The Morphing Self: Changing Identity As a Response to Self-Threats

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This research examines how consumers use possessions to “morph” their self from one identity to a new, redefined identity when faced with a threat. Using Mortality Salience manipulations to achieve a threat to the self, results demonstrated that when the threat is salient, consumers distance themselves from possessions that were once a central part of their self-concept and incorporate possessions that were originally extraneous to the self into the self to create a new identity. Further, results demonstrate that self-esteem and materialism moderated the effects. Low self-esteem individuals and participants high in materialism were most likely to “morph” their self.

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Reminders of mortality are regularly flaunted in the media where consumers hear and read the death counts from events such as 9/11, the Tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina. Research on Terror Management Theory (TMT; e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986) that focuses on how people respond to death related information has shown that such information significantly influences individuals’ actions, thoughts and emotions. Consumer research has shown that when mortality salience (MS) is high individuals tend to over consume, engage in conspicuous consumption and risky behavior, and spend more money (e.g., Arndt et al. 2004; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005). While research to date provides insight into the impact of MS on product acquisition and consumption, it has not considered the possible implications of MS on the retention of possessions which consumers consider part of their extended self. Thus, in the present research we explore the possibility that in the face of an identity threat (i.e., MS is high), consumers will reconstruct their self identity (i.e., morph the self into a new recreated self) through the use of their possessions. Further, we test whether the tendency to morph the self through possessions when threatened will be moderated by two individual differences related to TMT: self-esteem and materialism.

The self is not permanently defined but rather it evolves and changes over time. Changes of the self occur naturally as a person moves from child- to adulthood, but also arise during stressful life events such as death, divorce, and loss of employment. This process of identity reconstruction is described by the concept of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960) consisting of separation (i.e., disentanglement from a social role or status), transition (i.e., adaptation and change to fit a new role), and incorporation (i.e., integration of the self with the new role). One way in which individuals may shape their new identities is by the products they consume (e.g., Arnold and Cusati 2000) as according to Belk (1988) possessions, by representing memories and feelings that link people with their historical identity, are important as means of expressing a person’s self. For example, following a divorce a woman might dispose of a once sacred Mickey Mouse watch that was related to a fun/dependent self identity in exchange for a new Rolex that conveys a new identity as a strong, independent woman. In the present research we predict that when people are exposed to a MS threat they will attempt to redefine the self through the possessions they consider a part of their immediate identity. They will do this by both distancing the self from old possessions once considered a central part of their identity and drawing possessions once considered to be an extraneous component of the self closer.

Following TMT we expect that this effect will be moderated by self-esteem and materialism. First, according to TMT, high self-esteem individuals are able to protect their evaluations of themselves as their self-esteem can serve as a buffer against self-threatening information (Harmon-Jones et. al. 1997). Thus, we expect that low self-esteem individuals will have a stronger tendency to morph the self in the presence of a MS threat compared to consumers with high self-esteem. Second, TMT predicts that MS should lead to increased efforts to live up to the standards of value from which self-esteem is derived. High material values are defined as the use of possessions to judge
the success of others and oneself, the centrality of possessions in a person’s life, and the belief that possessions and their acquisition lead to happiness and life satisfaction (Richins and Dawson 1992). Given this we expect that people high in materialism should be more likely to redefine their self-concept by shifting possessions when MS is high, whereas tendencies to redefine the self through possessions are not expected to differ for those low in materialism regardless of whether a threat is present or not.

One study was conducted to explore the notion of the morphing self. The study was administered in two parts, one week apart. During the first session participants either completed the MS or control topic manipulations following previous research (e.g. Goldenberg et al. 2005) and the PANAS scale (Watson et al. 1988). After completing a distractor task they were given a piece of paper on which eight nested circles were printed, the innermost circle labeled “SELF” and subsequent rings labeled “A” to “H” described as elements in a participant’s life ranging from “very closely related to your self” to “not at all related to your self”. Participants were asked to place as many possessions as they could think of into the drawing, taking into account how closely related to their self they considered the possession. The dependent variable was the distances between the center of the circle and the cross that marked the placement of each of the possessions. Finally participants completed a self-esteem scale (Rosenberg 1965) and the material values scale (Richins and Dawson 1992). During the second session, participants completed the manipulation they were not assigned to during the first session and then again completed the PANAS scale, distractor task and dependent measure (i.e., circle task).

Results revealed that when participants faced a MS threat, they placed possessions they considered as being closely related to their selves further away from the self. In contrast, possessions that under the control condition were placed far away from the self were placed significantly closer to their self in the threat condition. As expected these effects were qualified by individual difference measures for self-esteem and material values. Participants who were both low in self-esteem and high in materialism used possessions to a greater extent to redefine their self-concept when MS was high (as compared to absent).

