

The Meaning and Value of Favourite Possessions in Environmental Transitions: A case of regional and international students studying in Sāmoa.

Bernadette Samau and Iemaima Gabriel, National University of Sāmoa

Abstract

Consumers own possessions for the value and meaning they provide and many studies have predominantly focused on privately owned possessions (Ahuvia 2005; Dittmar 1994; Mehta and Belk 1991; Tian and Belk 2005). In the context of studying in a new country, this paper extends current research on possessions by arguing that favourite possessions that help students settle into a new environment are privately owned and not owned. Through convenience sampling, primary data was collected via in-depth interviews from eleven regional and international students studying at the Australian Pacific Technical College (APTC) and the National University of Sāmoa (NUS). Content Analysis was used to analyse the transcripts and the identified themes are verified against Bih's (1992) seven meaning structure of objects. Findings from this study indicate (1) the meaning and value of privately owned possessions helped students to settle in a new environment, (2) the meaning and value of places and people in Sāmoa also helped students settle and deal with culture shock and/or homesickness and (3) people and places are perceived as special and meaningful possessions in environmental transitions.

Key words: possessions, meaning, value, transitional environments, students, Sāmoa.

Introduction

Privately owned possessions that consumers are attached to offer a sense of identity and helps to define who they are, who they were and who they hope to become (Belk 1988 and Richins 1994). More than 50 years ago, Levy (1959) introduced an idea to the consumer behaviour discipline suggesting that possessions and their symbolic meanings are important because they communicate and represent our identities. Later studies in line with this thought explored the relationship between people and possessions (Sirgy 1982 and Morgan 1993). Tuan (1978: 472) suggested, "our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess". In the discipline of consumer behaviour, Belk (1988:139) supports Tuan (1978) by highlighting, "we cannot hope to understand consumer behaviour without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions". Furthermore, he stressed, possessions are part of us because they are the things we call 'ours', and these include "external objects, personal possessions, persons, places, group possessions, body parts and vital organs" (Belk 1988: 140).

The connection between people, possessions and the meanings associated to possessions is extensive in marketing literature. The measurement of 'meaning' mainly looks at private possessions with previous studies identifying 'meaning' on the basis of 'favourite' (Mehta and Belk 1991), 'special' 'treasured' (Dittmar 1994), 'important' (Tian and Belk 2005), 'loved' (Ahuvia 2005) and 'shared' possessions (Wong et al. 2012). This study contributes to the limited literature that investigates the meaning and value of favourite possessions in environmental transitions (Bih 1992; Noble and Walker 1997; Mehta and Belk 1991). This study investigates the meaning and value of favourite privately owned and possessions not owned in environmental transitions in the context of regional and international students studying in Sāmoa.

Most research on the meaning of favourite possessions concentrate on privately owned possessions. This paper extends previous studies firstly by investigating the meaning of favourite

possessions valued by students as they transition from one environment to another and secondly by investigating the meaning and value of favourite possessions that are not actually owned but are considered meaningful in helping students adapt to a new environment.

Possessions and Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is an area of marketing that looks at how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources (time, money, effort) on consumption related items. That includes '*what* they buy, *why* they buy it *when* they buy it *where* they buy it, *how often* they buy it and *how often* they use it' (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000: 5). The 'things' that consumers buy are known as 'possessions' and for the purpose of this study, the definition of possessions is adapted from Belk (1988:140) as "things we call ours and is not limited to external objects and personal possessions but also include places, persons, body parts and organs". This study is guided by Belk's (1988) argument that we cannot understand consumer behaviour unless we gain an understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions.

The meaning of possessions has been widely researched in different disciplines such as anthropology (Geertz 1976; Levi-Strauss 1979; McCracken 1986), history and cultural studies (Bourdieu et al. 1984), sociology (Nuessel and Riggs 1997) and marketing (Ames and McCracken 1989; Belk 1988; Belk and McCracken 1989; Mehta and Belk 1991; Richins 1994; Sirgy 1982; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Empirical research have also examined the meaning that consumers attach to possessions through the examination of 'special' household possessions (Adler et al. 1983), hedonic consumption and the extension of self (Belk 1988; Richins 1994; Tian and Belk 2005).

