

## **“Am I as extended as you say I am?”**

### **Consumers’ emic perspectives on the extended self**

#### **Abstract**

Although the extended self construct (Belk, 1988) has been widely investigated in consumer research, it has inspired relatively few critiques. Moreover, there has been little research which directly assesses consumers’ own emic perspectives on the extended self. Here, an empirical investigation is reported which explicitly solicits consumers’ own ideas and hermeneutically considers them in relation to etic researcher theory. The findings indicate a major theoretical blind spot: not only do consumers differ in the polysemy, i.e., the various meanings and discourses they apply to the extended self, but also that marketing theory should be revised to reflect this lack of universal understanding.

#### **Keywords**

Extended self, critical marketing, empirical research, emic-etic, materiality, resistance, agency, naturalizing, polysemy.

## **“Am I as extended as you say I am?”**

### **Consumers’ emic perspectives on the extended self**

The application of self as a major construct in consumer research largely focuses on consumers using goods for its instantiation and expression. However, as various postmodern commentaries suggest, the cohesive vision of this self has become fragmented so that it is seen, to varying degrees, to be produced as multiple selves, roles and identities (e.g. Giddens, 1991). One major line of consumer research reflecting both the expressive and fragmented aspects of self involves the concept of the ‘extended self’. As introduced by Belk (1988), the extended self is differentiated from the core self in its incorporation of distal possessions. The impact of this construct has been enormous and the idea has appeared as ‘settled’ in consumer research in that there have been relatively few critical challenges.

We address this major theoretical blind spot through providing a critical perspective informed by an empirical investigation of consumers’ own views of the extended self. Three interpretive studies were conducted which report how *consumers* polysemically view the extended self. The main potential contribution is to problematise its naturalized conceptualization which was formed without any direct evidence regarding consumers’ own views regarding the existence of such a self. Belk’s formulation naturalizes the extended self to the extent that it can be thought of as if it is a taken-for-granted, everyday reality (Peñaloza, 2008). This naturalization occurs in two overlapping senses: (1) naturalizing the etic construct of the extended self and (2) naturalizing consumers’ own perspectives whether explicit or implicit-tacit. We would

also emphasize more broadly our contribution toward grounding marketing theories of real-world consumers in their own personal meanings and understandings. Such grounding is often overlooked in much theory development, including that of the extended self.

### **Critical enquiry into the extended self**

This study takes inspiration from critical marketing discourse (e.g., Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008) in an attempt to identify alternative conceptual perspectives within consumer research, through a process of reflexive deconstruction. This approach is adopted to reveal theoretical deficiencies (Brownlie and Hower, 2007) and suggest new ways of thinking about traditional constructs by exposing and questioning assumed claims to knowledge (Gould, 2010). Thus, we reflexively formulate fundamental questions about the conditions and consequences of two naturalized perspectives (cf. Thompson, 2002), one in which the consumer's own perspective may reflect the idea of one core self and the etic consumer research view which largely privileges a naturalized extended self (Belk, 1988). We also interrogate how these perspectives manifest and interrelate and seek to uncover blind spots that subvert any attempts to reassert conceptual closure.

Belk (1988: 160) proposes that: "Self-extension occurs through control and mastery of an object, through knowledge of an object, and through contamination via proximity and habituation of an object." He drew from over 300 sources of references drawn from various social science theories in a compelling attempt to identify meaningful extended relations between consumers and their possessions (Borgerson,

2005). Belk (1988: 160) was thus enabled to conclude that, “we are what we have and that this may be the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior”.

However, Cohen (1989: 125) suggested that the concept of the extended self is “an all-encompassing explanation for behavior” that lacks individual and collective meaning, empirical identification and explanatory power. He queries meaning in relation to a farmer’s parcel of land: “At what point conceptually does the farm become incorporated into the farmer’s sense of self rather than being of great importance but still external to the self?” (Cohen, 1989: 126).

Belk (1989) responded to Cohen (1989) by citing self-perception research where respondents had suggested there was a close link between themselves and their possessions. But, unfortunately, this issue was caught up within the larger paradigmatic positivistic-interpretivist debate. Cohen represented the positivistic aspect and this allowed Belk to argue that the extended self could not be reduced to a simplistic boundary-laden, scientific concept. Instead, he contended that it is a powerful metaphor for characterizing consumer perceptions about how the self relates to possessions. Reflecting agreement with Belk on that point, this paper does not take issue with such an approach since it will apply an interpretive analysis to consumers’ own perceptions of self and possessions. Yet, Cohen’s main critique of the extended self vis-à-vis the core self remains largely unanswered.

Moreover, only a small number of extended self critiques have attempted to further deconstruct its meaning and utility in such terms as its overextension (Solomon 1990), degrees of selfness (Ahuvia, 2005), aspects of self relations to goods and others (Kleine, Kleine and Allen, 1995), and conforming to a public image as opposed to the

extended self (Velliquette, Murray and Creyer, 1998). However, these studies largely skirt the issues raised within the Belk-Cohen debate concerning the meaning of self in relation to goods. Therefore, while they suggest that the extended self construct fails to explain attachments, they never address Cohen's issue that alternative perspectives on such a self may lead to consumers having altogether different relationships to goods. Indeed, there may be two different pathways through which consumers form attachments to goods, one through the extended self and one through other means.

