



Nature as extended-self: Sacred nature relationship and implications for responsible consumption behavior



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ABSTRACT

This study explores alternate ways to conceptualize the relationship between the self and nature. Specifically, how does nature in general, rather than specific places in nature, become part of the extended self? While the theory of the extended self has been applied to understanding relationships with tangible possessions, the theory's application to intangible objects such as nature remain scant. The ethnographic data reveals three dimensions of the self-nature relationship: the relational extended self, the encapsulated self, and the assimilated self. These dimensions illustrate the intensity to perceive nature as part of self. This study provides theoretical insights into understanding how consumers relate to nature, and the processes they employ to view nature as part of their extended self to develop concern for nature, thus encouraging responsible consumption behavior. These dimensions of the self-nature relationship help explain why attitudes and responsible consumption behavior differ among consumers.

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1. Introduction

A sense of self in a favorite place generates an attachment to a special physical location, including physical aspects, experiences, and symbolic representations (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003). This research pushes the boundaries of knowledge by exploring the inner motivational enablers of the self-nature relationship, and how nature becomes part of the extended self. This relationship is important because nature's influence as the extended self affects responsible consumption behavior. Prior work establishes that place attachment is an emotional link with specific places resulting from a sense of belonging and identity. Researchers commonly examine this attachment within the context of cities, neighborhoods, and homes (Lewicka, 2010), or natural settings such as gardens (Freeman, Dickinson, Porter, & Van Heezik, 2012), recreational parks, and marine life (Halpenny, 2010; Wynveen, Kyle, & Sutton, 2014). Prior studies also identify the significance of possessions to extending the self. These possessions may include "body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences, and those persons, places and things to which one feels attached" (Belk, 1988, p. 141). The present study explores a full range of factors through ethnography, including the attachment to places, emotional relationships, symbolic meanings, and personal experiences, that work together to form a web of meanings

to understand nature as part of the extended self. Findings demonstrate different types of relationships to and with nature.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The extended self

The self represents a person as a whole, and includes personality, personal beliefs, feelings, experiences, and the regulatory self (Leary & Tangney, 2011). Self's formation develops through social interactions, and is the outcome of language and self-reflection (Owens, 2006). Kleine, Kleine and Kernan (1993, p. 209) describe the self as "a sense of who and what we are." Therefore, the self encompasses physical appearance, roles, experiences, values, beliefs and goals, and incorporates both physical and symbolic properties. The self is a dynamic concept involving psychological characteristics and self-regulation that determine personal characteristics and actions. Individuals strive to match their self's beliefs and actions.

Barresi (2002) cites William James' classification of the self into the subjective self (I) and the objective self (me)—knower versus known self. Studies distinguish the knower (I) self and the known (me) self, where the former relates to experience, and the latter is the product of experience (Leary & Tangney, 2011). Much research focuses on the known (me) self rather than on the knower (I) self. Following James' classifications, the "me" comprises the material, social, and spiritual and the "I" as the thinker (Barresi, 2002). Hence, exploring factors, situations, and experiences that form the known self is critical to

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understanding the overall formation of motivation that drives a person's behavior.

Belk (1988) describes the extended self to be multidimensional and identifies two distinct versions of the self: the inner self (me, or the core self), and the extended self (mine). Every individual has an inner “natural nature,” or the “very early acquired roots of individual self” (Maslow, 1962, p. 178). The early intrinsic or raw self is shaped by external forces such as environment, culture, and family (Maslow, 1962). Differentiating between the inner self and the extended self, Belk (1989) argues that the inner self consists of one's mind, and the extended self includes anything a person perceives to possess. Further, an object's sense of attachment formation depends on whether an object is experienced by controlling or being controlled by. The concept of the extended self suggests that individuals either accept an object's identity into their self, or they impose their identity onto the object. This factor significantly determines the relationship dimension with the object.

Regarding possessions, Belk (1988) suggests that external objects include physical environments. Objects exercising power over individuals may become part of the self. For example, garden ownership strongly associates with the self-identity of the gardener (Freeman et al., 2012). Also, an object may become part of the self by creation and knowing (Belk, 1988) resulting in “psychological ownership,” or a “feeling of ownership” over objects (Wong & Hogg, 2011, p. 65). Applying psychological ownership to experiences in nature forms an attachment. Nature attachment examples include conquering a mountain (controlling), gardening (creating), or experiencing river trekking (knowing). These experiences form personal meanings and attachments to elements of nature, extending the identity of the participant. Prior studies apply the theory of the extended self to understand relationships with tangible objects. This study broadens the theory of the extended self to intangible objects of nature.

