

Our possessions, our selves: Domains of self-worth and the possession–self link

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Received 31 August 2009; revised 20 August 2010; accepted 30 August 2010

Available online 8 October 2010

Abstract

The extent to which a possession is linked to self is a critical determinant of whether a possession elicits grief if lost. We propose a framework for understanding the formation of the possession–self link, arguing that a possession's ability to represent the important domains on which a person bases her self-worth affects the possession–self link. We also show that dispositional tendencies to incorporate possessions into the self moderate this relationship, while the monetary value of the possession does not affect the strength of the possession–self link.

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Keywords: Special possessions; Possession loss; Self-identity; Self-worth

Baby teeth, a salt-and-pepper shaker collection, and a broken dirt bike are just some of the items that people on the television show *Clean House* are forced to part with when having their home decluttered and redesigned. Viewers may find it hard to understand why the owner dissolves into tears as seemingly useless items are sold at a yard sale or thrown in the trash. Victims who have suffered a total loss of their homes and personal belongings in natural disasters such as wildfires or floods lament the irreplaceable possessions that have personal significance to them, such as family photos or heirlooms (Archibold & Moore, 2007; Kovach, 2007). These individuals react to the loss of possessions with intense feelings; they grieve for their loss.

Why might individuals display strong reactions to the loss of certain possessions? Material possessions are often much more than their functional properties (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959); for example, possessions may be used to construct

one's self and thus become a symbolic manifestation of who one is (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Richins, 1994). Possessions with such properties become an extension of the self (Belk, 1988); therefore, the loss of these possessions is a threat to self-identity. Burris and Rempel (2004) similarly argue that the loss of special possessions elicits strong negative reactions because special possessions are identity markers, and the loss of an identity marker is a symbolic form of death of self.

In this paper, we propose that the extent to which a possession is linked to the self is a critical determinant of whether a possession is perceived to be an identity marker and hence liable to elicit strong reactions if lost. Prior research has proposed, but not empirically demonstrated, that such a link is critical to the degree of grief experienced from a possession loss. We demonstrate this relationship and, more importantly, offer and test a framework for understanding how and why possession–self linkages form for some consumer-possession pairs, but not for others. Specifically, we show that a key factor in the formation of the possession–self link is how strongly the possession reflects domains on which a person bases her self-worth. Further, we show that individual differences in the tendency to use

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possessions to define the self moderate the relationship between self-worth reflection and the possession–self link. Finally, we show that the material value of the possession, while affecting other aspects of possession attachment, does not affect the strength of the possession–self link. Thus, we have a specific, narrow focus on the role of possessions in identity construction, just one aspect of the broader construct of possession attachment.

Theoretical development

Possession loss and the possession–self link

Research based on interviews with those who have experienced involuntary possession loss (e.g., natural disaster and theft) shows that people often grieve the loss of possessions, and that experienced grief seems to be derived from, or at least accompanied by, concerns about one's sense of self. For example, burglary victims go through a process of mourning their stolen possessions (Rosenblatt, Walsh, & Jackson, 1976), reporting feelings of anger, invasion or violation, and losing a piece of their lives (Belk, 1988). Burglary victims report that their psychological losses were greater than their financial losses and feel that the event changed the type of person that they were (Maguire, 1980). Sayre and Horne (1996), focusing on replaceable items, found that victims of wildfires viewed the repurchase process as an opportunity to redefine who they were.

Why do people respond so strongly to the loss of certain possessions, especially if those possessions have little monetary or functional value? The value in owning a possession goes beyond its functional benefits; value can be derived from the possession's ability to symbolize important components of self-identity, such as the successes one has accomplished, the important relationships one has, and what one finds meaningful (e.g., Belk, 1988, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Levy, 1959). When possessions serve this symbolic purpose they become part of the extended self and go from being thought of as “mine” to being thought of as “me” (Belk, 1988). Thus, the loss of a possession means the loss of some aspect of self in addition to the loss of the tangible item.

Similarly, Burris and Rempel (2004) contend that humans have a boundary between the self and not-self and thus between mine and not-mine. An individual's ability to think symbolically about objects allows them to serve as identity markers. Thus, when an identity marker, such as a special possession, is involuntarily lost or destroyed, a part of the self is destroyed, which can be construed as a symbolic form of death, leading to strong negative reactions. Their model suggests that the more a possession symbolically represents the self, the greater the negative reactions experienced if it is lost.

We also argue that the most meaningful possessions are those that help the owner garner and/or strengthen self-identity and thus construct and symbolize the self. We refer to such a relationship as a possession–self link; the stronger the

possession–self link, the greater the grief experienced if the possession is lost (hypothesis 1).

Self-worth and possession–self link formation

Clearly, not all possessions will become linked to the self. A unique contribution of our conceptual framework is that we explore one process by which possessions become part of a consumer's constructed identity. We propose that possession–self linkages develop as a consequence of a possession's ability to represent the important domains upon which a person bases self-worth. Crocker and Wolfe (2001, 594) define a contingency of self-worth “as a domain or category of outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem.” One's view of her worth depends on perceived successes and failures in important domains, with higher self-worth when there are many perceived successes and few perceived failures. Possessions that are representative of those successes will bolster self-worth. For example, a college diploma represents an academic achievement and a wedding ring represents a strong interpersonal relationship, one or both of which may bolster self-worth depending on which domains are important to an individual consumer. We call the extent to which a possession reflects an important self-worth domain the degree of self-worth match.

Another way to think about self-worth match is to consider these contingencies as reflections of people's values. People build self-esteem by living in a manner that is consistent with and reflective of their values, such as valuing individual achievement or interpersonal relationships. When a possession serves as a symbol of an important value that is central to one's self-concept, thereby creating and bolstering self-worth, a possession–self link may be formed. Thus, self-worth match will have a positive relationship with possession–self link (hypothesis 2).

Moderation of the relationship between self-worth match and the possession–self link

We also propose that the formation of the possession–self link via self-worth match can be attenuated or enhanced by other factors. Specifically, we propose that people vary in the extent to which they generally use possessions to define the self. We refer to this individual difference as self-extension tendency, which reflects a general tendency not specific to any one possession. This notion was adapted from the Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg (2009) construct of brand engagement in self-concept, which is the tendency of consumers to include brands as part of their self-concept.

We postulate that self-extension tendency moderates the relationship between self-worth match and possession–self link such that self-worth match will have a stronger effect on the possession–self link for individuals low in self-extension tendency. People high in self-extension tendency will report strong possession–self linkages with many possessions, regardless of self-worth match, while people low in self-

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