Cohen (1994: 2) noted that the extended self is "not a monolith; it is plastic, variable and complex" and therefore requires subtle and sensitive deconstruction. Moreover, such self-discourses may be seen as major aspects of cultural discourses, self-mythologies and identity work (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). This means that understandings of the extended self may not reflect a single cultural myth-metanarrative but rather are embedded in myriad cultural discourses. Thus, the idea of the extended self and how consumers conceive it may be viewed as contextually constructed in individuals' autobiographic narratives. What is especially unclear is whether just as consumers perceive something they call the self in their everyday discourse, they also explicitly perceive the extended self as such and if so, what meanings they assign to it. This adds a possible way to distinguish what is being examined here: If a consumer cherishes certain goods, are they perceived as part of the self or not and what are the associated meanings? Moreover, this implies that universalizing both the extended self as well as core self constructs naturalizes them in ways that not all may recognize, including, for instance, researchers versus consumers.

Thus, one thing emerging from of our review of past research is that the extended

self (Belk, 1988) is a naturalized everyday concept (cf. Peñaloza, 2008). For Cohen (1989) and other critics, this naturalizing aspect of the extended self is not an issue. Indeed, when Belk, Cohen and other critics speak of the self, they are also speaking of a naturalized concept that seemingly all, both researchers and consumers, recognize and reify. However, while the extended self is a naturalized concept that some researchers might treat as such, many consumers could see it as a counterfactual fantasy rather than as a taken for granted description of their everyday 'realities'.

### **Addressing the extended self blind spot**

Given the widespread applications of the extended self in the face of what could be withering critiques of it, we are left to examine a blind spot in consumer theory. The approach taken here involves a reflexive critique of consumer research (Thompson, 2002) regarding the ignoring of certain alternative theories, such as Cohen's (1989), and the privileging of others. However, our critique also involves thinking more explicitly about consumers' own personal or emic perspectives regarding the extended self.

To this end, we are informed by the anthropological debate between Sahlins (1992) and Obeyesekere (1992) over how to best represent Hawaiians at the time of Captain Cook's death. Sahlins called Cook's death a religious sacrificial act while Obeyesekere argued that Cook was murdered by natives because he was trying to exploit the island and kidnap one of their chiefs. Obeyesekere's critique of Sahlins is that he accepted the colonial accounts at face value without a critical reading, whereas Obeyesekere's account dismisses "Hawaiian voices in sweeping terms" (Parker, 1995: 259). As Borofsky (1997: 256) argues, both Obeyesekere (1992) and Sahlins (1992) "are partly talking at

cross-purposes. No matter how much evidence each presents to buttress his case, the other does not concur because he uses a different though related perspective to demonstrate different though related points.” Thus, parallels exist with the Belk-Cohen debate in that both Sahlins (1992) and Obeyesekere (1992) seem more concerned with naturalizing their own positions. As a result of these processes of naturalization, emic distinctions are likely to be absent within both the Sahlins-Obeyesekere and Belk-Cohen debates, thereby privileging etic theorization.

We also follow Foucault (1989: 30) “to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of...thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities”. Similarly, Myles (2004) deconstructs sociologists’ doxa (the natural attitude of taking for granted various phenomena) and suggests moving to being more reflexively informed by everyday people’s consciousness. In consumer research, Peñaloza (2008: 420) argues that “we continue to naturalize our research methods and findings” in ways that privilege etic theorizations over possible unrecognized or even contrary emic evidence. Here, we start with a research question based on an etic controversy and seek to further investigate it from consumers’ own emic perspectives.

Thus, so-called naïve-lay views might be theoretically relevant (Wegner and Petty, 1998). For example, Belk speaks of research on the self-perceptions of consumers as evidence for the extended self. However, since that research did not start with how consumers explicitly thought about it, it is likely that some element of conceptualization is missing. For example, consumers readily understand the concept of self and apply it in their everyday lives, but do not appear to generally use the term extended self. The issue is to ask whether the extended self construct is a misplaced etic (Yang and Bond, 1990)

imposed upon consumers as Cohen implies and not something they hold themselves.

The main idea is also informed by Kozinets (2002: 26) who applied the “emic familiarity with apparently etic concepts” of consumers in their critiques of and tensions with such culturally-charged terms as consumer, marketing and advertising. Here, self is such an emic-etic shared, co-constructed term while the extended self may or may not be literally recognized by consumers though it likely could be in other terms. While it is possible there is a tacit-implicit extended self researchers may apply, Ringberg and Reihlen (2008) suggest that consumers make sense of the self through both categorical-automatic and reflective-critical processes. Similarly, Schroeder and Borgerson (2003) support the idea of projection of tacit-automatic processes through personal narratives. Likewise, research involving written-verbal protocols asks consumers about their own understandings regarding particular situations (Rook, 1987). In such investigations, the assumption of the so-called lay consumer-scientist is useful for verifying results and/or generating insights for both theory comparison and for interpreting consumers’ own practices and discourses. Indeed, the disciplines of metacognitive research, ethnopsychology and everyday folk psychology address relatively transparent aspects of individuals’ thinking and knowledge about their own thought and related cognitive, social and cultural processes (Lillard, 1998).

Thus, the idea of asking consumers directly about their own theories of the self has a diverse heritage of marrying the thought of a number of disciplines to generate an uncommon, if not entirely new approach in interpretive consumer research, namely to ask consumers about various everyday constructs such as the extended self and have them provide their own thinking about them (Gould, 2010; Lee, 1997). Researchers may

then critically reflect upon (dis)similarities in consumer-emic and researcher-etic theories. Additionally, the aim of this paper should not be construed as diminishing the significance of etic theory but rather as seeking insights which might inform, modify and/or enrich it.

