The Lived Meaning of Symbolic Consumption and Identity Construction in Stable and Transitional Phases: Towards an Analytical Framework

Elin Brandi Sorensen, University of Southern Denmark
Thyra Uth Thomsen, Copenhagen Business School

In this paper, we propose an analytical framework for the investigation of consumers’ lived experience of identity related consumption in stable and transitional phases. The framework integrates the ideas (1) that objects can support the consumer’s identity construction because of their ‘signal’ value - or because of their potential to provide the consumer with a certain ‘experience’ of self, (2) that these meanings can reside in a ’common’ domain - or in a more ’private’ domain, and (3) that these meanings can be vehicles for the ongoing ‘maintenance’ as well as ‘acquisition’ or ‘disposition’ of important life roles.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13720/eacr/vol7/E-07

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Lived Meaning of Symbolic Consumption and Identity Construction in Stable and Transitional Phases: Towards an Analytical Framework
Elin Brandi Sørensen, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark
Thyra Uth Thomsen, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we propose an analytical framework for the investigation of consumers’ lived experience of identity related consumption in stable and transitional phases. The framework integrates the ideas (1) that objects can support the consumer’s identity construction because of their ‘signal’ value or because of their potential to provide the consumer with a certain ‘experience’ of self, (2) that these meanings can reside in a ‘common’ domain or in a more ‘private’ domain, and (3) that these meanings can be vehicles for the ongoing ‘maintenance’ as well as ‘acquisition’ or ‘disposition’ of important life roles.

INTRODUCTION
Ever since 1959, when Levy’s seminal paper “Symbols for sale” entered the arena of marketing research, attention has been given to the symbolic virtues of consumption products. According to Levy, products are not only bought for what they do, but also for what they mean (Levy, 1959). Two decades later, Levy’s assumption was revived at a conference on symbolic consumer behaviour (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1981), which set the scene for the emergent discipline labelled the interpretive consumer research. Interpretive consumer research was interdisciplinary and holistic in nature and gave special attention to context, culture and symbolic meanings (Belk, 1995). In the wake of this discipline, the link between symbolic consumption and identity construction became one of many focus areas and has so far resulted in extensive theoretical insights and empirical evidence.

The purpose of this paper is to extract certain aspects of the rich body of research on the topic of symbolic consumption and identity construction into a comprehensive analytical framework. The framework will focus on how the consumer may encounter identity construction through consumption and give special attention to the rather new body of literature on symbolic consumption and identity transition. Accordingly, the framework will be able to account for one of the key characteristics of the late-modern consumer, which is the consumer’s ever-changing identity.

In the following, the presentation of the framework will be executed in two different steps. First, we will briefly review the body of literature covering relevant aspects of symbolic consumption and identity construction applicable to relatively stable life role phases. Subsequently, we will integrate the concepts of role separation and role transition into this framework in order to make it applicable to transitional life role phases and possibly radical changes in consumption practice and consumer identity too.

SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
From the point of view of the consumer, we take identity to be the answer to the question: “Who am I?” (cf. Thomsen, 2001a/b, Weigert et al, 1986). Following a social constructivist framework, the answer to this question can be conceptualised as a result of an ongoing symbolic interaction between the individual and society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weigert et al, 1986; Gergen, 1997). Thus, identity is negotiated and may have many faces (Gergen, 1995). These faces—that is the different answers to the identity question—must be meaningful and somewhat typical to be intelligible (Weigert et al., 1986).

A primary means of symbolic interaction is consumption. This means that consumption has communicative aspects. An extensive body of interpretive consumer research has focused on these aspects of consumption and documented that consumption objects and consumption practices1 are charged with symbolic meanings that may play a part in the construction of the consumer’s identity (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994; Kleine et al., 1995; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Askegaard and Firat, 1996; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Holt, 1995/1997/2002; Murray, 2002). Each of these works contributes to a comprehensive picture of how consumption and consumption meanings may contribute to the consumer’s identity construction. In the following, these aspects will be summed up and illustrated analogous to a framework developed for the analysis of consumer practice in the field of transportation (Thomsen, 2001a/b).

The choice of a certain consumption object can be a signal source for the construction of identity by saying something about or to the consumer (Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986).

Moreover, the choice of a consumption object may be an experiential source for the construction of identity by giving the consumer a certain feeling about himself or herself (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Askegaard and Firat, 1996). This leads us to a distinction between the ‘signal’ value and the ‘experiential’ value of a consumer good.

