



Using attachment theory to understand consumers' tensions between their sense of self and goal-pursuits in relationships

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ABSTRACT

Consumers face tensions in deciding which goal to pursue, who to be and which self to present in daily life. Yet we know little about these tensions consumers experience as they respond to distinct interpersonal contexts (e.g., perceived support, trust, conflict and sense of belongingness). To this end, we explore the consumption deliberations that consumers undertake for self-presenting when faced with varying interpersonal encounters. We used interview data with women aged 19–62 and Rabinovich and Kacen's (2013) qualitative coding methodology to examine interpersonal patterns of self-presentation. During the data analysis, attachment theory emerged as important in illuminating the tensions participants experienced in pursuing 4 types of goal-pursuit (intimacy, prevention, performance and authenticity) aided by their consumption choices for self-presenting in specific interpersonal contexts. Our findings show intrapsychic and interpersonal influences are not non-interacting entities, but rather need to be studied in conjunction when examining how people create desired social images/identities.

1. Introduction

In postmodernity, we are encouraged to draw on a diverse range of consumption choices to be whoever we want to be (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). However, studies have highlighted that consumers often experience tensions when exercising these consumption choices (Ahuvia, 2005; Ruvio & Belk, 2018; Tian & Belk, 2005). Arguably, this is especially the case with consumption closely related to personal adornment, the practice of cultivating one's body and appearance such as clothing, make-up, tattooing, plastic surgery and the like (Larsen, Patterson, & Markham, 2014; Ruvio & Belk, 2018; Schouten, 1991). Murray (2002) argued that consumption choices for self-presentation can be a source of tension where “issues related to competing subjective positions, difference, and identity politics are marked and experienced” (p., 433). In order to resolve such tensions, consumers declare both who they are - and who they are not - by combining, adapting and personalizing fashion discourses (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). However, by turning to consumption as a solution to resolve such tensions, the solution can create new forms of tension (Ruvio & Belk, 2018).

Past consumer research has shown that a sense of tension is often felt when consumers engage in consumption deliberations to decide between *who I want to be*, focusing on the exercise of consumer agency, and *who I should be*, emphasizing the importance of adhering to

appropriate socio-cultural conduct. Here, consumption engaged in to present *who I want to be* is often conceptualized as a means of communicating our expression of the perceived authentic self. On the other hand, consumption used to advocate *who I should be* is usually thought of as involving efforts to conceal one's natural way of being that might undermine social acceptance.

Yet, while insightful, prior consumer research, when examining the role of consumption choices in creating identity tensions, has tended to focus mainly on the tensions between individual consumers and the wider cultural ideologies. Little is known about the tensions consumers may also experience as they deliberate consumption choices in deciding which goal to pursue, who to be and which self to present in distinct interpersonal contexts (e.g., perceived support, trust, conflict and sense of belongingness). To explore this topic, our research objective is to examine the consumption deliberations that consumers undertake for self-presenting when faced with varying interpersonal encounters. Specifically, we ask (1) what are the goals consumers pursue in relation to their self-presentations? And, (2) what are the tensions consumers might experience in pursuing these goals as they respond to distinct interpersonal contexts? We answer these questions by investigating the various ways our women participants describe their personal adornment efforts to achieve specific goals in interpersonal exchanges. Whereas self-presentation is arguably the most important and prevalent

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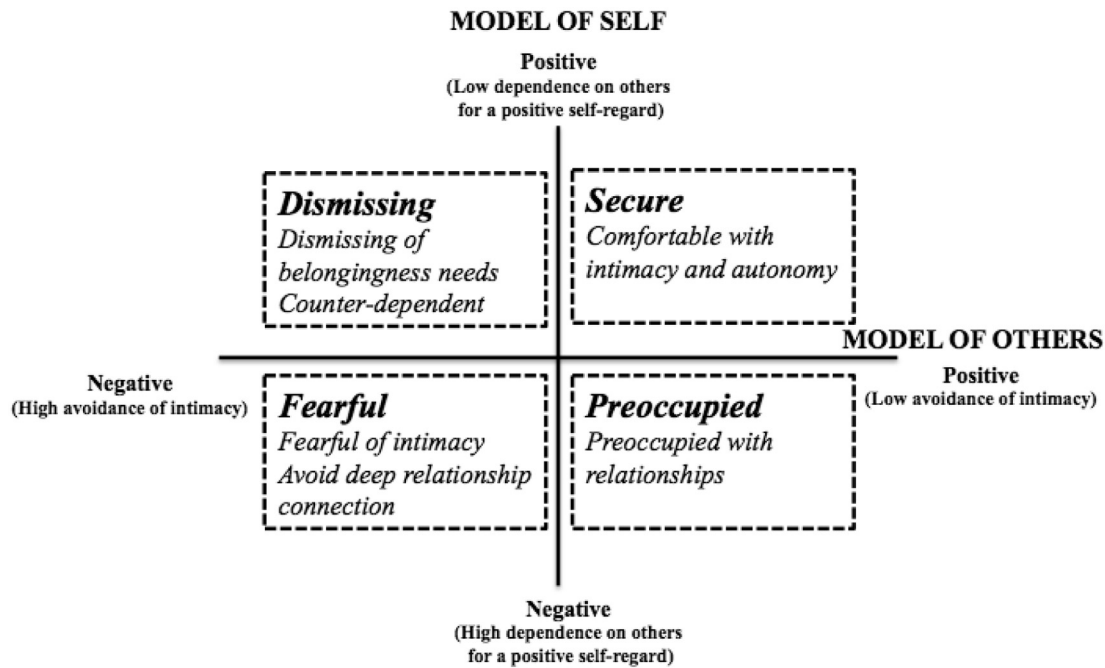


