Symbolic Consumption in Hong Kong Chinese Society: Narratives of Self and Special Possessions

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This paper draws on four consumer narratives to investigate how identities are negotiated via the symbolic consumption of special possessions, in order to provide a more nuanced conceptualization of the Hong Kong Chinese self-concept. We expand upon both western notions of the self concept and the current rather reductionist view found in Asian self-concept literature. We identify a variety of micro and macro level influences, on different aspects of the self, as well as the dynamic characteristics of the self which reflect changing life stages and experiences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Current western research on the self-concept does not capture the notion of the self as understood and enacted in collectivist cultures such as China (Marsh et al., 2003). This means that current theoretical and empirical understanding of the interrelationship between identity, self and consumption does not necessarily transfer neatly from western to non-western cultural contexts. This study addresses this research gap by examining self, identity and consumption with specific reference to Hong Kong Chinese consumers. While studies of symbolic consumption have been well documented in the West; research in South Eastern Asia has been comparatively limited.

In a Chinese context, views of the self in a social context carry very different meanings from the West because social relationships and roles form the core of the Chinese self-concept (Hsu, 1971). For Chinese consumers branded products function as important social instruments which can signify an in-group social identity linked to peers of similar social status; and at the same time can signal increased distance from other groups, to which they do not want to belong (Tse, 1996). This means that Chinese consumers potentially pay more attention to branded products (such as watches) and special possessions because these material goods represent a primary basis for establishing social distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Tse et al., 1994).

However, there is evidence of both interdependent and independent selves in non-western cultures. In this exploratory study of the self-concept in a non-western context, in order to pursue both these aspects of the self, we chose to collect and analyse consumers’ narratives so that we could access discourses around the self in different settings. Chinese consumers might reveal both collectivistic and individualistic aspects of their selves and identities when narrating their personal stories about possessions. Selves and identities are embedded in discourse in the format and construction of stories (Georgakopoulou, 2002). On the other hand, Chinese consumers may reveal selves and identities on an individualistic level when narrating their personal stories about possessions.

Our findings problematize current rather reductionist views of the self which align Chinese self and identity with collectivist and interdependence in contrast to western notions of individualism and independent. Rather our findings suggest much more complex cases for construction of identity around multiple aspects of the self. This study showed how people are open to both macro (e.g. different cultures and systems) and micro level influences (e.g. family) within the context of symbolic consumption. Self and identity change according to different life experience and stages, as told by the story narrators. In Hong Kong, construction of people’s selves and identities tend to lie on a continuum from Western (independent) self to Asian (interdependent) self. The changing pattern of domination and subordination in the synthesis of these macro and micro influences potentially varies by cultural context.

There is no doubt that cultural orientation plays a significant role in constructing one’s self and identity (Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997). A wide range of research of Western and Asian selves regarding conspicuous consumption has been well documented (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998, Tse, 1996, Zhou and Belk, 2004). Under the influence of Chinese culture, Hong Kong people tend to have more collective attitudes and behave in certain ways according to social norms. They seem to focus on publicly visible possessions that signify in-group and out-group differences (e.g. Simon’s story about his BMW). This confirmed ‘that social relationships and roles form the core of the Chinese self-concept (Hsu, 1971). The social (interdependent) self emphasizes the significant role of relationships, and particularly the importance of fitting in with the family, group and society as Confucius had highlighted that interpersonal harmony shapes the social self. Affiliation to group still played a significant role in forming their selves and identities. These Chinese consumers tended to buy branded products to signify an in-group social identity (Tse et al., 1994).

However, stories from Zabrina, Simon and Alex showed that personal (independent) self (which is typically identified with the western notions of the self) also played a relatively important role in terms of forming their selves. This independent self emphasized more the inner attributes that tend to promote an autonomous and unique entity that is not dependent on others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, Heine, 2001). These stories also offered another perspective when investigating selves and identities among collective people, as Hong Kong Chinese tend to view possession value as related to “value in use rather than to economic value” (Richins, 1994). Their stories showed that people have items that are so special and meaningful independent of or in addition to their economic value.

Some of our findings provide an interesting counterpoint to these earlier studies of the self in other East Asian studies which had indicated that internal personal (inner) attributes are not emphasized in representing the self among the Chinese. Amongst Hong Kong Chinese, there was some evidence of the independent internal self (e.g. Zabrina’s and Simon’s stories).

Collecting and analyzing consumer narratives allowed a deeper understanding in terms of how informants view themselves through their attachments, i.e. possession value of objects. The advantages of sharing the meaning of their possessions with the researcher through stories were that they are not only talking about the public meanings of the items, but also the private meanings. This allowed access to both interdependent and independent aspects of the self; and also to capture temporal notions of the self-change/continuity as possessions provide “symbolic benefits delivering self-change/continuity value” (Kleine and Baker, 2004: 25). It is particularly significant for the present study because these informants shared their inner most feelings about their possessions and revealed who they were, how they became who they are and perhaps who they want to be in the future, which meant that different views of the self started to emerge around the axes of continuity and change, providing the basis for further research.

Reference