In summary, our research aims to comparatively assess consumers' own emic perspectives and etic-researcher theories of the extended self. A further aim, informed by Borgerson's (2005) perspective that both Belk and Cohen fail to penetrate issues of self, especially its materiality and identity constitution, is to emergently map consumers' own perspectives that reach beyond prior researcher critiques and draw implications for re-thinking etic theory.

After introducing the method in the next section, we then report on three partly overlapping studies, which address the two primary aims. Study 1 found that some study participants supported the idea of the extended self while others rejected it. Two further subthemes emerged: the distinction between the inner (non-physical) and outer (physical) aspects of self, and resistance to the extended self's perceived materialism. Studies 2 and 3 further penetrated consumers' perspectives by emergently considering what terms they, themselves, use to describe this self.

To further distinguish consumer perspectives, all three studies were considered together and additional distinct themes, such as anthropomorphism or personality, emerged which largely either support the extended self, do not support it, or may do both. Most notably, agency in terms of the self, but also in terms of a co-created materiality, emerges as a powerful explanatory force.

## **Method**

Informed, as discussed above, by research evidence for both the explicit aspects of consciousness and metacognitive lay theories, a direct, if exploratory approach for assessing consumers' perspectives was taken.<sup>1</sup> A computerized, semi-structured written protocol approach was used to provide what has been called a structured essay (Tinsley, 1997), solicited narrative (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) or written essay (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). These approaches provide revelatory narratives which are phenomenological in drawing out participants' thoughts and feelings (Rook, 1987). They also permit simultaneous responses from multiple participants separated from one another, thus enabling a greater number and range of opinions in a given time period when compared to other interview methods (Tinsley, 1997).

In Study 1, where the participants are asked to make a choice between a given set of possible responses (e.g., either possessions are or are not part of the self), the question is presented as neutrally as possible either on a computer screen or printed page and participants then provide their own thoughts and perceptions. Similar to phenomenological interviews, this approach seeks to limit the perceived power and knowledgeability of the researcher while privileging the participant's subjectivity (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander, 1994).

The participants in Study 1 focused on this open-ended question, "*Are products and possessions part of the self?*" They (along with the participants in the subsequent Studies 2 and 3) were recruited from a pool of business students at a university in the

Eastern U.S. and had not studied consumer behavior. There were 49 participants ages 19 to 43 (26 females). The sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of the participants all being students. Thus, should differences of opinion regarding the extended self emerge, they would be strongly indicative of variation in practices and meanings that is less likely to be the product of socio-cultural differences, such as age or social class, though this does not rule them out.

This approach differs from other interpretive research, which may seek to capture sociocultural diversity by selecting individuals who are maximally different in demographic and/or psychographic profiles. Here, the emphasis is on exploring possibly competing cultural discourses among individuals of similar socio-cultural status (Allen, Diefendorff and Ma, 2013). Moreover, while it might be argued that the participants were business students who might have been exposed to marketing notions of self and would thus be biased, they generally were not marketing majors; indeed the personalized reflexivity, variety and broad range of their answers suggest there was no one 'normalized' perspective. Thus, while eventually differences among various collectivities may be investigated, a post-structural approach suggests that each individual is a site of meaning, even while situated in a similar cultural context (Gould, 2010). Therefore, differences within shared collectivities might provide even stronger evidence for making claims about varying emic-informed theories of the extended self. Study participants came in groups of up to seven to a room with a bank of computers and typed in their responses to the questions. Seventeen informants wrote their answers in longhand. They stayed between 15 to 45 minutes and answered in paragraphs ranging from one to three or more in number.

Studies 2 and 3 evolved from Study 1 to fine-tune its methodological limitations, enabling the reduction of possible demand artifacts, specifically in how and whether the term “extended self” was used in question prompts. Thus, the update feature of probing in interviews used in qualitative research is at least partially captured in a different, if exploratory way, i.e., by analyzing the results of the first study and determining what bears investigation to generate further questions which subsequently became the bases for Studies 2 and 3. Therefore, instead of having the participants consider the extended self as a received term, there remains a need to let them choose their own terms, whether or not they think it exists. This approach is informed by Cotte et al. (2004) who felt in their study of time-use that it required a wider range of metaphors to interpret it than was previously available; here the extended self construct necessitates such a range. Further, while the analysis focused on emerging general themes, the richness of the individualized responses in Study 1 suggested that giving the participants even more freedom in how they perceived the construct might be fruitful. Study 2 was designed with this in mind. Thus, since Belk (1988) was interested in the extended self metaphor, this study took a step in flushing out its metaphoric meanings in rather explicit terms, though here participants supply their own metaphors rather than researchers assigning them. It also provided for the emergence of symbolic metaphors as distinct perspectives for each consumer (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994). There were 61 participants (34 females, 4 not reporting their gender), ages 19-49, who were asked, “*Whatever your view, we would like to know what you would call this “extended self” in your own words.*”

However, one further limitation appeared; asking the participants for “extended self” alternatives might still yield a demand artifact. While the desired explicitness was retained, the relatively restrictive wording of the main questions was reduced, thereby affording the participants more freedom. In fact, participants in Study 2, especially those supporting the extended self, tended to use that specific term though not exclusively, while those who came up with other names tended not to support the idea of the extended self. So to afford even greater latitude to the participants and reduce possible confounding and demand effects, Study 3 was developed. It never used the term “extended self” at all, and instead, asks on a relatively unaided basis, “*Whatever your view, we would like to know what you would call this form of consumer behavior in your own words.*” There were 29 participants (17 females), ages 20 to 36. These two studies are reported with their responses by study, what they call this self, and support or opposition to the concept<sup>2</sup>.