Students in environmental transitions

Literature on international student migration documents the experiences of international students migrating mostly from Asian countries to study in Europe, United States and Canada (Carlson and Widaman 1988; Goldstein and Kim 2006; Hunley 2010; Jackson 2006; Ono and Piper 2004; Pitts 2009; Yang et al. 2011). Particular areas of focus include psychological distress and loneliness, motivation and goals for study abroad (Chirkov et al. 2007), coping with values and adaptation (Chirkov et al. 2008, Ryan and Twibell 2000,) and the meaning of objects in environmental transitions (Bih 1992).

While majority of research on the meaning and value of possessions focus on household possessions, public places and possessions in the workplace, a few have investigated the meanings of favourite possessions in environmental transitions (Mehta and Belk 1991). In the case of liminal transitions, Noble and Walker 1997, investigated the value and role that symbolic possessions played to understand the nature of the liminal experience that students go through as they transition from high school to college. The results of their study indicated that students appear to rely on possessions that symbolize the past as well as those that represent the new role to help facilitate the transition from high school to college. Specific to post graduate students, Bih (1992) explored the role that personal possessions had in helping Chinese post graduate students adapt to studying in the United States. From a sample of fourteen Chinese post graduate students, findings from this research showed that objects played an important role in helping students adapt to a new environment. It also indicated that the meanings of objects changed during the students' adaptation to their new environment (Bih 1992).

Methodology

The focus of this study is to understand how the meaning and value of favourite possessions help students' in environmental transitions adapt to their new environment. The value of possessions will be understood by examining the meanings attached by the students' to five of their favourite possessions. By adapting Belk's 1988 definition of possessions, this study will also include possessions that are not owned. The guidelines for this research are conducted in accordance with the guidelines developed by Wallendorf and Belk (1989) cited in Piron 2006. The methods of data collection are adapted from qualitative consumer research studies that investigated object attachment (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) object meaning (Bih 1992) and favourite possessions (Mehta and Belk 1991).

Through convenience sampling, we investigated the meaning and value of favourite possessions from eleven students (five females and six males). Seven were regional students from Fiji, Tonga, and Tuvalu and Kiribati studying at APTC and four were international students from Guyana, Belize and Guyana studying at the National University of Sāmoa. For the purpose of this study, favourite possessions can also be referred to as special, important or loved possessions. It included possessions that are privately owned and external objects, groups and places in Sāmoa not owned but were considered to be helpful to adapting to Sāmoa's environment.

Before the interviews took place, each student was given an 'information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and a consent form to record they had agreed to participate in the study. To measure consistency in interview answers, a sheet was given to each student a week before the interviews to record five possessions they considered 'special' 'loved' 'favourite' or 'important'. The possessions had to be ranked from 1 to 5 according to their importance in helping them settle in a different environment. Each possession also required an explanation as to why it was considered 'special' 'loved' 'favourite' or 'important'.

The analysis used in this study was informed by grounded theory (Ellis 1992) and the interpretative approach. From the transcripts of the eleven informants, content analysis was used for the coding and categorisation of each possession to fit into Bih's (1992) 7 meaning structure of objects.

