The Belonging Process: Elements and Enactment Within a Consumption Context

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This research investigates how individuals proactively leverage consumption activities to pursue a sense of belonging. Theoretical constructs emerge from written narratives and a longitudinal study to illuminate the processual nature of belonging. We delineate these emergent constructs and offer theorization regarding how they relate. Implications for future research are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Given the centrality belonging is to daily life, it is not surprising that the phenomenon attracts scholars’ attention from many disciplines (Maslow 1943). Yet what is notable is that while consumer researchers allude to concepts related to belonging (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), research on the actual construct, and how belonging relates to consumption activities (Mead et al. 2011), remains undertheorized. We believe focused attention to belonging in our discipline is crucial, especially considering it may provide further enlightenment on related and entrenched topics such as power and self-esteem (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012).

Most belonging consumer research examines how people fulfill needs to belong after being excluded. Yet this does not account for how people actively leverage consumption practices to construct, maintain, or enhance belongingness. Consequently, our overall goal in this paper is to leverage empirical research to delineate a broader conceptualization of belonging than dominant definitions currently reflect, and to offer evidence for a new understanding of belonging, one we term the belonging process (referred to as “BP”). This conceptualization reflects the relatively recent assertion that belonging is best understood as a process rather than a state-based construct (Yuval-Davis 2006). Importantly, delineating the process first required us to identify previously unarticulated but focal elements within it. Our overall contribution, therefore, is that we develop and illuminate how people actively use consumption to pursue belongingness.

The Need to Belong Construct
Baumeister and Leary (1995) are the first to compile empirical evidence to support the existence of the NTB. They propose the NTB possesses two distinct features: 1) frequent personal contacts or (non-negative, ideally pleasant) interactions with others, and 2) perceptions of “an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future” (500). These features distinguish the NTB from other social needs; e.g., the need for attachment or social connection. For example, one’s need for attachment can be met by maintaining a stable relationship filled with negative interactions, failing short of the NTB’s requirement of pleasant personal contact. Or one may fulfill the need for social connection via brief stranger encounters, but never form a stable relationship, thus eschewing the second feature.

Consumer Behavior and Belonging
We assert that much extant consumer research relates to belonging, although belongingness-related theoretical constructs are often left unarticulated or undeveloped.

Social Exclusion. Consumer research often approaches belonging experimentally, treating social exclusion as an implicit proxy for a heightened NTB. Research finds consumers spend strategically after being excluded, demonstrating increased desires for goods and experiences that aspirational social groups valorize (Dommer et al. 2013). Extant findings suggest people are willing to sacrifice “personal and financial well-being for the sake of social well-being” (Mead et al. 2011, 902). The authors find such sacrifices include tailoring spending preferences to an interaction partner’s preferences, spending money on unappealing food favored by peers, and even an increased willingness to try cocaine, when doing so increases chances of social connections.

Brand Communities. One of the most relevant contexts linking belonging with consumption is the brand community, defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound [and] based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 412). This research acknowledges the importance of belonging – at least indirectly. McAlexander and colleagues (2002) suggest that one potential barrier to brand community participation is the fear of not belonging. Importantly, newer members’ fears are partially alleviated when experienced members initiate interactions with newcomers (McAlexander et al. 2002, 46-7).

Context
Belonging is frequently studied in education-based contexts. In university contexts, research finds students’ identities may change, depending on the specific groups, times, and places in which they interact, demonstrating the enacted nature of belonging (Bhopal 2008). Such relocation implies students’ social relationships are disrupted, especially for freshmen, transfer students, and international students. Consequently, we follow precedents from social psychology and sociology and consider the university campus a conducive context for examining belonging.

Our context is a large Midwestern university serving over 45,000 students (30,000 undergraduates). Tuition averages approximately $27,000/year in-state and $41,000/year out-of-state. Though 73% of undergraduates are in-state, about half come from a large city over 120 miles away. In two phases, we study general college students and then a specific honors program.