The resulting texts were subjected to a hermeneutic analysis using the interview texts, prior research and researcher insights. Consumers’ emic theories were then compared to researchers’ etic theories (Kozinets, 2002), the only difference being that the participants were explicitly addressing an etic theoretical construct. The goal was to rethink etic marketing theory, as one more informed by consumers’ own meanings regarding the extended self.

### **Study 1 findings: extended self or not?**

While all three studies explored the issue of whether and how consumers perceive the self-goods relationship, Study 1 is primarily informed by the initial Belk-Cohen debate

and attempts to better understand the link between possessions and the self. Following a hermeneutic procedure, themes and related theories are interpretively applied. The responses generally indicated that the participants had very different views of the extended self, some supporting Belk and some resembling Cohen. Ben (21) supported Belk's idea of the extended self:

Products are a part of ones-self. Whatever product you buy or food you eat is a representation of yourself. People are not one-dimensional so the products one person buys may greatly differ, but all of the products show something about the person... Whatever... prompted the consumer to buy that product, whether it is the color, style or possible usefulness, shows what the consumer prioritizes in life. Even if a consumer buys a product for its convenience that is an extension of the personality of the consumer... Everything is a choice and the options that are chosen, make people who they are.

Indeed, a number of participants understood the idea of both self and extended self through the lens of personality which itself is a naturalized concept.

For a view that saw the self as entirely different from products and possessions and echoes Cohen concerning goods as external to the self, consider what Jenny (20) said:

Products and possessions are among the things we own but they do not form part of ourselves. For example, a pair of shoes is a product that we own, but is not part of who I am. I do agree with the argument "Anything outside the self is just that, outside oneself no matter how important it

might be to us.” Products and possessions are not part of oneself; however, people, culture, religion, ethnicity, personality, beliefs, and values are part of oneself. They form the person we are today... we can say “my job, my house, my husband/wife,” they do form part of our life but not part of whom you are.

These results indicate that the extended self-concept is deconstructed when we consider consumers’ emic perspectives; some participants echoed Cohen while others accorded with Belk. Excavating this deconstruction further, two additional subthemes can be identified: inner versus outer self and materialism versus resistance.

#### *The inner (non-physical) versus outer (physical) self*

When considering whether possessions were part of the self, it became apparent that a significant number of participants made a distinction between the inner (non-physical) and outer (physical) aspects of self. This dimension is similar to Belk’s conceptualization of self versus environment with fuzzy boundaries. The issue of physicality in relation to the extended self arose in the response of Belk (1989: 129) to Cohen when he asserted, “boundaries of the extended self are perceptual, not physical or physiological.” Much of what has been conceived as the extended self was seen by the participants as being entirely external to the self and is consistent with research on the embodied self suggesting that it is constrained by the symbolic or inner self (Markman and Brendl, 2005). Markman and Brendl find that self as a symbolic phenomenon may be viewed as separate from the physical body. Their formulation is quite different from Belk’s who saw the body as part of the extended self. Here, the concern is with how consumers

represent the relation between the inner (non-physical) and outer (physical) self. For some, it seems to follow an embodied cognition perspective in which the self is represented in the body as its extension while for others it is not so represented at all. For example, one informant reflects on the boundary between the inner (non-physical) and outer (physical) in externality terms:

Your externality can also be part of self... The type of clothes you wear is all part of yourself or rather you being you. It is not strange for someone with a gloomy disposition to wear all black, or on the other hand someone who is joyous to wear lively colors (Ruth, 23).

However, Randi (20) applies this physical/non-physical distinction differently.

Product and possessions are not part of oneself. These items may be very important to us but in order to be part of oneself, it has to be from within the person. It can be physical or intangible. For example, the heart is part of a person, without it, the person may die... I agree that anything outside the self is just not part of oneself.

Laticia (21), while clearly distinguishing a non-physical self apart from objects, allowed for something akin to the projection of self through goods:

Though products and possessions cannot be directly defined as part of the “self” as I’ve defined it, I do feel that physical items we actively choose by the free will of our consciousness are extensions of the “self” into the material world... the variety of preferences and the existence of those that go against the majority, the “norm”... evidences that products and

possessions can be looked upon as physical extensions of the “self”.

Taking a similar view with respect to physicality versus non-physicality, one participant nonetheless also used this perspective to distinguish goods from the core self:

Another example of personal belongings being separate from one-self is the physical aspect of the belongings. If these belongings were destroyed in a fire or were stolen that would not change someone’s personality. It may change how someone feels about things but they are still the same person... No one can do that with their personality (Herm, 21).

This quote, which echoes others across all three studies, seems to contradict Belk’s focus on loss of possessions as crucial to the extended self. Loss of goods may not always reflect a loss of self though further research with people in actual loss situations, particularly those where the goods are of high personal or financial value, might be warranted to assess consumers’ extended self perspectives (cf. Ariely, Huber and Wertenbrock, 2005). Nonetheless, while Belk recognized both how goods may flow into or out of the extended self (Kleine et al., 1995), a more focused aspect emerged here. Goods as aspects of the extended self are often seen as transitory and for some, this element contradicts the extended self while supporting a more permanent core self, if also a sense of it as being adaptable:

My possessions such as my clothes, car, jewelry are not a part of me. They are just things that belong to me. In a short time, I will probably get rid of them... with some exceptions... What I consider the self is my thoughts, views, beliefs and ideas about life and my surroundings. These are the things that will always be part of me, the things I represent and that my

friends value about me (Sarah, 20).

