



“My plastic dreams”: Towards an extended understanding of materiality and the shaping of consumer identities☆



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ABSTRACT

Individuals relate to consumption objects as a means to develop, reinforce, transform, or align their fragmented individual identities. Prior research has mainly focused on understanding the identity-shaping potential of finished consumer products, such as branded shoes. Less attention has been dedicated to understanding how material substances, designer intentions, and marketing efforts jointly influence materiality and the shaping of consumers' identities. Drawing from a netnographic investigation of an online community of plastic shoe aficionados, we extend current understandings of object–consumer relations to include pre-objectification – a process whereby cultural forms are translated into material objects. This expanded view allows us to examine the outcomes of consumer interaction with material elements inscribed in consumption objects. Our study uncovers a collective materialization process where culturally situated material interactions give shape to consumer identities and feedback into consumer culture.

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1. Introduction

Consumer research has extensively examined how interactions with products help consumers to shape their identities and selves (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1998). Product design, for instance, can elicit infatuation in object–consumer relations (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011), and consumers may become attached and develop relationships with specific material objects, independently of these objects' brands (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2013). Although recent research in various disciplines has started to move beyond finished consumption objects to look at the material characteristics objectified in them, a comprehensive framework for examining the identity-shaping outcomes of consumers' interaction with pre-objectification elements is absent (Borgerson, 2013;

Dant, 2008; Ingold, 2012). The “thingness” of consumption objects (Miller, 1987, 2005) thus has the potential to support consumer identity-shaping in ways that we do not fully understand. Our study addresses this gap by proposing an expanded view of materiality that considers how interaction with objectified material elements may influence consumers' identity projects.

In elaborating our framework, we focus on shoes, a consumption object that is frequently associated with consumers' identity-shaping efforts (Belk, 2003; Marion & Nairn, 2011). Shoes, like clothes, are an example of an object that is “especially suitable for studying the relationship between personal values and values attributed to material goods because of its close association with perceptions of the self” (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Material culture surrounding shoes stimulates consumer imaginations through fantasies and dreams of escape from reality (Huey & Proctor, 2011). In many fairy tales, movies, and TV shows, shoes are gifted with “the magical power that gives the ordinary and humble the ability to move out of their environment into a better world” (McDowell, 1989, p. 86). Hence shoes have been extensively examined as meaning-laden consumption objects, being considered primarily in light of their magical, fetish-related or cultural properties, “in terms of what they stand for (usually femininity and sex) rather than what they are” (Sherlock, 2014, p. 26). Consequently, their thingness – that is, the material substances and shapes they are made of – disappears into the background of academic research analyses (but see Braithwaite, 2014, for an exception). But as our study demonstrates,

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substances, shapes, and the intentions of object creators also support the shaping of consumer identity when we consider pre-objectification — a process whereby cultural ideas are translated into material forms (see Section 3.2).

In examining how consumers interact with the thingness of shoes, our study's makes three important contributions to the literature. First, we extend research on materiality, which attends mostly to finished products (Ingold, 2007), through advancing our understanding of the outcomes of consumer interaction with material elements, namely material substances, designer intentions, and marketing efforts inscribed in consumption objects (Borgerson, 2013; Dant, 2008; Ingold, 2012). The marketing efforts objectified in consumption objects have been extensively covered in the branding literature (Ahuvia, 2005; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011). Hence, while we keep in mind the marketing efforts that shape brand identity, we center our analysis of object–consumer relations on the other two pre-objectification elements: material substances and design intentions.

Second, by analyzing consumer interactions with the elements that materialized in material consumption and the way these interactions are displayed, shared, and collectively extended online, we uncover a more detailed process through which culturally situated material interactions shape consumer identities and feedback into consumer culture. Current research largely overlooks how material interaction shapes the broader cultural context where it happens (Watson, 2008), focusing instead on outcomes manifested at the individual level (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009). Recent exceptions (Bettany, 2007; Watson & Shove, 2008) have highlighted the importance of understanding consumer interactions with material in order to complement our understanding of how meanings shape the socio-cultural world (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986).

Third, we bridge the gap between understandings of object relations in social psychology and current understandings of object–consumer relations in consumer culture research and other disciplines. We do so by developing a theoretical framework that details the process of materialization into its pre-objectification and objectification phases, connected by what we call creative space. Based on Winnicott (1971)'s concept of “third space”, the creative space is loaded with the emotional energy that emerges as consumer and object interact. The final stage in the materialization process, the creative space represents the phase where consumer and object transformations get embedded into consumer identity projects and cultural forms.