People construct self-relevant meanings by reflecting on their experiences. Self-reflection encourages a person to examine his/her thoughts, emotions, or priorities, and this activity enhances self-understanding, guides behavior (Leary & Terry, 2012), and adds meaning to experiences (Devos, Huynh, & Banaji, 2011). To comprehend the self-nature extension, the present study examines the experiences of people through their engagement with nature, and how these experiences contribute to symbolic meanings and the formation of self-nature relationships. Exploring a person's self from various dimensions, namely, their values, experiences, and self-beliefs achieves this research objective. Additionally, this study explores nature's influence as the extended self on responsible consumption behavior. The term responsible consumption behavior means understanding the self-directed motivation of individuals towards the preservation of nature. Thus, responsible consumption behavior is the purchase, use, and disposal of goods and services with the goal of minimizing negative impacts on nature while still achieving personal gains.

3. Method

The research was conducted in Malaysia, mainly around the cities of Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Port Dickson in West Malaysia, and in Kota Kinabalu in East Malaysia. This study employs short term ethnography. Short term ethnography engages in immersive data collection while concurrently achieving a tight focus deriving from a theoretically-defined context (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Ethnographic data were gathered through participant observation in suitable activities, in-depth interviews and home visits, and recorded in-field notes, photographs, or transcribed tape recordings. Initially, participant observation offered a route to immersion in the topic, and researchers decided to maintain this approach for the study's duration. The first author engaged in participant observation over 17 months, participating in 11 nature-related activities totaling 115 h of observation (see Appendix A). Nature-related activities included bird watching, mountain and river trekking, cleaning waterfall areas, and nature and botanic walks.

Augmenting observations, long interviews aimed to deepen the etic, or researcher, view and purposive sampling maintained the focus of the research. Participants were sourced through connections with nature societies, from participant observation activities, by word-of-mouth, and through snowball sampling. Participants' privacy and identity were protected through the use of pseudonyms. Fifteen English speaking informants met the criteria of the purposive sampling, ranging from informants who connected with nature on a regular basis to environmental activists involved in nature conservation activities. Each interview lasted over an hour, and 20 h of conversation was recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, projective techniques were used to uncover participants' personal meanings of nature. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the informants until data saturation was reached and to check the developing etic analysis. Finally, the first author visited homes to observe and photograph participants' consumption practices. Coding and categorizing data was conducted progressively with data collection. Two researchers independently read the data and formed interpretations. The interpretations were compared to ensure trustworthiness and consistency, using part to whole analysis to develop the categorization represented by the final model (see Fig. 1). Any discrepancies in the interpretation were resolved through extensive discussion.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion present various dimensions of nature as the extended self. Results identify three different connection types to nature. This section concludes by discussing how nature as the extended self does influence responsible consumption behavior.

4.1. Nature as the extended self

Nature as an extended self is a complex relationship. Influencing this relationship are classifications including perceptions of boundaries between the self and nature, inclusiveness, beliefs, values, emotional bonding, symbolic meanings, purposes for engaging with nature, and behavior towards nature. External factors influence the inner self (core self) and formation of the extended self. That is, the knower self 'I' (the thinker) differs from the known self 'me' (the product of the experiences). Fig. 1 conceptually depicts these relationships' dimensions between the self and nature, and illustrates the values, beliefs and ecological worldviews, and the resulting impact on responsible consumption. The first dimension of the self-nature relationship comes from the literature. The self is separate from nature; anthropocentric values and beliefs dominate this dimension. This view regards humans as the core and most significant entity in the universe, and nature as an object for humans to use and exploit (Kortenkamp & Moore, 2001). This study purposely chose participants with an interest in nature, thus, none of the participants have a pure anthropocentric worldview. The results reveal that informants perceive nature as part of the self when they view nature as important to the self and is bound by affective connections.

Study results reveal three dimensions of the extended self. These dimensions include: (1) nature as a part of a larger self (relational extended self); (2) the self as a subset of superior nature (encapsulated self); and (3) the self as one with nature (assimilated self).

4.1.1. Nature perceived as a part of a larger self (relational extended self)

Vani and Sham relate to nature as an outward extension of the self to dominate nature. They perceive self as being more important than nature. Initially introduced to experiences of nature through gardens, these individuals symbolically define nature as a “mother” who provides food, shelter, beauty, and health as well as a place to improve personal characteristics. They connect with nature to fulfill personal needs, and they engage with nature to enhance physical and mental strength, improve personality, and build desired character. For example, Vani reports that her decision to climb Mount Kinabalu reflects her ability to

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