; Dreier, Mollenkopf & Swanstrom 2004). It takes very old concepts of urban planning, and builds them into new neighborhoods, which are thought to facilitate social interaction, trust, sharing, and a communal spirit (Zukin 2009). In this study, by community, we mean "a (physical) place, shared ideals, social network, collective framework, neighborly interaction, including "structural, cultural and sentimental supports and an altruistic outreach of affection and empathy (Keller 2003)."

This work explores how traditional community exists in contemporary consumer culture. We also ask, "How does the market try to (re)create community through a residential product?" We explore the role of consumption in these neighborhoods, and its role in creating a sense of belonging to a traditional community.

To date, the first author has conducted 28 semi-structured depth interviews with 37 residents of a New Urban neighborhood. Additionally, we have used extensive field notes, photographs, and secondary data sources to understand how traditional community exists.

The site of our study, Pleasant Valley, USA, features New Urban residential design, with modest homes on small plots of land, ample shared space, but relatively minimal personal property. In Pleasant Valley, belonging to a traditional community constitutes the brand platform and consumer promise. It is also a place where a way of life, is marketed, sold and in turn, consumed. In this study, we ask whether this neighborhood product delivers on its promise, and if so, how.

A second line of questioning focuses on an issue that has been studied since Veblen's 1899 work on the Leisure Class. Conspicuous consumption is thought to be a way of expressing one's self through possessions, in place of personal interaction. We ask whether the role of conspicuous consumption is different in this place where personal interactions are the focus and goal.

The adage "keeping up with the Joneses" is widely recognized to be a suburban phenomenon in which neighbors express themselves and especially their economic worth by trying to consume the biggest and best on their neighborhood block. The New Urban ideal promotes a carefully controlled, common aesthetic in which neighbors are encouraged to contribute to the overall image of the neighborhood, both behaviorally and materially (Zukin 2009). Therefore, our research explores the ways in which residents in New Urban neighborhoods use consumption to signal individual meaning and how that establishes the parameters for in-group belonging, reinforcing the communal focus.

Our results show that a desire for community is the most popular reason for purchasing a home in Pleasant Valley. However, the most powerful ways informants recount a sense of belonging in the community involve adhering to the proper consumption script. One common topic is the "anti-consumerist" community ethic, and the importance of deliberately and visibly living beneath one's means. The culture of the community is perceived as more socially and environmentally conscious, less materialistic.

Instead of common portrayals of conspicuous consumption in which extravagant consumption replaces social connection (Veblen 1899), in this case consumption is driven by the desire to convey an ideology, politic or philosophy of moral responsibility.

Informants expressed a sense of obligation to make moderate, controlled decisions about consumption, and expect others to do the same. This results in the accumulation of field-dependent cultural capital within the neighborhood (Bourdieu 1986).

Using underconsumption to express one's belief in the neighborhood ideology seems to solidify community in Pleasant Valley. However, there was one common theme among informants that was seen to cause a breakdown in community. Residents who presented ostentatious displays of wealth are thought to weaken community by disregarding the community culture of underconsumption. Informants who described this often made character judgments about those offending residents, even though they had never met. After discussing the "infidels" or "outsiders," informants described themselves to be more like the majority of residents in the neighborhood who also consume responsibly. This represents an ideological conflict, one that has been central in American culture: libertarian free market versus communitarian (Putnam 2000), and social expression as taste.

To conclude, in much of the social science literature, community has been placed at odds with consumer culture. However, in this case it is through consumption activity that residents feel a sense of common ground and belonging to the neighborhood and its members. Also, they practice a form of conspicuous consumption that is not intended to be used for comparison purposes, but rather to be less remarkable, and to signal an understanding of the shared moral responsibility. This is in contrast to popular theories on conspicuous consumption. Also, this research offers new findings related to Bourdieu's theories of capital by presenting a case in which the visible results of high levels of economic capital diminish cultural and social capital. We also hope to provide insights into New Urbanism's effectiveness in recapturing a traditional sense of community.

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