A second study is currently conducted in which the effect of non-mortality related threats on consumers’ tendency to use possessions to redefine their selves is examined. Preliminary analyses indicate that consumers morph their self as a response to a variety of threats to their self.

References
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SESSION SUMMARY

The title for this special session was inspired by the recent movie “The Devil Wears Prada”, which narrates the misadventures of young university graduate Andy Sachs who obtains a job as assistant to powerful fashion magazine editor Miranda Priestly. This movie is of special interest for the ACR community as in one of its most dramatic scenes Miranda—whose character is inspired by Vogue America’s editor-in-chief Anna Wintour—denies the idea of consumer agency. In the scene, Miranda and some of her assistants are deciding between two similar belts for an outfit and Andy, who got a job “a thousand girls would kill for” despite not being a fashionista, sniggers because, in her opinion, they are almost identical. Here is Miranda’s reaction.

Miranda Priestly: Something funny?
Andy Sachs: No, no, nothing. Y’know, it’s just that both those belts look exactly the same to me. Y’know, I’m still learning about all this stuff.
Miranda Priestly: This... ‘stuff’? Oh... ok. I see, you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don’t know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you’re trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don’t know is that that sweater is not just blue, it’s not turquoise... it’s actually cerulean. You’re also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar De La Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn’t it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of 8 different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic casual corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it’s sort of comical how you think that you’ve made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you’re wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of stuff.

In this scene, we can perceive echoes of one of the central debates in social theory: are individuals autonomous in their thoughts and behaviors, or are there deeper forces that influence how they think and behave? Here, Miranda acts as a spokesperson for a strong structuralist position. In her view, fashion institutions shape the actions of individuals, even those who, like Andrea, believe not to be influenced by fashion. The agency vs. structure debate is of central interest also for consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) where a variety of studies has on the one hand represented consumers as autonomous, interpretive agents who do not always passively accept the influence of marketers over their life while, on the other hand, other research has illuminated the institutional and social structures that systematically influence consumption. We however note the dearth of research that analyzes the interplay between consumer and marketing practices. We thus concur with Peñaloza (2001: p. 394) that “in carving out the study of consumer behavior as a separate field of inquiry independent of marketing activities, consumer researchers may be losing sight of the ways in which consumers and marketers negotiate cultural meanings in relation to each other in the marketplace”. Putting marketing back in the picture, in our view, is key to an improved understanding of consumer culture.

When speaking of fashion, these same remarks apply. While a few studies have investigated agency vs. structure in the consumption of fashion (Thompson & Haykto, 1997; Murray, 2002), the joint investigation of consumers, marketers and the media as they negotiate cultural meanings is still in an embryonic state. The goal of this special session was to introduce new research findings that improve our understanding of how consumption of fashion is influenced—sometimes in invisible ways—by marketplace actors. All the papers in this session analyze the construction of fashion in two different moments of cultural production: marketplace discourse and everyday consumption. The papers draw on a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches that should appeal to a broad audience interested both in fashion and, more in general, to institutional constraints to consumer choices and to consumer constraints to marketer choices. More in detail:

Søren Askegaard, Deniz Atik and Stefania Borghini introduce the session with a study on consumer desires and fashion based on interviews with both fashion consumers and designers. Intriguingly, they found not only that the fashion systems constrain consumers as the meaning of fashion-related choices is continuously resignified, but also that consumers pose constraints on marketers, increasingly frustrated by the need to keep up with increasingly changing consumer tastes.

In the second paper, Diego Rinallo investigates the emergence of the metrosexual—a straight men adopting the aesthetic sensibilities of gay consumers—and compares this media representation of masculinity with the lived experiences of male consumers. He found that the consumption landscape of straight men is made of ‘danger zone’ and ‘safe areas’ whose boundaries are continuously renegotiated by marketers, the media, individual consumers and the ‘panoptical’ gaze of their significant others.

The third paper, presented by Susan Kaiser, Janet Hethorn, Ryan Looyesen, and Daniel Claro, addresses the interplay between prescription and description in men’s fashion, through a longitudinal critical discourse of men’s magazines which is compared with consumer data based on interviews and a survey. The study on which this paper is based draws on an ongoing multi-year study. Extensive interpretations and write-ups for the findings here reported are however complete.

Also the final paper looks into the world of men’s fashion with a quantitative study that employs a web-based methodology for visual research to empirically identify the ways through which consumers and cultural gatekeepers (i.e., people working for various fashion institutions) categorize men’s “looks”. Data collection and analysis is complete for consumer data, but still underway for gatekeeper data. For the presentation, initial results from the comparison will however be provided.

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

“It’s sort of comical how you think that you’ve made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry”: Fashion and Consumer Agency, Revisited
Diego Rinallo, Bocconi University, Italy