Methodology
We employed qualitative methods to understand how students use consumption to pursue belongingness. Two researchers acquired a dataset composed of written narratives pertaining to consumption and belonging by eighty-three undergraduate business students. Narratives require participants to organize experiences in temporally meaningful episodes, framing experiences as “part of a whole… and that something is a ‘cause’ of something else” (Polkinghorne 1988, 6). We recruited these students from two classes, offering extra credit for voluntary participation.

While our initial narrative sample provided breadth, the first author engaged in a longitudinal exploration of a second specific cohort in the college. Specifically, he conducted an ethnography in a college honors program to study how the students selected for this community establish and maintain belongingness. These honor students must enroll in four courses restricted to the cohort during their freshman and sophomore years, and are strongly encouraged to participate in an international immersion experience at the end of their freshman year.

Refined Research Questions
We began with one broad research question: “How do people proactively leverage consumption to enhance their sense of belonging?” We found our analysis demonstrated that consumers’ belonging experiences involve constructs previously unidentified in either the NTB or sense of belonging conceptualizations. Furthermore, our longitudinal phase provided deep insights not only into how these
constructs intersect, but how belonging unfolds as a process, and how consumption practices foster and fit into this process. Thus, our analysis necessitated refining our original research question, and breaking it into two, as follows: 1) What elements structure the BP? and 2) How do these elements relate to each other and contribute to the BP?

Findings

Elements and their Enactment in the Belonging Process

Cultural Context. All belonging processes are embedded in a specific cultural context. Ours is a North American university campus in the Midwest, which encourages a broad range of extracurricular activities. It is also embedded within a first-world consumer culture, containing aspirational middle and high income consumption patterns. These characteristics are important as they shape the cultural norms and behaviors, which may be very distinct from a university in a different country or even from different colleges accommodating lower or higher-income consumers. Darryl, a university administrator, articulates how these broad cultural forces may influence the students, “...students don’t like to brag about [being] in the honors program because I think we have a little bit of a Midwest value set. That’s a different context than I see in other schools, but they’re very supportive of each other...”

Belonging Targets. Belonging targets (hereafter; targets) are the social entities within which one aims to belong. Consistent with prior research on the level of analysis of belonging, targets emerge on three distinct structural levels: macro, meso, and micro (Christenson 2009). Utilizing Christenson’s (2009) framework, we describe macro targets as “imagined communities,” resembling a concept broader than a specific collective of people (such as national, kinship, religious, or cultural groups). We employ the term meso to describe social entities in which a consumer may interact with other members, but still does not know everyone within the target. Finally, we reserve the term micro targets for social entities in which a consumer knows and interact with everyone in the group; this is usually limited to a small number of individuals. One informant provides an example of how she conceptualizes her university as a macro-level target, and how she belongs in it:

Belonging in a group so vast and diverse happens more in terms of values than relationships. My sense of being a student is similar to the sense of citizenship one feels for their country; there are some shared priorities and behaviors, but little direct connection with the many subcultures that exist (NARR, WF, 21).

Belonging Conduits. Belonging conduits are the resources both from the marketplace and other sources consumers leverage to facilitate belongingness pursuits. One informant notes that once he bought his Sperry TopSiders, “I felt like I belonged to a group, community, and culture. The group was my fraternity...the community was all of Greek life on campus, and the culture was...Greek culture [as a whole].” (NARR, WM, 21) The plethora of consistent research noting linkages between branded clothing and a strong sense of self, and affiliation with a group supports the salience of this finding (e.g., Chaplin and John 2004; Fernandez 2009). Significantly, we observe that technology products like smartphones and gaming gear can act as both functional and symbolic conduits, while apparel, accessories and jewelry are primarily symbolic. Similar to how a consumer may rely on a symbolic product to reinforce family identity, our consumers leverage these conduits to enhance belongingness within their targets (Epp and Price 2008). One gamer notes he needed an XBox “to interact with my friends the way I wanted to...[it] helped me become even closer to [them] and eliminated our distance barrier.” (NARR, WM, 21) As such, consumers rely on conduits to transcend limitations rooted in time and space, barriers that otherwise could contribute to the weakening of social ties (Otnes et al. 2014).

