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SELF-EXTENSION, BRAND COMMUNITY, AND USER INNOVATION

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For thousands of years, people have pondered the quintessential questions "who are we?" and "what can we be?" Lately, with the rise of the consumer society, another question has risen in prominence, one which concerns how people's lives are shaped and socially connected through the things they consume and possess. To illuminate this complex relationship between self and mass goods, consumer behavior researchers have developed a stream of literature that focuses on how people extend individual and group self through the use of specific products and brands.

Belk (1987, 1988, 1989) summarizes that self-extension takes place in three primary ways: via controlling and mastering the object, via knowing the object, and by creating the object. While the first two ways of self-extension are quite well documented (Belk 1990; Hill *et al.* 2008; Epp and Price 2008; Hirschman 1994; Kleine *et al.* 1995; Sivadas and Venkatesh 1995; Tian and Belk 2005), surprisingly few studies have looked into how people extend self via the things they themselves create (Claiborne and Ozanne's (1990) study of custom-made homeowners, and Belk's (1988) references to craftspeople and artists being notable exceptions). This particular omission is all the more noteworthy given the phenomenal rise of and scholarly interest in consumer co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; von Hippel 2005). Consumer behavior researchers suggest that the participatory actions by consumers, such as the customizations and improvements they make, create much value for other consumers (Schau *et al.* 2009). However, in the extended-self literature we find little to illuminate the question of how social contexts influence creative and self-definitive processes.

To address these gaps, in this chapter we explore how members of the organic Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOL) community extend self through user innovation and community membership. In addition to making contributions to the consumer behavior literature we add new perspectives to the user innovation literature, which has been concerned with how user innovation happens and what motivates it, but which has so far not dealt with the relationship between identity negotiation and consumers' creations.

Self-extension and ways of self-extension

Central to the extended-self construct is the notion of a reciprocal relationship between consumers' view of self and their possessions. Consumers are construed as possessing a proximal or

core self that is extended into possessions while those possessions, in turn, infuse consumers' identities (Belk 1987, 1988, 1989). Through extending self into products that are consumed, possessions come to act as symbols (Belk 1988: 144) or artifacts of the self (Kleine et al. 1995: 341). These symbols give the individual the possibility to gain feedback from others who may otherwise be reluctant to respond to the unextended self (Belk 1988). As we will show, the solicitation and provision of feedback are processes that play out quite powerfully in the AFOL community.

Not all possessions are candidates for being perceived as part of self nor do all possessions reflect the same kind of potential "me-ness." Generally, the possessions people consider "me" and "mine," feel emotionally attached to and are satisfied with are more likely to become part of self (Sivadas and Venkatesh 1995). This is because such possessions are invested with psychic energy that links the owner with important feelings, experiences and life projects (Belk 1988, 1990; Epp and Price 2008; Hill et al. 2008; Hirschman 1994; Tian and Belk 2005). As such, possessions have the capability of integrating experiences and relationships from the past into the present life story (Epp and Price 2008; Kleine et al. 1995). As we will demonstrate, user innovations, too, can facilitate these processes.

Kleine et al.'s (1995) findings further suggest that possession attachments are usually past or present oriented. That is, people rarely become attached to products that represent emerging aspects of themselves. Similarly, consumers feel less of an attachment with possessions that mark what the consumer wishes to avoid becoming (Morgan 1993). Despite having lost their ability to mark current self, such possessions still signify identity (Kleine et al. 1995). These processes, too, are evident in the user-innovation activities of AFOL.

Belk (1988) suggested that one of the ways people appropriate objects is by overcoming, controlling, and mastering them. For example, as we learn to ride a bike, climb a mountain, manipulate a new computer system, or find our way in an unfamiliar subway system, we gain control and mastery over (and by) the thing. In these processes, our self figuratively extends to include these things (Belk 1988: 150). As we will show, consumer innovation represents a potent form of control and mastery.