Fig. 1. Model of adult attachment (adapted from Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227).

task of the self across interpersonal contexts, the tensions involved in coming to terms with which goal to pursue and which self to be may be its most important intrapsychic task (also see Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005 on self-regulation).

This study draws on attachment theory (AT) to help shed light on the study phenomenon. During the course of our data analysis, Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) model of adult attachment styles emerged as highly relevant to the ways in which our participants made sense of the consumption choices that aided their self-presentation in distinct interpersonal contexts. Attachment styles have been used to explain consumer behavior in the context of relationships (Mende, Bolton, & Bitner, 2013; Nguyen & Munch, 2011, 2014; Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012) and the goals individuals pursue in interpersonal exchanges (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). More recent research has identified both stability and change in individuals' attachment styles as they respond to ongoing interpersonal experiences (Fraley, Vicary, Brumbaugh, & Roisman, 2011; Gillath, Karantzas, & Fraley, 2016; Stern et al., 2018). In the light of our findings, we view attachment styles as dimensional (Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015), which can help illuminate the tensions our participants experienced between their sense of self and the goals they sought to achieve through their self-presentation in distinct interpersonal contexts.

2. Consumers and their self-presentation

Research has long indicated heterogeneity in self-presentation across relationships (Snyder, 1987). Leary and Allen (2011) argue that firstly, people tailor their public images to specific audiences, and secondly, a broader variety of self-presentation behaviors are engaged with when interacting with close others rather than with non-close others. In addition, Øverup and Neighbors (2016) suggested that individuals engage in differing levels of self-presentation, depending on the perceived closeness to and trust in the socializing other(s). That is, when people feel close to and have trust in a person, they tend not to feel as urgent a need to portray a favorable self-image, although this feature was recorded somewhat inconsistently in that study. In sum, we know that different self-presentations often reflect a variety of goal-pursuits in relationships. Yet, little is known about how these goals operate in specific interpersonal contexts (Øverup & Neighbors, 2016).

In the consumption setting, earlier studies have established the importance of cultivating specific self-presentations through personal adornment as a means of achieving a variety of identity and/or relationship goals (Askegaard, Gertsen, & Langer, 2002; Belk, 2003; Liu, Keeling, & Hogg, 2016; McAlexander & Schouten, 1989; Ruvio & Belk, 2018; Schouten, 1991). McAlexander and Schouten (1989) show how hairstyling could help consumers facilitate identity transition. Huang and Yu (2000) find products used to enhance self-attractiveness play a role in maintaining romantic relationships. Liu et al. (2016) identify how women used make-up to cope with a series of wellbeing challenges (including the need to fit in, or to create intimacy). Seregina and Weijo (2017) argue that costuming or cosplay is a means of aiding identity play and creating community feeling. In the meantime, many researchers have shown that consumers often experience tensions in their choices of personal adornment, negotiating between “who I want to be” and “who I should be” (Murray, 2002; Ruvio & Belk, 2018; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Ruvio and Belk's (2018) work, for example, underlies the tensions transpeople often experience in choosing how to adorn the self, reflecting their struggle in trying to harmonize social norms and perceived authentic self-presentation. These studies tend to focus firstly, on consumers' appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings, and secondly, at the level of their self-presentation. We therefore still know little about the role of interpersonal contexts in influencing the tensions consumers experience as they deliberate about which goal to pursue, who to be and which self to present.

3. Attachment theory and styles

Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) model of adult attachment styles emerged as important in illuminating the reasons behind our participants' various uses of personal adornment in specific interpersonal contexts. There has been an increasing application of AT from psychology to the consumer behavior context (e.g., Nguyen & Munch, 2011; Paulssen, 2009; Thomson et al., 2012; Whelan, Johnson, Marshall, & Thomson, 2016). One reason for this is that attachment theory is one of the most comprehensive and leading theoretical frameworks for explaining how people approach and behave in interpersonal relationships (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Nguyen & Munch, 2014). Attachment

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