Belonging Barriers. Lee and Shrum (2012) identify two types of belonging threats: being rejected and being ignored. However, our data support a broader interpretation of hindrances to belonging that extend beyond mere ostracism. We find evidence of belonging barriers, defined as enduring forces that hinder people from achieving belongingness within a target. A participant explicitly indicates how he did not achieve belongingness within the program due to demographic variables:

Our class is primarily White females. And guess what demographic I’ve had the least contact with? White females…. Asian guys and White girls don’t mix. I don’t mind, but other people do....I just noticed that they’re [students in honors cohort] mostly women.”

Zack clearly identifies gender and race as two sociological factors he believes impact his ability to belong in his honors program.

Belonging Outcomes. We use this term to capture the various belonging-related goals consumers desire and proactively pursue. These outcomes relate to their general perceptions and feelings of belonging, and manifest across a broad spectrum, from engaging in simple interactions or establishing strong, stable relationships within a target. In fact, while extant research links positive social interactions to belonging and acceptance (Baumeister and Leary 1995), consumers even express just having non-negative interactions as desirable outcomes. For example, a young African-American woman compares the negative reactions that White people sometimes express toward her natural-state hairstyles, to post-purchase experiences after she undergoes professional hair-straightening:

Although many are unconscious of it, straight hair is more accepted, and less threatening to others in this society; and I would prefer to be unnoticed but accepted than to be ostracized. However, when unnoticed, there are not many affirmations that you are accepted. (NARR, AAF, 21)

As this young woman frequently straightens her hair, she knows the type of reactions she will garner after purchasing a relaxant. More importantly, she understands the (negative) reactions she will avoid. She relies on this particular consumption activity to manage the stigma of “natural” hair (Crosby 2012) and explains how even the absence of negative reactions can serve as a reflection of acceptance. Importantly, these quotes evidence desired outcomes beyond simply fulfilling the NTB or establishing a sense of belonging. Our data demonstrates consumers may simply aim to belong functionally, or “fit in just enough” to go unnoticed, or, to be accepted (NARR, AAF, 21).
The Belonging Process

This section demarcates the interrelationships among the various elements of the belonging process. The cultural context shapes and influences all of the elements, as it encompasses the entire process. Importantly, this impact includes the social context of a consumer’s intended belonging target. Within a target, a consumer may live through a variety of experiences that lead to specific outcomes, and we emphasize those pertaining to consumers’ conscious pursuit of belonging outcomes.

The nature of the target will shape how consumers evaluate potential marketplace resources (i.e., conduits) to achieve particular outcomes. Targets can influence the selection of conduits explicitly, directing a consumer’s attention toward specific consumption opportunities (e.g., branded shirts of a student club, the honors program strongly encouraging students to participate in the international trip) that can enhance belonging. Conversely, the influence of a target on conduits can be less overt, as a target can merely act as an information source that communicates to the consumer what consumption activities the target (de)values.

Discussion

Our findings demarcate key theoretical constructs to help illuminate the process of consumers’ efforts to belong. The identification of these constructs allows scholars to be more precise when designing research studies. More importantly, we theorize how the constructs operate in relation to one another, forming the belonging process. The process we theorize reveals important belonging/consumption issues beyond the scope of NTB and sense of belonging conceptualizations. Thus, we move beyond the compensatory perspective of restoring belonging needs and illuminate a previously overlooked area in consumer/belonging research, that is, consumers’ proactive pursuit of belonging. Here, we highlight a variety of marketplace resources that may facilitate belonging, the role targets may play in shaping consumers’ preferences, and alternative belonging-laden outcomes beyond attaining a sense of belonging and fulfillment of the NTB.

Conclusion

We find support for emergent constructs and classifications that pertain to consumers’ belongingness desires. We discuss five elements essential to the BP: cultural context, targets, conduits, cues, barriers, and outcomes. We offer preliminary theorization of how these emergent constructs relate to each other. Our research contributes to work on identity, belonging, and consumption by advancing understanding on the processual nature of consumers’ proactive pursuit of belonging, heretofore unexamined in consumer behavior. The belonging process we propose provides scholars with a theoretical foundation to build upon and advance the nascent research link between belonging and consumption.

REFERENCES


