Strategies of the extended self: The role of possessions in transpeople's conflicted selves

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Abstract

Identity conflicts are an integral part of our lives, yet little is known about the implications of such conflicts for people's strategic presentation of their extended selves to others. To explore this topic and the role of possessions within it, we considered an extreme example that puts the issue into sharp relief. Using data from personal interviews with transpeople and information gleaned from their online forums, we identified four self-extending strategies that participants use to cope with and attempt to resolve their identity conflicts: backward self-extension, parallel self-extension, forward self-extension and metamorphosis of the core self. These strategies are ascribed to the evolution of their extended self and the processes of undoing undesired identities while owning up to desired identities. We draw conclusions about expanding the theories of the extended self and performativity in order to better account for self-conflicts and the role of possessions in dealing with these conflicts.

1. Introduction

As part of the individualistic discourse that began to emerge in Europe about 400 years ago (Tuan, 1982), we are encouraged to be whomever we wish to be. But are our options truly limitless? In April 2015, Caitlyn Jenner, née Bruce Jenner, an Olympic icon and reality television star, presented herself in an ABC interview as a woman, and shortly afterward was featured elegantly on a Vanity Fair cover in a pink corset with full female make-up. The event triggered a controversy ranging from support and encouragement to contempt and rejection. This reaction suggests that, despite having consumption options to project a desired identity and thereby potentially resolve identity conflicts, exercising these options can create new conflicts.

This paradoxical view of the role of consumption in self-conflict situations reflects the contention, held by the extended self theory (Belk, 1988, 2013) and Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, that we have the illusion of an “authentic” core self, projected to the world via possessions and consumption rituals. The development and growth of the core self is reflected by modifications in its material enactment in order to maintain illusionary self-coherence (McConnell, 2010; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). Nonetheless, changes in self-identity are far from easy and are often accompanied by self-conflict as we struggle to grow psychologically (Erikson, 1968). Gender identity conflict is especially challenging. Established early in life, gender is assumed to be immutable in Western society and is regarded as a major self-defining characteristic (Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011).

Transpeople are individuals who experience a lack of congruence between their gender identity and their biological sex, resulting in a conflict between desired and socially acceptable performance of gender identity (Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). Gender conflict challenges both the extended self theory and Butler's (1990; 1999) notion of performativity. The former views the use of possessions as a means to construct an enhanced identity, implying a linear relationship between the inner and outer aspects of the self. Butler maintains that by rehearsing the performativity of a socially defined identity, one claims it as one's own. However, these perspectives offer very few insights into situations where the inner aspect of the self conflicts with its outer presentation, or when the performativity of the self is divorced from a person’s perceived “authentic” self. Furthermore, these perspectives do not address the evolution of the extended self and how social norms steer it.

This paper integrates the theory of the extended self, Butler's (1990; 1999) view of gender performativity, and transgendr theory to introduce a novel conceptualization of self-extension strategies reflecting the evolution of the extended self. We identify four self-extension strategies people use when coping with identity conflict: backward self-extension, parallel self-extension, forward self-extension and metamorphosis of the core self. We ground our findings in transpeople’s narratives to provide a deeper insight into their conflicts, as well as netnographic interpretations of discussions in online trans communities.
for greater breadth (Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009; Weijio, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014). We assert that insights gained from this extreme example of self-contradiction shed light on more common behaviors associated with negative social stigmas (e.g., Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Kates, 1998; Sandikci & Ger, 2010), and be of interest for consumer and business research more widely. By revealing the active role that possessions play in the evolution of self-contradiction, the paper’s contribution is not only to theories of the extended self, performativity and transgender theory, but also to the understanding of the strategic use of possessions in the reproduction of the self.

2. Possessions as an extension of the conflict between selves

The extended self theory (Belk, 1988) posits that the importance of possessions derives from their ability to shape and reconcile both inner and outer aspects of the self by creating a desirable self-presentation. This view has received overwhelming empirical support for the past three decades (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Reed et al., 2012; Richins, 1994). The theory maintains that we have a sense of an “authentic core self that might change over time and across situations (Belk, 2013). Even in situations where multiple conflicting selves vie for dominance, possessions are the anchors through which these contests are waged, and the sense of the coherent core self is maintained.

Nevertheless, Belk (1988) fails to explain how the extended self evolves in situations of self-contradiction. Various identity conflicts have been documented in the marketing literature, such as the tension immigrants experience between their home country and their host country identities (e.g., Askegaard, Arnould, & Kjeldgaard, 2005; Mehta & Belk, 1991), the conflict gay men endure between their socially acceptable identity and their stigmatized identity (Kates, 1998), and the struggle of young adults to construct a unique identity as part of a social group (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). While these studies highlight the important role that possessions play in situations of identity conflict, they focus mainly on the resolution of the conflict and less on its evolution and meaning for the extended self (Ahuvia, 2005). Consequently, these studies do not address the degree to which consumption and possessions are key to the construct of the self.