Findings & Discussion

Table 1: Five favourite possessions in order of importance (1= most important)

Res	1	2	3	4	5
1	phone	external drive	photos	places	people
2	phone	camera	people	tv	places
3	phone	camera	photos	places	staff
4	phone	prayer book	laptop	fitness gear	ipod
5	phone	camera	ipod	laptop	places
6	phone	pendant	hard drive	people	places
7	phone	puletasi	fiji shirt	people	places
8	passport	bank card	phone	sneakers	glasses
9	laptop	photos	passport	umbrella	stick
10	phone	laptop	bank card	picture frame	passport
11	phone	passport	blanket	Hair extensions	places

Table 2: Summary of the meanings of possessions

Possession	Meanings
Phone/ipod	communication, connectivity, memories of loved ones, relaxation
camera	past and future memories, love,
laptop	tool to do assignments, storage, memories of family, relaxation
photos	love, family, motivation, home, happiness,
passport	identity, security,
blanket	home, love, happiness, great memories, comfort, warmth,
people	relationships, belonging, help, comfort, enjoyment, relaxation, fun
places	escape, fun, enjoyment, kill time, reflection of home, a photo to take home of Sāmoa, a memory of Sāmoa, relaxation
bank card	security, access to funds
bula shirt	identity, home, culture,
stick	protection, safety, stray dogs, security in the dark
prayer book	protection, identity, faith, motivation, love, hope,
training gear/sneakers	healthy body and healthy mind, distraction, kills time,

Table 3: How possessions helped settle into the new environment

Possession	How possessions helped settle into a new environment
Phone	minimise homesickness, allowed for regular communication back home, allowed me to carry past memories,
Camera	home away from home feeling, a tool to take new memories back home,
Laptop	distraction from home sickness, escape boredom, storage for past memories
Photos	provided motivation to stay focused, warms the heart, provides a reason to study and a reason to go home on time, memories of love, kept memories alive in the heart,
Passport	security, identity, guarantee of return home,
Blanket	home away from home feeling, comfort, happy memories, kept memories alive
People	distraction, created a home away from home environment,
Places	distraction, escape, relax, reminder of home
Bank card	security, living, budget
Bula shirt	identity, a piece of my culture, confidence,
Stick	protection, a sense safety, enabled me to wonder without fear of stray dogs,
Prayer book	faith, encouragement to complete studies
Training gear/sneakers	kill time, distract mind from home sickness

Table 1 illustrates each informant’s top five favourite possessions ranked in order of importance. Content analysis of their meanings is presented in Table 2. Together with an analysis of Table 3, three themes were generated to describe the meaning and value of favourite possessions.

(1) Identity and Self-Expression

Both privately owned and possessions not owned evoked emotions of love, belonging, escape, identity and relaxation. Possessions (prayer book, bula shirt) played the roles of reinforcing a sense of self and identity (Richins 1994). Other possessions (photos frames, pendant) represented sentimental interpersonal ties while others (fitness gears) represented recreational and extensions of self (hair extensions, phone, people, and places).

(2) Sense of the Past, Present and Future

Privately owned possessions (photos: either stored on the informant’s phone, laptop, external drive, or framed) blanket, pendant were mementoes of the past while (phones, cameras represented connections to the past, present and future. The functions of these possessions were beyond their utilitarian value and their meanings resided in the emotions attached to each possession. These possessions not only represented who they were, it also identified who they are and who they hope to be in a new environment.

(3) Relief to culture shock & homesickness

There were also possessions that functioned purely to provide distraction (tv programs), relaxation (beach) and escape from homesickness (night clubs). Informants indicated the enjoyment found in places and people because they experienced comfort, relaxation, companionship and belonging.

These themes were validated against Bih’s 1997, 7 meaning of structure of objects for validation.

Possessions analysed according to Bih’s (1992) 7 meaning structure of objects	
(A) Objects for instrumental purposes	Phone, camera, laptop, external drive, stick, training gear, passport, bank card, tv.
(B) Objects as an embodiment of values or ideals	prayer book
(C) Objects as a manifestation of achievement	n/a
D) Objects as an extension of memory)	photos, pendant, birthday card, blanket, hair extensions, bula shirt,
(E) Objects for deepening experience	worship songs on ipod, prayer book
(F) Objects for social exchange	photographs, pendant, birthday card, blanket, cultural souvenirs
(G) Objects as an extension of self	prayer book, pendant, blanket, photos, phone

A meaning structure of possessions

(A) Objects for instrumental purposes and beyond

While every object has a particular utilitarian purpose, there were possessions that were considered ‘loved’ ‘special’ and a favourite because it represented both functional and symbolic elements. In this category, 9/11 students identified the phone as their most important favourite possession not only because of it’s a communication and internet accessibility functions but most importantly because it stored photos of family and friends back home. The phone represented the symbolic meanings of: love, family and life.