Also, we may distinguish between—what we will call the ‘private’ and the ‘common’ symbolic meaning of consumer products (Richins, 1994; Holt, 1995). A private symbolic meaning is ideographic and less institutionalised than the common symbolic meaning of products. A common symbolic meaning of a product, on the other hand, is part of a culture’s common knowledge like, for instance, some consumption stereotypes. Still, any private meaning is embedded in the common symbolic universe that is shared by the consumer culture. According to Thompson and Haytko (1997: p. 38), dominant discourses—in the sense of offering a conventional or preferred reading of cultural events—as well as more marginal discourses all exist as possible narratives from which consumers can construct an understanding of everyday life.

Whether or not the consumer may choose freely between these marginal/private and dominant/common consumption meanings is frequently discussed. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) argue that identity selection by the post-modern consumer is “an optimistic theoretical construction”. A free selection of meanings and thus identities—is a utopia. However, according to Murray (2002), this is but one of two possible perspectives. From a sign experimentation perspective, the consumer may “have free reign in the play of signs to piece together a collage of meanings that expresses the desired symbolic statements”. The “sign domination” perspective, on the other hand, eliminates this emphasis on agency in favour of structural processes. The framework suggested here acknowledges the concept of agency, while recognizing that this agency is embedded in certain structural imperatives. As a consequence, the symbolic meaning attached to products by the consumer are expected to be of both private origin and structurally guided. The consumer may thus

1In the remains of the paper any reference to consumption objects will cover both objects and practices.
not only express the meaning of consumption in easily recognizable common stereotypes, but also in more marginal private symbols. Combining the distinctions between ‘signal’ versus ‘experience’ and ‘private’ versus ‘common’ as described above, a consumer may encounter identity through symbolic consumption in the ways depicted in figure 1 (cf. Thomsen, 2001b).

The above-illustrated four categories will be briefly described below. The categories are not mutually exclusive since a product can add to the consumer’s construction of identity in more ways than one and at the same time (cf. Holt, 1995). The overlapping circles illustrate this point. Even so, from an analytical point of view, the distinctions made are important in order to avoid focusing on the perhaps most obvious source of identity construction that objects may carry, which is their common signal value. While the commonly shared cultural meaning of consumption objects—such as consumption stereotypes—are widely recognized to have implications for consumer identity, the private and experiential meanings of consumption are more easily overlooked.

A) Common signal. Here, the consumer ascribes a common communicative meaning to the consumption object. The consumer (re)produces a typified and commonly shared meaning of consumption. Consuming a certain object tells a story about the consumer that will be understood in much the same way by himself and his surroundings. In this way, consumption can contribute to the communication of the consumer’s identity and lifestyles (Holt, 1997; McCracken, 1986).

B) Private signal. In this case, the consumer ascribes an idiosyncratic experiential meaning to consumer products. The consumption communicates something to the individual. Through auto-communication, the private symbolic meaning of the consumption object can add to the consumer’s sense of self (Belk, 1988; Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986).

C) Common experience. A common experience of consumer products is based on the consumers’ general evaluation of the consumption object. This evaluation is embedded in the consumer culture’s norms, history and conventions (Holt, 1995). Here, the consumer experiences himself according to experiential meanings of a consumption object commonly agreed on.

D) Private experience. Here, the consumer ascribes an idiosyncratic experiential meaning to consumer products. The consumer’s aesthetic, emotional or sensual reaction to the consumption object can be both positive and negative (Holt, 1995) and bring about a certain sense of self (Askegaard & Firtat, 1996).

The theoretical framework described above illustrates how consumption can be thought to add to the consumer’s identity construction. Examples of these types of identity construction through consumption will follow in the next section. It is worth mentioning, however, that non-consuming may add to the consumer’s identity construction in much the same way. In the age of reflexive consumerism, expressed as a dislike of certain products and a distancing from certain values of consumer culture, may be equally important sources of identity construction (Kleine et al., 1995; Douglas, 1996; Holt, 2002).

Finally, as noted earlier, a key characteristic of the late-modern consumer is the consumer’s ever-changing identity. Since the above-presented framework is based on a constructivist paradigm, by nature it is adaptable to the notion of identity change. As a further consequence of its constructivist origin, it is open to the notion that a perfectly healthy modern consumer has many faces and may embody several identities all at the same time (Gergen, 1995). However fluid, the plasticity of self manifests itself in somewhat fixed and recognizable shapes of identities during the individual’s life course (Berger and. Luckmann, 1966). These identities may however change in a radical way during certain life stages and rites of passage and that consumption can play an important part in these transitional phases. The next section will address these issues.

SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AND PERSONAL TRANSITIONS

Since Schouten’s (1991) seminal article on the role of cosmetic surgery as a marker of important personal transitions, there has been a moderate but steady interest in the complex relationship between symbolic consumption and personal role transitions. Among the personal role transitions that have received attention, we find the transition of going away to college (Noble & Walker 1997), the
transition into motherhood (e.g. Fischer & Gainer 1993; Jennings & O’Malley 2003), women’s transition into the empty nest stage (e.g. Hogg, Maclaran & Curasi, 2003; Curasi, Hogg & Maclaran, 2001; Olsen, 1999), and end-of-life dispositions of possessions (Arnould et al. 2004).

In most of this literature, a central idea is that life status changes involve not only a movement into a new role, but also a movement away from a previous role, and that these movements are marked symbolically through consumption behaviours. Thus, entering a role is marked symbolically by the acquisition of new products or activities (Noble & Walker 1997), while leaving a role is marked symbolically by disposing of old possessions and practices that related to the old role (Young 1991; Adelman 1992; Price et al. 2004).

This central idea has its roots with van Gennep and his classic work on ‘rites of passage’ (van Gennep, 1960). Van Gennep contends that important life transitions, e.g. the birth of the first child or the death of a spouse, usually comprise three distinct phases. First there is ‘separation’, where a person seeks to dispose of a previous role or identity. Then there is ‘transition’ where the person seeks to adapt to and create a new role or identity. And finally there is ‘incorporation’, where the person integrates the new role or status into the self.

In primal societies, culturally prescribed rituals, the so-called rites of passage, would support the individual during his role transition. However, in a modernized secular world, people often lack such supportive rites. They are more often than not left on their own to cope with the difficulties of transition and the ambiguities of self-concepts. On this background, Schouten (1991) develops the idea that people who are in the process of a role transition are likely to employ the symbols and activities made available to them by our consumer culture to create their own personal rite of passage.

As previously suggested, the idea that life role transitions may be marked symbolically through consumption has been well developed. But what is less clear in this literature is that the symbolic meanings differ in nature. When a pregnant woman decides to give up going to pubs in order to be seen as a responsible person by others (cf. Jennings & O’Malley 2003), the symbolic meaning resides in an institutionalised understanding of how a good mother behaves. But when a woman gives her car to her brother, because it contains too many bad memories of her rebel youth and therefore invalidates her sense of being adult (cf. Young 1991), the act of disposition derives its symbolic meaning from a very private resource; that is, the woman’s specific experiences with that car.

Thus, to develop a tool for analysing the symbolic meanings of transition-related consumption in more detail than has been the case hitherto, we propose to integrate the concepts of role transition described in this section into the framework for analysing symbolic consumption described in the previous section. We thus suggest that symbolic consumption may support life role transitions in four different ways; that is, due to its value as a ‘signal’ versus an ‘experience’ and its meaning residing in a ‘private’ versus a ‘common’ realm.

In table 1, we present the four categories of identity related symbolic consumption and our proposed equivalents for the process of separating oneself from a previous role and for the process of approaching a new role.

The table illustrates the kinds of identity related meanings consumption can take on during ‘role maintenance’, ‘role acquisition’, and ‘role dispositions’. The meanings that consumption takes on are dependent on how the consumer encounters the consumption object or consumption practice. Therefore, the lived meanings are only accessible to the researcher through the consumers’ expressions of their encounter with consumption objects in stable and

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Maintenance of identity</th>
<th>Role acquisition</th>
<th>Role separation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> Common Signal</td>
<td>I see myself according to a generalized understanding of the product</td>
<td>I see myself approach my new role by acquiring the product in accordance with the generalized understanding of it</td>
<td>I see myself distance myself from my old role by giving up the product in accordance with the generalized understanding of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> Private Signal</td>
<td>I see myself according to my own understanding of the product</td>
<td>I see myself approach my new role by acquiring the product in accordance with my own understanding of it</td>
<td>I see myself distance myself from my old role by giving up the product in accordance with my own understanding of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> Common Experience</td>
<td>I experience myself through the product according to generalized evaluations of it</td>
<td>I experience myself approaching my new role by acquiring the product in accordance with the generalized evaluations of it</td>
<td>I experience myself distance myself from my old role by giving up the product in accordance with the generalized evaluations of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> Private Experience</td>
<td>I experience myself through the consumer product according to my own appreciation of it</td>
<td>I experience myself approaching my new role by acquiring the product in accordance with my own appreciation of it</td>
<td>I experience myself distance myself from my old role by giving up the product in accordance with my own appreciation of it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Lived Meaning of Symbolic Consumption and Identity Construction in Stable and Transitional Phases

transitional phases. Examples of such encounters are illustrated below the table.