3. Transgenderism – the performance of conflicted selves

The term “transgender” refers to those who have internalized a gender identity and choose to enact a gender presentation that is not aligned with their anatomical sex (Gagné et al., 1997). In Western culture gender identity is determined by the physical genital configuration of the body and is regarded as an immutable aspect of the self. Transgender theory has moved away from the binary view of gender and maintains that gender identity takes many forms (Nagoshi & Bruzy, 2010). The theory emphasizes the diversity in personal narratives as key to one’s self-identity (Hines, 2006). Such narratives reflect the journey of transpeople who “cross over” society’s gender boundaries, often leading to social sanctions aimed at “correcting” what is perceived as deviant behavior (Diamond et al., 2011; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

Butler (1990; 1999) focuses on the performative aspect of gender. She views gender performance as ritualistic behavior consisting of repetition and the recurrence of activities that are interpreted and governed by the dominant social discourse. Thus, gender is something that one does rather than something one is. Consumption plays an important role in this ritualistic performance of the gendered self (Belk, 1988; Kates, 1998; Ruvio & Belk, 2013) as it helps with the enactment of maleness or femaleness. People are expected to use possessions to enact their gender identities in a socially acceptable way (Butler, 1993). Those who fail to internalize a gender identity or to enact a gender presentation that is consistent with their physical configuration are often considered “deviants” from what is considered “normal” (Gagné et al., 1997). They are encouraged to conform to social norms, and often try to hide their stigmatized identity and “pass” as normal. Yet, while Butler (1993) acknowledges the role of social norms in shaping one’s performance, she does not address the dynamic of an “incorrect” performance.

Transgender theory posits that gender conflict has an internal, private aspect as well as an external, public one. The internal aspect of the conflict refers to the discrepancy between the current self and the desired self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The external aspect of the conflict surfaces when there is a discrepancy between the perceived anatomical self and the performance of the desired self (Butler, 1993; Diamond et al., 2011; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). However, while this theory acknowledges the importance of the “gender appropriate” use of possessions in regard to the extended self and performativity, very little is known about how possessions are strategically used (or misused) to cope with identity conflicts. Thus, we ask: 1) How does the evolution of a person’s identity conflict correspond with the evolution of the extended self? 2) What extended self strategies do people utilize to cope with their identity conflicts? 3) How do social norms shape the enactment of these extended self strategies?

4. Data collection and interpretation

We utilized both in-depth interviews with transpeople as well as a netnography of online conversations on transpeople forums. Using both online and offline sources allowed us to triangulate the information, obtain a richer data set, and establish stable themes (Kozinets, 2002).

4.1. In-depth interviews

We conducted ten in-depth interviews with transpeople participants (ages 27–59), seven male-to-females (M2F) and three female-to-males (F2M), in different stages of identity transitions (see Appendix 1). The M2F/F2M ratio in our sample aligns with their proportion in the general population of transpeople (Miller, 2015). The wide range of our participants’ identity transitions provides us with better insights into the dynamic of the conflict from people who are currently experiencing it and people who are reflecting on prior conflicts.

While most of the informants consider themselves to be open and outgoing about their identity, gaining access to their closed social milieu was not easy. The contact with the community was made through their leaders and activists, who opened the door for us and introduced us to community members. By snowballing from their connections and associating with the trans community in venues such as their conferences and social haunts, we were able to recruit additional informants for our study.

At our participants’ requests, we interviewed them in public places (e.g., restaurants) or in the privacy of their homes. The interviews, which lasted from 90 min to 4 h, started with a short description of the purpose of the study and an open-ended question in which we asked the participants to describe themselves and their lives in general. We then asked them for more information regarding their experiences, attitudes, and emotions. The process of interpretation included multiple deep readings of the interview transcripts, the identification of common themes and shared meanings across individuals and well as the relevant literature (Walther & Schouten, 2016). Following Thompson’s (1997) hermeneutic framework, we interpreted our participants’ narratives on three levels. First, we identified key themes within each individual’s narrative. Next, we identified key themes across our participants’ life stories. Finally, we identified the relationships that these narratives revealed and interpreted them in a broader social and theoretical context.

4.2. Nettography of transpeople’s online communities

Netnography is a naturalistic approach that provides researchers with access to ongoing discussions about topics of interest (Hsu et al., 2014).
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