Another way of incorporating objects into self is via the accumulation of deep knowledge of a thing, such as the consumer who has a profound and passionate knowledge of his collection of products, the way these products function, their history, and new offerings on the market-place of relevance to his or her collection (Belk 1988). Such knowledge, in most cases, would precede efforts at innovation. Hill et al.'s (2008) study vividly illustrates how passionately knowing a thing can be tied up with both very positive but also very difficult and sad emotions, like for example when one is being forced to end the relationship. In addition, their findings suggest that knowing is typically associated with attachment and satisfaction with the thing. However, as our findings show, the sense of closeness may also result in the opposite – i.e. feelings of devaluation in cases where other members of the community criticize the creation.

Finally, people may incorporate objects into self via creation. Belk (1988: 151) suggests that "handcrafted pieces to the craftsperson, and artworks to the artist, may become part of extended self, because we have intentionally worked upon or created these things, investing both energy and self in them." Belk (1988: 149) discusses the possibility that handcrafted items come to possess more of the creator's self compared to mass-produced items. Similarly, people are known to retain identity in the creation via marking the object (if the object is physical) or by codifying it though patent (if the thing represents a mental creation such as an idea for a product). None of the few studies available have studied the processes through which integration via creation happens and how consumers subscribe meaning to these processes. Neither have

they been centered on mundane and mass-produced consumption objects of the kind that are consumed most frequently. Our study addresses these gaps.

Research site and method

In 1998 the children's toy firm LEGO launched the product line, LEGO Mindstorms Robotic Invention System. Sales data for this system revealed quite a surprise: it was mainly adult males who bought and used the product. Also surprising was the extent to which these adult con-sumers, without any encouragement from the firm, re-engineered and wrote new code for the programmable control unit that came with the set. These consumers thought of themselves as belonging to the self-organized global AFOL community exhibiting the cultural and social hallmarks of brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Today, this community comprises over 70,000 members (LEGO Group, interview, April 2011).

User creativity and product innovation have always been central activities of the AFOL community. AFOLs innovate all aspects of the LEGO consumption activity (Antorini 2007; Bender 2010; Baichtal and Meno 2011). For example, they innovate new LEGO models, new play concepts, and technologically based products, all with the purpose of going "beyond what comes in the box." They also innovate social spaces and means of communication that allow for online as well as offline interaction. Between 2003 and 2010 we engaged in a multi-site, multi-method research program to examine community development and user-innovation in the AFOL community. The multi-site, multi-method program allowed us to study self-identity in different contexts and situations.

We observed AFOL in two contexts: 1 at conventions and locally arranged events; and 2 on community forums and sites. We participated in seven conventions in North America, Denmark and Germany, which amounted to 82 hours of observation. The conventions had between 50 and 400 AFOL. At these events, AFOL displayed their most impressive user innovations and participated in presentations, workshops, competitions, auctions, and roundtable discussions. We also observed AFOL at smaller and locally arranged events such as visits to the LEGO factory and the LEGOLAND park in Billund, Denmark, monthly LEGO user group meetings and locally arranged LEGO shopping trips. At the end of each observation, impressions were con-solidated into field notes that included descriptions of the physical frames of the event venue, the kinds of innovations and creations that were on display, the nature of the social interactions, and the language and jargon we observed. Becoming increasingly aware of the relationship between user innovation and self-extension, we followed several LEGO online forums and we collected member profiles uploaded by members of the LEGO User Group Network (Lugnet.com). In total, we collected 1,016 pages of double-spaced text.

To further elaborate the ideas that were associated with AFOL group self and to study the "me" and the "mine" that was associated with the things AFOL created, we conducted 25 depth interviews with members of the community that we met at conventions and events. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. In total, interview transcripts yielded 672 pages of double-spaced text. The interviews offered an opportunity to further elaborate the findings that had emerged through the observations and to expand the opinions and experiences that AFOL had previously brought up in the message board threads.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Miles and Huberman 1984; Strauss and Corbin 1998), where we engaged in an iterative procedure of transcribing, interpreting, pursuing new questions and paths, collecting additional data, and challen-ging, affirming, and refining emerging themes until we achieved sufficient interpretive convergence.