The Maintenance of Identity: The Example of Being a Man

**Common Signal Value.** A man may state that wearing clothes of masculine colours and patterns is important to him, and that wearing a shirt with pink flowers, for example, may communicate wrong ideas about his gender identity and his sexual orientation to others. Thus, he expresses an expectation that others ascribe the same meaning to certain styles and colours of clothing as he does. In this case, the meaning of his clothes can be said to take on a ‘signal’ value, since they are supposed to communicate something about him and they reside in the ‘common’ domain.

**Private Signal Value.** A man may also report that he perceives his hairstyle to be masculine since it resembles the hairstyle of his late father, while he could not see himself with a fancier, more modern hairstyle. This selection of hairstyle does not rest on the perceptions of others, but is a response to how he sees himself based on his own life history. The meaning he ascribes to his hairstyle can be said to take on a ‘signal’ value, since it tells a story, but it is located in the ‘private’ domain, as others would not easily recognize this meaning.

**Common Experiential Value.** A man may explain how riding his motorcycle with his buddies makes him feel like a man and how it is an emotional experience to him. He may express the expectation that this experience is easily understood and recognized by others. In this example, we would say that the symbolic meaning of consuming a motorcycle has an ‘experiential’ value, since it adds to his sense of self and that this meaning resides in the ‘common’ domain—as he believes motorcycling to be a particularly masculine enterprise in his consumer culture.

**Private Experiential Value.** A man may tell a story about having tried on some new clothing style that otherwise sent the right signals about his identity. But trying on the new clothes, he may have encountered a physical feeling of discomfort, a feeling that this is ‘just not me’, and thus rejected them. Such meanings we would categorize as ‘experiential,’ since they refer to how he senses himself, but since the experience cannot be traced by anybody else than himself we would say that it resides in the ‘private’ domain.

The Approach of a New Life Role: The Example of Becoming a Mother

**Common Signal Value.** A mother-to-be may state that she looks forward to the first strolls with her baby in the pram, since this to her would be an activity that would show the rest of the world that she is now a mother. In her eyes, this may be the obvious way to be recognized by others as a mother or parent. In this case, we would say the woman ascribes a ‘signal’ value to the pram, and this meaning resides in the ‘common’ domain, since she believes this signal to be recognized by other people.

**Private Signal Value.** A woman may report that as part of her transition into motherhood she has reconfigured her wardrobe, not as much in response to the perceptions of others, but more in response to how she sees herself. She may report not being able to connect her previous dressing style with her new status as a mother, but at the same time she may express awareness that this is an idea of her own that has less to do with how other people would see her. In this case, we would say that she ascribes ‘signal’ meanings to her wardrobe, but that these meanings are located in the ‘private’ domain, since she seems to be communicating primarily with herself rather than her social surroundings.

**Common Experiential Value.** The pregnant woman may report that she is carrying out a number of activities that prepare her mentally for the upcoming family extension, for example decorating the nursery or cleaning the house. She may report that these activities provide her with a feeling of getting closer to the actual state of motherhood. And she may refer to these activities as part of her nesting instinct, an instinct she may consider commonly known and which she believes that almost any pregnant woman will experience. In this case, the meaning of her consumption activities can be said to take on an ‘experiential’ value that resides in the ‘common’ domain.

**Private Experiential Value.** The newly hatched mother may tell a story about experiencing a sense of nostalgia and security when using the same brand of lotion for her baby as her own mother did. It may provide her with a feeling of doing the right thing for her baby and thus support her in approaching the new role as a mother. She may express awareness that others would attach very different meanings to this lotion brand, for example that it was old-fashioned. In this example, we would say that the consumption meaning of the product has an ‘experiential’ value—it makes her feel a certain way and that this meaning is a ‘private’ one—she does not expect anybody else to have the same experience she has.

The Disposal of a Previous Life Role: The Example of Divorcing

**Common Signal Value.** A newly divorced woman may report that she has taken off her wedding ring. She may also relate that she has disposed of the door sign with both her and her ex-husband’s names on it. Insofar as the woman expresses a belief that these activities are commonly recognized ways of communicating to the social surroundings that her life role status has changed and that she is no longer somebody’s wife, she thus ascribes a ‘signal’ value to these activities belonging to the ‘common’ domain.