In many respects, these results indicate that for many participants what is conceptualized as the extended self is largely external to the core self and its non-physicality; the physicality and the relative impermanence of goods informs that view. As such, the participants can be seen to inscribe their accounts with a variety of physical and symbolic attributes.(cf. Cohen, 1989; Ahuvia, 2005). Quite noticeably, there are distinct individual differences in these construals, such that for some participants self-characteristics are more embodied in physical representations than for others. This is a very constructivist, localized-poststructuralist perspective and argues for complexity, ambiguity and a lack of universalism in consumers' extended self-construals.

#### *Materialism and resistance*

Not surprisingly, some Study 1 participants saw the issue of extended self as reflecting materialism, often overly so, suggesting that the framing of the extended self is multilevel; the construct is framed both in micro terms as to how it is embodied with respect to the self and socio-culturally in material culture terms as to how it is instantiated in particular meanings, practices and ideologies (Miller, 1998). Illustrative of this, Lenka (24), who supported the idea of the extended self and was the only one among the supporters who overtly naturalized it, suggested we are socially-conditioned to accept possessions as parts of the self:

Often an individual's worth in society... is judged by his wealth and the numerous things he possesses. Status is connected to possessions. Since growing up in this type of society, I think many of us are conditioned to

believe that products and possessions are a part of one self... people probably don't even question the connection between the self and possessions; it is natural to many of us.

But Herm (21), reflecting the resistance that was apparent in many participants, disclaimed the extended self and bemoaned the materialism that judges people by their wealth and goods:

Products and possessions **are not** [bold his] an extension of one-self. Though it is unfortunate... that people are judged by their possessions. I believe that it is true that anything outside the self is just that, outside oneself... It is important to remember that possessions do not make a person; a person makes a person.

Sue (20) distinguished the outer and inner in terms of materiality:

Material goods can have some sentimental value that may cause a person to become very attached to it. For example, an engagement ring or family's heirlooms are usually goods, which hold great sentimental value. Most people hold these goods dear to their heart and feel that they could not live without them... After losing this material good, the person's personality or character has not changed in anyway. The inner and outer self still remain the same... I do not believe that worldly possessions could ever be part of your extended self and alter your inner self at their disappearance.

*Discussion of study 1*

While the Study 1 results echo the Belk-Cohen debate in reflecting one or the other view, they also expand it through the themes of the inner versus outer self and materialism and resistance. The inner-outer theme reflects the meanings consumers attach to the extended self in sharply demarcating the inner-symbolic and outer-physical selves. The materialism theme is found in Belk's original formulation, as well, and for some it seemed both desirable and natural for the extended self to incorporate material goods. However, for many others, such a naturalizing-materialistic view of self represents a negative. This view, which was well beyond what Belk (1988) had theorized, gave shape to a decided resistance; many, though not all of the participants, were uncomfortable with equating even a part of themselves with a materialistic orientation.

These results indicate that for many participants what is conceptualized as the extended self is largely external to the core self and its non-physicality with the physicality and relative impermanence of goods informing that view, thus inscribing a variety of physical and symbolic levels (cf. Ahuvia, 2005). Significantly, there are distinct individual differences in these construals, such that for some participants self-characteristics are more embodied in physical representations than for others. This is not only a very localized-poststructuralist perspective on consumers' construals, but it also suggests that naturalizing as a process is contextual; consumers may not only naturalize aspects of the (extended-)self differently from researchers but also from each other.

Consumer understanding of materialism embodies the cultural framing of the extended self, that is, in tacit-implicit materiality culture-like terms as opposed to the more micro level, relatively psychological orientation of the prior section. For those who

take issue with the extended self and especially its materialistic ties, there is abundant resistance. Resistance is a theme which here is reflected not so much in market-sanctioning consumer experimentation, but more in resistance to the market itself (Kozinets and Handleman, 2004). It manifests in ways that stand at the very conception of self; some consumers clearly want to distinguish what they think of themselves from what they regard as anathema to it, including the marketplace.

These findings suggested a need for further research that might better situate Study 1's conclusions. While it identified consumer differences, it did not reveal as much about alternative ways of conceiving the self-goods relationship and why consumers might differ in their views.

### **Studies 2 and 3: Extended self descriptor-metaphors**

Studies 2 and 3 seek to investigate how consumers perceive possessions and the extended self in their own understandings; we thus follow up on Belk's (1988) own, if largely unfilled suggestion to study consumers' own meanings by which they link self and possessions. In this regard, it may be best to think of dynamic rhizomatic mappings (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) in which a multiplicity of perspectives on the self (and related name-metaphors) are found flowing through conscious experience. However, while there were some important differences, as noted above, the two studies also had many similarities and were pooled for further analysis; nonetheless, for purposes of clarity we state which study participants were in.<sup>2</sup>

*Call it extended self?*

Study 2 used the term “extended self” as a prompt in soliciting the names the participants might use for it while the prompt in Study 3 did not use that term. The motivation for asking about the extended self first comes from Cohen (1989) who distinguished between me and mine, that is what and who I am, and what I possess or own. This distinction became particularly clear in these studies, since in providing alternative extended self-descriptors, some participants used the occasion to similarly frame the issue, distinguish possessions from themselves, and apply a variety of descriptors or names. In Study 1, this reflected different views underscoring consumers’ idiosyncratic understandings. Yet, there also emerged a way to reflect thematically on them discursively as tropes. Since according to Belk (1988), the extended self may be viewed as a metaphor, it is important to see what forms it takes in consumers’ thought. Ahuvia (2005) framed the issue in terms of core self/extended self metaphors by allowing the self to stand for one’s identity which involves so many things that it needs something to give it coherence; consumers need to synthesize varying and/or competing aspects of themselves.