Findings

AFOL self-extension through creation

Being creative is for AFOL an important component of self. Consider the following comments:

> Creativity is what I, and I suspect others [AFOL], value. It does not matter how much [LEGO] you have but what you do with what you have.
>
> *(Christina, f, interview)*

> I think of LEGO as a creative outlet. I tell people I am creative but I am not artistic. I cannot draw, paint or sculpt or play music. But LEGO gives me a real creative outlet because I can look at something and start thinking about how I would build it. If it does not turn out the best part is that you take it apart and try again. That to me is the essence of LEGO. Being able to express something that I see in my head so that other people can see it.
>
> *(John, m, interview)*

As the above comments illustrate, creating new things, seeing other AFOL's self-designed work, and discussing innovative ways of using LEGO elements represent the things most appreciated about being AFOL.

AFOL generally think of creativity along two interdependent dimensions: creativity as related to mental and inner cognitive processes ("something I see in my head," "your uniqueness," as AFOL mentioned in interviews), and creativity as a collectively negotiated process in which social interaction and exchange of viewpoints in the form of feedback appear to be an important source of attraction. Consider these narratives:

> I find that there's a sort of a cycle where I build, share it, hear what people say about it, see what other people are building, talk about it, then go back and build again. Ideas tend to get passed around that way, and different people will use the idea in different ways and generate new ideas. It becomes a highly creative experience for me.
>
> *(AFOL posting from Lugnet.com)*

> The audience I build for is Builder's Lounge [a members-only forum for a group of very experienced and proficient AFOL] and a few other non-members I highly respect too. Sure, I build primarily for fun, but if I can get those select people to comment on something I did, I know I have achieved something great.
>
> *(AFOL posting from The Brothers Brick)*

As the above narratives illustrate, everything that makes AFOL uniquely them are incorporated into their creation, but in such a way that it is attuned with the taste of other community members. Feedback, in this respect, plays a key role in the reciprocal relationship between the AFOL creation and sense of self.

Through these iterative processes, an otherwise anonymous pile of LEGO elements transform into a symbol and artifact of the creator's self but also, because of the integration of other members' ideas and tastes, the group self. For example, we observed that AFOL would oftentimes show other AFOL's work to non-LEGO people as a way of testifying what AFOL as a group are capable of creating. In other words, we saw a strong sense of ownership and identification with other AFOL's work. Consequently, creation among AFOL is very much a social process made

possible through the many community meeting spots (online and offline). The social aspect is also reflected in the way AFOL talk about their work, which they commonly refer to as MOC, an abbreviation for "my own creation."

Self-extension and the role of the MOC

With the emphasis on *my own*, AFOL want to clearly distinguish their creative work from LEGO models produced by the LEGO Group. To qualify as a good MOC it needs to be perceived as novel and not just a variation of the known, or worse, a copy of someone else's work. As John (m, interview) mentions, and which represents a typical viewpoint among AFOL:

> You know, there are so many ways to put the bricks together that somebody is always coming up with something new. And for a lot of people that's a really cool thing. Finding a new way to do something.
>
> *(John, m, interview)*

This desire for novelty is closely linked with AFOL's collective quest to move the hobby "beyond what comes in the box," as it said on the cover of an AFOL-produced book about AFOL LEGO creations. Also, though, by praising the novel MOC as "a really cool thing" and by motivating one another to create new work, with each new MOC, AFOL are able to experience new sides of the self. As postmodernists have noted, the ability to experience new sides of the self through acquisition of new products is perhaps the most powerful driver of consumption in our times (Lipovetsky 2006). For AFOL specifically, it explains their high level of engagement in the MOC specifically and in innovation more generally.