On the other hand, one informant identified a stick as an important possession because it meant protection.

'the stick is extremely important because it protects me from potential dog attacks while walking on the road. There are many stray dogs and it can be scary walking home at night.'

The utilitarian function of a television for one informant was not important. This informant thought the available channels were very limited and the programs were not entertaining to watch. However, passively watching tv was one way to kill time and distract his mind from missing home.

(B) Objects as an embodiment of values or ideals

Usually objects that fall into this category are those that reflect our cultural or personal values and beliefs which help to improve our thinking and understanding about the meaning of life and guide our actions (Bih 1992). Examples of these objects include religious books or mottos about life. One informant identified his prayer book as a favourite possession.

"Church is a very important part of my life back home and I read my prayer book and pray every night.....God is my Saviour and he gives me faith and hope...When I pray it helps me to relax"

(C) Objects as an extension of memory

Objects that remind us of moments of joy and pain are identified in this category. Photos stored in phones, cameras, laptops, external drives and framed photos represented memories of the past for most informants. Photos were identified as a source of motivation for two informants.

"When I look at the picture of my kids, I am reminded of the reason I am here....My kid's photo motivates me to keep going even I am homesick"

Another informant considered a pendant gifted to him by his children an extension of past memories of his children and his family while another regarded her blanket and cultural souvenirs as reminders of comfort, joy and identity.

"I wear my pendant all the time because it reminds me of my children's love for me and my love for them".

(D) Objects for deepening experience

There are also objects that provide people with enjoyment or pleasure and provide emotional feelings through interaction with these objects. Two informants identified their ipod as a favourite possession that brought a deeper spiritual connection while another regarded his prayer book as his spiritual guide and confirmation of his faith and religious values in a new place.

'the worship songs I listen to on my ipod takes me to another place....It allows me to meditate and think about life and makes me feel closer to God'

(E) Objects for social exchange

Possessions identified by informants that functioned as an initiator or a topic of social conversation were: photographs, pendant, birthday card, blanket, cultural souvenirs. These objects became tangible manifestations of their love with their family and friends and often became initiators of conversations when friends would visit their rooms.

(F) Objects as an extension of self: owned and not owned

While all possessions had symbolic meanings to the informants, not all possessions represented or expressed their 'core self'. Privately owned possessions that represented the 'core self' were: prayer book, pendant, blanket, photos and phone. In addition to privately owned possessions, five informants identified places (clubbing, beach, rivers) and people (staff, friends, families of friends) as part of their 'core' self. Relationships and family were valued as part of who they are as individuals

and therefore they regarded the friendship of friends in new places a special possession. Additionally, their 'core self' was also about inner peace, relaxation and fun hence these emotions were experienced in possessions they did not own.

The findings illustrate that favourite possessions (owned and not owned) have multiple and similar meanings. For example, people, places, ipod, and laptop all meant 'relaxation'. Similarly, 'love' was emotionally attached to photos, cameras, laptops, people and places. Furthermore, the initial meaning of favourite possessions also echoes how they help during the time of transition.