**Private Signal Value.** The newly divorced woman may report that she has stopped buying some of the brands that she and her ex-husband used to purchase for their shared household. They have come to represent him and their life together and she may express a need of telling herself a new and different story. The woman is communicating with herself, and we would say that the ‘signal’ value she ascribes to the brands in question is ‘private’ due its specific reference to her life with her ex-husband.

**Common Experiential Value.** The divorced woman may quit former consumption practices that are normally linked to married life in her consumer culture; for instance regular cooking or grocery shopping. Giving up these activities may have an emotional aspect and provide her with a feeling of freedom, a feeling of finishing up a stage in her life. She may state that she considers giving up former practices as a normal way of coping with a divorce. Thus, we would say that the meaning of these activities takes on ‘experiential’ values that are considered to reside in the ‘common’ domain of symbolic meanings.

**Private Experiential Value.** The divorced woman may report that she has made a great effort to tidy up and clean the house, getting into all its corners, and that this activity felt like removing the presence of her ex-husband. She may express the belief that others might find her feelings silly and that they would ascribe very different meanings to the very same activities. We would say they carry ‘experiential’ meanings, but due to their particularity they are ‘private’.

Discussion

Since the framework focuses on the lived meaning of consumption objects on identity construction, the ordering of consumption meanings in the above illustrated categories rest entirely on the way consumers encounter the consumption objects and practices. Also, the same consumption object may carry several consumption meanings and thus support identity construction in multiple ways. The framework’s strength, we believe, resides in
highlighting the point that consumption may support an identity in multiple ways—other than through the well-known common symbolic values of, for example, consumption stereotypes.

In our view, at least two types of projects could benefit from the employment of the framework. One type of research projects would be those focusing on the issue of identity—whether it is the ongoing identity construction or more radical life role transitions. One point of departure could be a specific group of consumers, for example young people moving away from home or women in the transition into motherhood. The challenge here is to investigate how specific identity issues and role transitions are supported by the symbolic meanings of various products and activities.

Another type of research may focus on a specific product or product category—with the purpose of establishing the various identity-related meanings that are attached to this very product. The framework invites a focus on the acquisition/disposition of products or activities that are particularly prevalent in transitional phases, for example the acquisition of a driver’s license or the acquisition and usage of prams.

Whatever the focus of the research, it is the lived experience of the consumer that is central for the analysis proposed in the framework presented here. Although some consumption objects are obviously spun into tight nets of commonly shared symbolic meanings, such as for instance a wedding ring, these meanings are not necessarily prevalent in the consumer’s understanding of the object and related self. Different and unexpected meanings of consumption goods may exist. Therefore any research applying the presented framework must rely on consumers’ own expressions of consumption meanings acquired by means of, for instance, written accounts or oral statements.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to propose a framework for analysing the lived experience of consumers’ identity related consumption of products and activities in stable and transitional phases. The first step was to present an analytical ‘lens’ that might be used for the investigation of the ongoing identity projects of consumers. This part of the framework incorporates a set of conceptual dimensions salient in the literature on symbolic consumption. One dimension describes the idea that consumption objects can support the consumer’s identity construction process because of its ‘signal’ value—or because of its potential to provide the consumer with a certain ‘experience’ of self. Another dimension describes the idea that the meanings, which consumers ascribe to consumption objects, can reside in a ‘common’ domain—or in a more ‘private’ domain.

The second step was to develop this framework further to make it suitable for the analysis of consumers’ lived experience in major life role transitions. A central idea in previous consumer literature on transitional consumers is that life status changes may involve not only a movement into a new role but also a movement away from a previous role—and that these movements are marked symbolically through consumption. Thus, the concepts of ‘distancing’ oneself from a previous role and the ‘approachment’ of a new role are incorporated into the framework.

In the framework, we seek to typify the expressions that consumers may have about their encounters with identity and transition related products and practices. Thus, the framework should be suitable both for the analysis of consumers’ lived experience of life role transitions and how this is supported through product symbolism as well as for the analysis of the more specific meanings ascribed to specific products or product categories. The first results of applying this framework to an empirical setting are promising. In the study of pram consumption in Denmark (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006) the framework proved to be suitable for the analysis of the identity related meanings that were attached to prams by both expectant and newly hatched mothers. Future research may seek to further employ and develop the proposed framework on material comprising consumers’ expressions on their lived experience with consumption and identity projects.

REFERENCES


McCracken, Grant (1986). “Culture and consumption”. Journal of Consumer Research, 13 (June), 71-84.