While AFOL are generally happy to see others incorporate their work as symbols of the shared AFOL self, they also want to maintain a sense of self in the creation. Thus, similar to when people mark and patent their work, AFOL signal individual ownership over MOCs by writing elaborate descriptions of the model(s) they display and show others, by giving particular (brand) names to their work, and by using particular building styles that identify them as the creator. We observed several examples of AFOL who openly frowned and discredited those who, for whatever reason, had incorporated part of an MOC in their creation and displayed it as his or hers but without crediting the original creator. We see this as a self-defensive act that strives to protect the "me" that has been invested in the MOC. To AFOL, these self-defensive acts are anything but trivial and mundane. By posing as the inventor, the copyist threatens to "wash away" (Belk 1988: 159) the identity of the original creator.

Being no longer capable of claiming self through the MOC, the true creator can no longer gain feedback from others who may otherwise be reluctant to respond to the unextended self (Belk 1988). He or she becomes a "have-not" (Sayre and Horne 1996: 323). Clearly, there is much at stake when a copyist tries to claim work he or she did not do. It's not just that people can't respond to the creators' self if the MOC no longer is associated with him or her. Other deeper parts of the creator's identity risks being "washed away" too. Thus, we found that the MOC links AFOL with important self-defining experiences that concern first, AFOL's past, and second, the sense of engaging in constant self-improvement.

User creations as links to AFOL's past and self-improvement

MOCs connect AFOL with the past that is for many associated with a strong sense of creative freedom. Freedom to lose oneself entirely in the joy-filled act of expressing whatever idea came

to mind, where one did not have to deal with, as many AFOL pointed out to us, current "stresses of life," "deadlines," and "grown-up life of working, having a mortgage, etc." The past is clearly the time when AFOL were their "ideal self" (Belk 1990: 670). So strong is this need to create distance from the anti-self (associated with "grown-up life of work, having a mortgage, etc.") and to be connected with the ideal self that AFOL have created – a sacred myth that is centered on the idea that being innovative with LEGO elements represents, in the words of AFOL, a "fountain of youth" that offers the "chance to never stop being a kid." The myth is not about achieving immortality or staying the same forever. Rather, it is about connecting the current self with freely chosen, creative practices of the past.

By creating and sharing their MOCs with others, AFOL transfer and situate their ideal self in the present. Self-extension via the MOC, consequently, allows AFOL to express themselves and it helps them resolve current life theme-related tensions and emotional inconsistencies that exist between AFOL's desire for unrestricted creative self-expression and the limitations and constraints that are associated with grown-up life. Innovation and MOC creation thus help affirm the harmony and integrity of the self (McAdams 1993: 112).

Our findings support Belk's (1990) observation that people are especially concerned with the past when current identities are challenged and that possessions can act as security objects that help overcome life theme-related tensions. We build on Belk's (1990) findings by accentuating the role of creation in coupling past self with current self, and how the physical and mental involvement in a creation process enable people to actually act on the gaps that may exist between the two. Thus, our findings suggest a more agentic and dynamic view of the relationship between past, possessions, and the self.

Our findings also suggest, as the following will further illustrate, that social contexts play a key role in coupling these dimensions and giving them a future-oriented direction. Consider Stefan's (m, interview) comments:

STEFAN: The feedback I get most excited about is the one that takes time to dissect and analyze and deconstruct my model ... That gives me something to think about, something to, you know, that makes me excited, starts getting the mental resources pumping and makes me think about, you know, how to improve it. It makes me very energetic, very, "OK, all right, I know I can do this, and this, and this, and this," 'cause then I have a laundry list to go back to look through the monolog.

R: What does it tell about you as a person that you have this kind of, you know, or you have this wish to ... ?

STEFAN: Hopefully, that I like improving myself, that I like improving my creations, that I hold myself to a high standard ... If it's [the feedback] something that just says, oh this sucks, but it doesn't tell me why, then it will either make me very ... it'll make me feel bad, obviously, but it will make me feel discouraged and disheartened. But the lack of feedback will also do the same because I go: "OK, well, this isn't impressive enough to make anybody care to post. So I have to go back and make it more impressive. I have to find a way to make it more attention-grabbing." So there can be discouragement and depression when you don't get any response to your model, be it good or bad.

