Shared Spaces and Personal Corners in Social Networking Websites: the Contracted and the Cryptically Revealed Self.

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This interpretive paper (mainly based on interviews) addresses the gap in the intersection of personal and social identities with a specific focus on the role of objects as relationship mediators. The ‘contracted self’ (Tian and Belk, 2005) is explored further as a mechanism through which members of social networking websites manage a balance between individuality and a simultaneous connectedness to multiple others in search of ‘the social link’ (Cova, 1997). Two strategies of either contracting or cryptically revealing the self are identified and explained in terms of fostering shared social spaces and preserving individuality in multilayered environments.

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Extended abstract

Consumer objects and associated narratives lie in “the intersection of the personal and the social” (Hurdley 2006). Yet studies on consumer identity have focused on the relationship between possessions and individual identities (e.g., Schau and Gilly 2003) or possessions and collective identities (e.g., Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001) and there remains a notable gap in understanding the interrelationships between different levels of the self (Epp and Price 2008). This “in between space” (ibid) between personal, interpersonal and collective self (Brewer and Gardner 1996) has often been described as home to “friction” (Schau and Muñiz 2002) as the person seeks a balance of uniqueness and similarity to others (Snyder and Fromkin 1981). Prior research (e.g., Schau and Muñiz 2002) has investigated the tensions between the self and the social (Jenkins 1996) but these have been mostly associated with individual impression management concerns (e.g., in Belk and Watson 1998). However, this paper addresses the gap in the intersection of identities with a specific focus on the role of objects as relationship mediators (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). The concept of the “contracted” or “concealed self” (i.e. non-extending aspects of the self through consumption) is borrowed from Tian and Belk (2005) and explored further in this paper as a mechanism through which members of social networking websites (Facebook and MySpace) manage a balance between a sense of individuality and a simultaneous connectedness to multiple others in search of “the social link” (Cova 1997). Two strategies of either contracting or revealing the self are identified and explained in terms of simultaneously fostering shared social spaces and preserving individuality.

A corpus of interviews (individual and within friendship groups of network use) with eleven key informants over a period of four months, supplemented by interview, diary and introspective essay exploratory data, have provided accounts on the symbolic meaning (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998) of the networked profiles’ resources (e.g. photographs, textual status updates and comments) and have been interpreted based on grounded theory analysis procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The Facebook profile of Julie, one of the research informants, contains more than four hundred photographs of her (either alone or with peers and posted both by her and by friends). However, Julie insists that “There is nothing about me here.” Unlike personal websites—which have been described as vehicles for conspicuous self-presentation (e.g., Schau and Gilly 2003)—social networking profiles can be construed not to be passively viewed but to be inviting group participation and involvement. Far from being closed spaces under the control of their owner, others can co-habit and ultimately co-write them, for example by posting photographs or links and engaging in conversation on each other’s profiles. The result is a shared space filled with communal acts which provide links to others (Belk 2010). Here the resources become “joint possessions” (ibid) and members become “users” of the resources in accomplishing social engagement and connectedness. Two strategies of retracting parts of the individual self to achieve this shared, shared space are identified. First, retracting from the representation of the past and future self and focusing on its present. For example, Mia notes “Anything old won’t mean anything [to other people]” while “updating your self helps you keep in touch.” Second, retracting the personal or prior meaning of a possession and using it anew as a social prop. For example, an old fashioned family photograph previously displayed and cherished in the family home is now uploaded to an online account, attracting humorously mocking remarks from peers leading to a snowballing of comments.

While the individual self retracts in some senses to promote social involvement, it can be revealed and it can regain control and ownership of resources (Belk 1988) in individual spaces of “private meanings” (Richins 1994). However, tensions created through the need to ensure community participation in a primarily social space leaves the self looking for cryptic ways to express its individual aspects. A multilayered environment containing both shared, social spaces and individual ones with restricted access can be moulded with two cryptically revealing strategies. First, dividing the space and finding individual corners in a literal spatial manner alongside the shared spaces. Indicatively, the majority of Anna’s photographs contain candid shots with friends or tourist sites and are intended “to be shared with friends”, yet her profile photograph depicting her with a green hat bearing a four-leaf clover is a carefully constructed representation of her self: “My profile photo says who I am … I am Irish.” Tim, originally from Asia but studying at a British university, says: “Somewhere on my profile I have created an album about autumn in the United Kingdom. It means a lot to me. I took it for my niece to see, she loves tree leaves…” The second strategy entails subtly incorporating the individual self into the shared spaces. For example, Ross describes what kinds of status updates he prefers: “I would write ‘I just had an amazing sandwich–pastrami–from that amazing baguette shop I just found’. People could then comment on the place. They might have a story to tell about it, they might start a dialogue, someone might want to comment on the shop. It communicates something about your personality if it’s spontaneous like that. Otherwise you might as well walk around with a t-shirt saying what sandwiches you like.”

Thus, while different contexts have been described to trigger temporary shifts in identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the data reveals that contracting and partially or cryptically revealing the individual self within a social context becomes a tool in the hands of consumers for constructing a multilayered environment of shared social spaces and preserved individuality. This way individual aspects need not be given up in favour of the community as in the accounts of Ritson et al.’s informants (1996) nor does the shared environment have to remain socially undifferentiated. Rather, individual aspects can find their own nuanced ways to coexist alongside or within a social shared web of connectedness.

References
Eager Vigilance in Consumer Response to Negative Information: The Role of Regulatory Focus and Information Ambiguity

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Abstract

Research on negative information (e.g., Herr et al. 1991) has well documented that negative information compared to positive information of equal extremity can exert greater influence on consumption related beliefs and attitudes. Although considerable research has studied the impact of negative information, little attention has been paid to the information characteristics of negative information, especially ambiguity or certainty of the information. Nowadays, consumers have access to a wide variety of outlets for negative product information, including traditional media and new media, such as online news forums, webcasts and podcasts. The negative information consumers encounter in their everyday consumption setting is not always certain and clear-cut. For example, one cannot be certain whether the review for a restaurant from a stranger on internet forum is reliable; one cannot be sure whether to blame the company, the consumer or the situation for a product failure reported by another consumer. When consumers encounter such ambiguous negative information about a brand towards which they have an initially positive attitude, how will they react? Whether will they accept this information and downgrade their attitude toward the brand accordingly, or will they disregard it and maintain their initial attitude? Previous research on boundary conditions of negativity effect (Ahluwalia 2002; Ahluwalia et al. 2000) suggests that committed and non-committed consumers differ in their receptibility of the same piece of negative information. Committed consumers tend to counterargue the negative information concerning their beloved brand rather than passively accept it as non-committed consumers do. However, question still remains in the situation of early process of attitude formation, where consumers are not committed to the brand and are often actively referring to a variety of sources for product information of various qualities. Will they all be affected to the same extent by negative information? In this research, we draw on the literature from regulatory-focus theory (Higgins 1997), negativity effect (Ahluwalia 2002; Herr et al. 1991) and information ambiguity (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Ratneshwar 1993) to provide evidence for the interaction effect of consumers’ regulatory focus and information ambiguity on the persuasiveness of negative information.

Regulatory focus theory proposes that promotion focus and prevention focus differ in their strategic inclinations for attaining desired...