For those participants who resisted the idea of extended self, it could be said to be a metaphor in representing some understanding; it stands for something that can be described but is imaginary to them like a fantasy:

I would not call products and possessions the extended self. I would call them items. More exactly just what they are for example a car is a car or clothes are clothes. They are not part of me they are just things that I own... The most obvious to me is when I die I cannot take these items

with me (Raj, 22, Study 2).

One person refused to name the extended self anything, but instead reflecting the loss perspective described above declared, “I am who I am. I am a soul. I don’t have an “extended self” because all of these extensions can be taken away as they were received” (Grigory, 19, Study 2).

Similarly, Sandra (19, Study 2) reflected the same empty metaphorical perspective, though giving the extended self a name, but then described her family as a part of her:

I would call this extended self “My possessions and I.” Possessions are separate from our internal selves. We are NOT what we own... We come into this world with nothing and leave with nothing... I agree that the “self” is an integral part in how we decide what to buy, but it should remain separate from ourselves in other aspects of life... Possessions are separate from me. My family... brings me great happiness, and I do not classify them as possessions or products. My family is part of my “self.”

This example reflects the contingent aspects of goods as relatively incidental and not central to the self. It also reflects the embodiment dilemma. If things are me, then the self is not quite separate from them; indeed, to varying degrees, it is composed of them. But if it is ‘mine’, then clearly the symbolic self is seen as different from the body. Larry (21, Study 2), who referred to the goods one has as “personal possessions”, even used the word embodiment in saying, “My dog, coin collection, or computer is not an embodiment of me.” Others had similar views and thus for those not holding to the

existence of an extended self, there was also no separate relationship with the core self.

*Alternative descriptors for the extended self*

One name that emerged was that four Study 3 participants unaidedly used the term “extension” or variants. But only Amy (21, Study 3) used the term as Belk (1988) theorized by describing possessions as part of oneself; she considered one’s image as represented in the products one chose:

I call this type of consumer purchase behavior “extension of the self”. I think every person buys certain things that differentiate them from other people; or that reflect their position in society; or... they want to be in... So, possessions are part of the self because they represent... our position in society.

The other three participants offered paradoxical explanations that applied the term extension and saw products as extensions of the images they are trying to project, but not as part of the self. For example, one considered image, but viewed it quite ironically in extended self terms:

Products are not part of us but rather extensions of ourselves. People don’t always buy things because they like them, but rather there is an image they are trying to project... They do this by buying certain clothes, houses, cars... these products are not true reflections of the self... Advertising, peer pressure and society norms all effect our purchasing judgment... the things we buy can never truly be part of us (Bob, 21, Study 3).

Thus, while some consumers and theories of the self hold that image is part of the self, others, such as Bob , may see the image as a delusion that is not part of the real self (cf. Velliquette, Murray and Creyer, 1998); image is an extension, but not a part of one's true self. As Jana (26, Study 3) indicated in a nuanced perspective:

I am not so sure that I would call products and possessions a *part* of self but rather an *extension of oneself*. Our possessions reflect to others our interests since we purchase products that we feel express ourselves. We buy a certain suit that ... will express the type of person that we are.

However, she went on to vehemently distinguish herself from products:

No matter how important to me my car may become or how much I love it my car will never be a part of me. I do not feel comfortable with stating that inanimate objects are a part of who I am. That is a little too freakish to me and no one in my family is from the family canine or feline.

Some saw goods as mirroring the 'real' self. For example, Dean (21, Study 2) viewed possessions as a reflection of self in hierarchical layers of self, body and products:

Some people also use shopping as a form of a hobby, which in turn would be a reflection of self... I would call ones possessions as a "reflection of self" or perhaps "mirror of one's soul", all things that we possess are outside our bodies and more importantly outside our minds, which are the soul provider of ourselves.

Hannah (22, Study 2), raises the problematics of this reflective process by suggesting that people form a relationship with a good over time rather than when making a purchase:

Some people get used to using living in the house... Prior to their purchase of the house... they might choose another... the adoption or simply the time they spend with the house... make them believe that they cannot live without the house... products and possessions that have been called the extended self are not really the reflections of the person who makes such claim.

Another also relates to the idea of a product becoming a part of oneself when using it as a “reasonable person.”

When I purchase a product it does become a part of me every time I use it. The reason one purchase[s] a product in the first place is to fit their unique style. For those who argue that products and possessions are quite separate from one is clearly mistaken (Andrea, 21, Study 3).

### *Discussion of Studies 2 and 3*

The results of these studies reveal the wide variety of descriptors our informants used to describe the extended self. They incorporate a range of perspectives which problematize this construct and which we address next by considering some additional theoretical insights.