Regional VS International students: Experiencing Culture Shock

Table 4: Culture Shock among regional and international students

Resp	Age	Gender	Status	Regional/International	culture shock
1	26	f	single	regional	No, similar culture, made friends from similar cultures here
2	22	f	single	regional	No, similar culture, many students from my country here
3	35	m	married	regional	No, similar culture
4	33	m	married	regional	No, not really, already students from my country here
5	30	m	married	regional	No, food a little different but similar to home
6	33	m	separated	regional	no, but language barrier
7	38	m	married	regional	different culture but a bit similar to home
8	37	f	single	international	yes, conservative type of culture, very different to home
9	32	m	single	international	yes, culture differences, language barriers, very different to home,
10	24	f	single	international	yes, clothing differences, language barriers
11	26	f	single	international	yes, clothing differences, different food, very traditional culture

When comparing the experiences of regional to international students, it was identified that while regional students admitted to experiencing 'homesickness', they experienced this at a lower level compared to international students. Regional students saw the cultural similarities between their country and that of Sāmoa a reason that made settling in less complicated. Furthermore, there were also many other students from their country already studying at APTC and they were quick to make friends through these affiliations. Despite being 'homesick', regional students did not experience 'culture shock'. In comparison, international students experienced 'culture shock' and discovered a few of Sāmoa's cultural values and principles primitive and difficult to understand.

According to one informant:

Sāmoan women and girls dress very modest and dressing revealing is considered disrespectful here. Where I come from, women and girls dress in whatever they want. Majority of the time, we wear more fitted and revealing clothes and it is not considered disrespectful

While Sāmoan hospitality is commonly appreciated by visitors to Sāmoa, aspects of Sāmoan hospitality are perceived: 'a little strange' according to another informant.

Having to always accept food when given because otherwise it is considered disrespectful is a little strange, and sometimes I am given food I am unfamiliar with so I hardly know what I'm eating.

Places and people: special possessions not owned

Both regional and international students identified making friends and affiliating with people a very important factor when settling into a new environment. All informants experienced 'homesickness' and the value of friends and people were perceived 'most important'. The feeling of 'needing to belong' and 'wanting to belong' was almost instant upon arrival. The sense of 'belonging' was commonly experienced through people, places especially Sāmoa's natural environment. Places according to seven informants provided relaxation, reflection of the past memories and memories to take back to their home countries.

For one informant, 'I took many photos of beautiful beaches because back home I don't live near the sea. I will take these pictures back and show my family how beautiful this place is'

For another, 'The clubs is my favourite place, I enjoy going there with my friends and it also helps me to feel a little more at home'

Possessions owned and not owned of equal importance in transitional environments

The findings from this study expose the value and meaning of favourite possessions that are not owned. Both privately owned and possessions not owned had emotional values and meanings beyond their functional elements. Both regional and international student's identified the meaning and value of favourite possessions they brought from their home countries to be of equal importance to those they experienced in Sāmoa. The results from this study indicate that the people and places of a new environment play an essential part in facilitating and accommodating people moving from one place to another.

Conclusion

The value and meaning of personal possessions is extensive in marketing literature. Possessions are part of who we are and our attachment to them defines and fosters our self-concept (Belk 1988 and Levy 1959). This study has extended the value and meaning of favourite possessions that are owned and not owned in helping students transition from one place to another.

Possessions identified as 'favourite' 'loved' and 'special' were evaluated equally for their functional purpose eg: (phone, laptop, and camera) and their symbolic meanings. (Bih 1992). Other than its utilitarian functions, the phone, camera and laptop shared the same meanings that a birthday card, blanket and photographs had because it symbolised past memories of family and friends back home and represented security, comfort, belonging and love. These favourite possessions became surrogate representations of the absent people that transitional possessions represented Mehta and Belk (1991).

Like privately owned possessions, places and people have value and meaning (McCracken 1988). In this study, the places and people in Sāmoa helped students transition into a new environment by providing a source of identification, affiliation and an overall sense of belonging. Places were 'loved' and 'special' commonly because it associated with experiences of the past and also present.

While the results of this study reveal the importance of favourite possessions (not owned) in transitional situations, this study did not evaluate whether the meaning and value of these favourite possessions remained constant throughout the entire duration of each students study period. The

participants of this study were at different stages of their study program when the interviews were conducted. Future research comparing the importance of favourite possessions (not owned) at the beginning and at the end of each students study would present a deeper understanding of the role that favourite possessions (not owned) play in transitional environments.

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