We apply our model to examine consumer relations to shoes that are produced with a distinct material and style: plastic shoes commercialized under the brand Melissa. By empirically examining how Melissa consumers relate to the shoes' material substance and design, we offer an illustration of how our framework allows for considerations of the influence of pre-objectification elements in support of consumer identity work and transformations of self.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We briefly review consumer research and other literature that examines how object relations shape consumer identity projects, present key elements of materiality research that are relevant for understanding consumer–object relations, and introduce our conceptual model of extended materialization. We then describe our research context and our methods, present our findings, and conclude with implications for business research and practice.

2. Object–consumer relations and their outcomes

Consumer culture scholars have extensively elaborated on the implications of objects' symbolic dimensions for consumers' identity projects (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1989). For instance, Ahuvia (2005) notes objects' capacity to transform consumer selves into new desired forms. In expanding on Belk (1989) proposition that relationships between a person and a thing always involve a third person who may also want to partake of the object, the author explains that objects are also used

to express and mediate relationships among people. Therefore Ahuvia (2005) extends the notion of self towards social interaction with objects by discussing love as an overarching emotional state that is useful to consumers to experience and sustain a diversity of coherent identity narratives as these consumers interact with their possessions.

More recently, other scholars have been discussing the notion of self-concept as a dialectic interaction between distinct dimensions of self to address consumers' emotions in dealing with many self-conceptualizations (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Hamilton & Hassan, 2010). Marion and Nairn (2011) also understand self-concept as a dialectic interaction and find that consumers' coherent identity narratives are not only based on their differentiation in selfhood (experiences of one-self) but also on the sameness (oneself over time) in their life project. Hence, consumer identity becomes an incremental process in which the uniqueness of each person endures over time while transformations are welcome as long as they make sense to one's lifetime self-concept. Altogether, these studies shed light on emotional aspects of consumers' constituting their sense of self in relation to society. They also show that possessions work beyond self-representation as consumers make use of objects to reflect on their self-concepts. However, the material aspects of object–consumer relations fade in their analysis.

Other understandings of identity as an outcome of social relationships have been developed that clearly indicate how objects are employed to develop and reflect processes of self-transformation, also transforming how individuals are treated by others (Choi, Ko, & Megehee, 2014; Dittmar, 1992; Miller, 2010). For instance, Shankar et al. (2009) note that while choosing an identity may seem an agentic choice, it can also be a very threatening one because of its potential to cause social rejection. Whereas Shankar et al. (2009) analysis focuses on what constrains consumer identity projects, it also highlights the role of objects as a stabilizing force in human life. As individuals go through life changes, they fix their identities in objects, allowing these identities to be retrieved later when they are desirable and socially appropriate.

Conversely, material goods may drive consumers to recall aspects of their existing identities that may be seen as unfitting to the consumers' current forms of socialization and ongoing identity projects (Shankar et al., 2009). This disconnect could undermine consumers' relationship with these objects and their brands. Therefore the capacity of objects to work in consumers' favor by supporting their identity projects (Ahuvia, 2005) is relative. These findings highlight the need to attend to the constraints on consumer agency when objects are taken as active in consumer identity-shaping (Shankar et al., 2009). In addition, the capacity of material goods to introduce reflexive thoughts and actions into the object–consumer relation should be highlighted, as the agency of objects seems to play a more prominent role in the process of materiality than that which has been granted to it by consumer research thus far (Borgerson, 2013). In order to advance these understandings, we provide the following overview of the research on materiality and consumption.

3. Materiality

Material goods are frequently understood through the lens of material embeddedness and studied as the process of objectification (Miller, 1987; Schatzki, 2010). But material goods have also been examined as the embodiment of cultural ideals, achieved through a process supported by interactions between consumers and objects (Dant, 2008; Ingold, 2007; Woodward, 2011). Engagement between individuals and objects is what is common to both approaches to materialization, and people's engagement with objects is motivated by the possibility of self-transformation (Woodward, 2011). Through its mediating role, materiality is regarded as a dynamic process that is able to connect — and transform — objects and consumers simultaneously.

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