### **Distinguishing consumer perspectives**

To further interpret consumer perspectives, we identified a few additional emergent themes from all three studies. For those supporting the extended self, products and possessions may reflect who you are or want to be (e.g., Ben (21, Study 1) “Whatever product you buy... is a representation of yourself.”), are anthropomorphized (e.g., Martha (29, Study 1) “...they may use their car as a friend to stay with them”; Jannine (21, Study 2) “We buy things we want and then sometimes worship”), and/or may have symbolic-sentimental value (e.g., Sonja (22, Study 1) “There are certain possessions that are dear to us... and part of us”).

For those not supporting the construct, goods are temporal (echoing earlier results, e.g., Will (24, Study 2) “No one is born with products and no one dies with products.”), and/or have their utilitarian purpose (e.g., Huang (32, Study 2) “Even though I use it everyday, I just won’t treat them as part of me...”). However, personality was mentioned in ways that both supported and opposed the extended self. For example, Lena (24, Study 2) declares, “The house reflects particular traits of personality, but it is not a part of personality, just a reflection.” Yet, Agnes (23, Study 2) suggests, “these things I call ‘extended self’ are things that characterize my personality.”

Similarly, Rachel (21, Study 1) used the descriptor, “external self” to support the extended self though with reservations, “when people put material possessions as priority, that is when there is a problem and the external self is distorted.” In contrast, Jim (21, Study 2), who did not support the idea of the extended self, also used the term, “external self”, and stated regarding possessions that they “have no effect on us as human beings at all.” Thus while some aspects seem to separate supporters from non-

supporters of the extended self, as the personality and external self themes illustrate, there is no single reductive perspective.

Further, we considered other suggested theoretical explanations for the extended self, including actor network and assemblage theories as suggested by Belk (2013), as well as Borgerson's (2005) perspective on materiality. While it is impossible to incorporate all in granular detail, we examined them in terms of our motivation to explore emergent perspectives on the (non-)extended self.

What emerges is that perceptions of agency as a force in all these theories is found whether or not informants supported the extended self. This agency largely seems to reside in the self, but also at times in a broader co-created materiality (Borgerson, 2005) in that informants often recognized external influences which helped inscribe products in their narratives. For example, Alise (23, Study 2) in not accepting the extended self and thinking of the person-possession relationship as "cultural orientation" declares, "I might term the relationship between a person's choice of products or possessions as cultural orientation because I believe that one's culture is what shapes one's mind set to make their basic buying decisions." On the other hand, Martina (22, Study 3) in her support for the extended self called it "personal buying" and suggests, "People seem to buy products that are the norm in society, or that their peers are buying at that time."

Moreover, agency manifests in active-passive respects. Raquel (25), who chooses to call the extended self by that name (she was in Study 2 where that term was used), nonetheless opposes it for products and states in a more passive voice, "If I have a dog and it dies, obviously I do not die too. A person can be stripped of all that they own

and have achieved but the self will always remain.” Natasha (19, Study 2), largely negates the extended self while referring to it as “possessions”, also writes in a passive voice, “These possessions can determine your popularity when you are in high school even when you are an adult.” Taking a more active extended self perspective, Olivia (21, Study 1) declares, “I believe that everything I own and buy identifies who I am.” More actively with a non-extended self view, Jenny (20, Study 1) declares, “Since, the products we own are not part of oneself, it can be easy to get rid of them. Let’s take for example a pair of shoes, once they are old or out of style we can easily throw them away.” These results may be said to partly support the notion that there are alternatives to the idea of active subjects and passive objects (Bajde, 2013), but more significantly they indicate the polysemic passive-active discourse consumers apply in this context.

Thus, for the variety of themes and theories that might explain extended self views, we also find that they often explain non-extended self views. We do agree with Belk (2013) that self in relation to objects may have both agentic and affordances elements, but this by no means privileges the extended self. On the contrary, it dovetails with a more fluid reconceptualization.

## **Conclusions**

With the concept of the extended self in mind, the findings suggest that if we were to hold a mirror in front of each of our participants, they would not perceive the same thing. For some, the mirror would clearly reflect the extended self in much the same way that Belk saw it. For others, the concept might be vaguely discernible, while for still others the most noticeable aspect would be its complete absence. The emic perspectives

reflected in this research suggest a co-constitution of self and objects, which displaces unreflective and predetermined “naturalized” hierarchies” (Bajde, 2013, 237). Thus, much as researchers have disagreed over the status of the extended self since the Belk-Cohen debate, we find that consumers additionally reveal a broad range of emic perceptions. At the same time, our findings are exploratory and reflect limitations in terms of the student samples, the written protocol method, how well we represented consumers’ views, and in particular, possible demand artifacts which we attempted to correct for; future research should indeed address them. Nonetheless, our work illuminates the extended self blind spot by providing a more nuanced perspective on traditional theory (Brownlie and Hewer, 2007) in several emerging, if overlapping phases.

The first phase compared consumer emic and researcher etic theories in explicit terms; while some study participants echoed Belk’s extended self conceptualization, others buttressed the case of Cohen for reining in the construct. Our empirical approach produced quotes that were often quite like those of both researchers. The second phase involves taking the comparisons made between emic-consumer and etic-researcher theories and using them to further develop extended self theory. The objective is not just to discover consumers’ own theories, but also to advance a comparative perspective for etic theory development. The third phase was to consider some other theoretical explanations (e.g., materiality theory), but in doing so, we find they do not distinguish consumers holding different extended self views. The final phase is to recognize the naturalizing of all these perspectives, such that researchers may naturalize concepts like the extended self in different ways than consumers, as well as consumers naturalizing

them differently from each other; what constitutes the extended self is liquid in definition and boundaries. Moreover, while self as such is a conventional, if fluid concept (e.g., Gould, 2010), the extended self appears transparent to some, while opaque to others.

Therefore, the conventional, quasi-positivistic narrative-construction of the extended self constitutes a major theoretical blind spot that needs to be surmounted by critically incorporating more nuanced, poststructural accounts. The failure to do so within marketing theory means to engage in a kind of erasure (Derrida, 1997) of consumers' perspectives, which leads to, at best, an incomplete de-contextualized, epistemological account of the extended self phenomenon, and, at worst, a complete misreading of the construct altogether (Gould, 2010). Thus, the naturalized, partially fictitious (Cohen, 1994) extended self meta-narrative may have to yield to something less certain and yet more ambiguous, situated, and paradoxical. Perhaps most importantly, the very construct of the extended self as held by consumers and theoreticians alike needs to be critically re-examined in terms of its polysemy, its degrees of cohesiveness and plasticity, its explicitness and implicitness and the appropriate tropes for revealing it.

Further, our findings suggest that, to a greater or lesser extent, consumers variously identify with either extended or unextended selves, especially when the participants' metaphors for the extended self are considered. Indeed, the participants suggest a very contextual, constructivist view of the extended self. Most theories about it tend to be universalized (i.e., all consumers relate goods to their extended selves) and it is virtually reified as a consumer characteristic. Here, the idea of the extended self paradoxically seems to be highly individualized and reflective of more nuance even as it, as well as the core self, can also be viewed in a more general cultural context (cf.

Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Building on what Ahuvia (2005) says about consumers trying to formulate coherent self-narratives, our work further suggests that such narratives and the very idea of selfness should be explored not only in broad cultural discourses, but also in relation to very individualized local knowledge creation practices. Thus, the assumed postmodern fragmentation of the self may be seen not only in its splintering as a cohesive whole, but also as a fragmentation of ideas and knowledge about it.

The participants' views also illuminate prior research and/or emergent aspects of what we have called the 'extended self' in terms of characteristics, including inner-outer, materialism and me-mine. However, these findings also suggest that even as a descriptive trope, there is much to ponder. On the whole, the unextended self exists simultaneously with the extended self in the form of contextually constructed parallel self-discourses, but not necessarily as parallel everyday beliefs about the self. The core self would appear to be captured in the idea of a symbolic self differing from both the physical self and world; the conceptualization of the extended self may be seen as a paradoxical attempt to explain the person-goods relationship in that it seeks to make coherent what is fragmented, namely all the consumer roles and related uses of goods.

Moreover, participants tended to either focus on some aspect of self or products in describing the 'extended self'. Especially important findings were that for many how they describe it suggested they were inclined to see it dynamically and agenticly. For some, there is a central self in the act of possessing something rather than a static self-aspect akin to the extended self; the symbolic self is quite different from the body and world it is embodied in. The discourse of this agentic self as possessor thus differs from

that of the extended self. For others, the extended self functions dynamically in that over time it renders products as part of it, much as Belk might predict. However, for those not holding to the extended self, products were recognized as what they literally were (e.g., “items”, “possessions”), though it could still be understood conceptually, that is informants could recognize it even as they did not experience or believe it (cf. Thompson, 1990).

Indeed, the issue of what the construct means remains unsettled. Particularly vexing is the issue of what might be called metacognitive self-awareness of the extended self. The participants seemed to readily recognize the idea of the extended self, whether or not they accepted it or had thought about it before, perhaps reflecting some tacit understanding. It is even possible that the idea of the extended self could become a naturalized cultural construct if people started to conceptualize and use the term in everyday discourse. In any case, future research should reflect this self-awareness aspect. Can we say that consumers who act with self-conscious perceptions of the extended self are behaving in the same way as consumers who try to achieve some sort of core self coherence (cf. Ahuvia 2005)? These are two very different directions of focus: expressing the core self versus extended self. If that is the case, then researchers following the extended self approach may be misconstruing who many consumers are (or think they are) and how they are narratively situated. The cultural discourse of the goods-self relationship and possible self-extension thus requires further theoretical explication. Moreover, we also suggest that future research should from the outset move beyond taking the extended self as a naturalized concept.

More generally, our findings suggest the value of emic insights for etic theories (Gould, 2010). Indeed, researchers might also examine the largely unexamined rhizomatic co-construction of consumer-marketplace phenomena like the extended self. While it is beyond our scope to fully develop such an approach here, an emergent implication is that many aspects of consumer-marketplace phenomena should be similarly examined with the perspective that consumers, marketers and academic researchers constitute subcultures of discourses and meanings. These may overlap to varying degrees, but the present approach is suggestive for treating all perspectives as emic, even those that are seemingly clearly etic, i.e., here consumer researcher perspectives on self. It may seem paradoxical to develop theory this way in that emic discourse is co-constituted by both consumers and researchers to reformulate etic theory. But, it does serve to problematize the over-privileging of the etic aspect of the emic-etic binary; such an emic-informed analysis may be suggestive of ways that etic theory addresses or fails to address crucial issues.

### **Notes**

1. The texts for each of the studies' instructions and questions are shown in the online supplemental Appendix A.
2. A full compendium of the descriptors/names is shown in the online supplemental Appendix B.

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