Feedback allows Stefan to think about how his work can be improved and how, as a result, he as a person can change and evolve. Creativity becomes part of an ongoing narrative of personal development and future visions of the self (Morgan 1993). The MOC couples past self with current self-identities but it is also instrumental to the development of the self, what the individual member and AFOL as a collective are hoping they will be in the eyes of others. As one

AFOL explained to us in an interview: people not in the LEGO hobby generally "have fond memories [of LEGO play] and that is all," but they "do not understand that this is a very complex and deep hobby and the possible creations you can make out of LEGO parts are endless." MOCs are perceived as instrumental to the path toward legitimizing the hobby as they demonstrate the complex nature of the hobby.

These findings contrast previous findings (Klein *et al.* 1995) which suggested that people rarely become attached to objects that represent emerging aspects of self. We find that people do become attached to such objects. We also find that the meanings inherent in these objects – i.e. their capacity to help people couple the past, the current, and future vision of self – represent a powerful motivation to innovate. By creating new MOCs, AFOL show to the world that they are evolving, consistently holding themselves, as Stefan emphasized, to a higher standard. The attitude: "I have to go back and make it more impressive," resonates with the self-view-bolstering dynamics described by Gao *et al.* (2009) and Belk (1988), where demand for new products and/or periods of creativity may follow loss of one's possessions. In the case of AFOL whose MOCs are being criticized or are simply ignored, the loss is not a tangible one but a symbolic loss related to the MOC's incapability to reflect how the creator has improved. We can see why Stefan and other AFOL are willing to work so hard to improve their work, and we can see why self-extension via creation can be a risky and time-consuming task that requires cognitive competencies and skills, but also attention to the social contexts of which the creator is a part.

Clearly, physically building with LEGO elements represents the most obvious way in which AFOL actively and intentionally incorporate LEGO products into self. However, incorporation also happens via control and mastering, and through knowing the brand. For example, AFOL's wide use of consumer-developed building techniques, various 3D-modeling software and parts library systems enable them to gain a high degree of control and mastery over the LEGO System. Through years of collecting and building with the LEGO System, AFOL have come to know the LEGO brand passionately. In some cases, AFOL know the brand better than employees of the LEGO Group itself, a fact noted by LEGO managers (Koerner 2006). Yet it is in the physical interaction and manipulation with LEGO elements that the subject arises and that the MOC can truly act as a symbol of self which other people can relate to, comment on, and acknowledge.

Discussion: self-extension, brand community, and user innovation

One of our main contributions to the extended-self theory is that self-extension projects sometimes fail (marking the creator as a "have-not") and that successful self-extension through creation depends on the individual's ability to incorporate the collectively negotiated taste that is shared by community members (and which in our case involves a taste for the novel creation). Compared to the unchanging objects that are typically examined in the extended-self literature (like furniture, houses and clothing), which are integrated into self through knowing, controlling, and/or mastery, self-extension via creation is a tricky and quite complicated task.

In the context of brand community, successful self-extension through creation happens not simply because the creator has intentionally worked upon or created a thing (Belk 1988). It happens because the creator is also able to reflect and incorporate the collectively negotiated taste in his or her creation. This is because, as we show, creation is very much a social process which involves a great deal of interaction and negotiation among members. In addition, we found that other members readily incorporate a creation as theirs when the creation testifies to what members appreciate and value as a community. These findings represent significant extensions of current literature which focuses mainly on the person-thing-person relationship and which depicts self-extension processes as largely under the control of the individual. We

find that others exert considerable influence on individual members' self-extension projects. We also find that through these processes the community creates a communal sense of self: what it means to belong to the AFOL community.

Another main finding concerns the role of innovations as narratives of self. It contributes to extant user innovation literature by illuminating the overlooked aspect of how identity relates to the innovations users conceive. Overall, user innovation scholars identify the following motives for why users innovate: a strong need for the thing which is not on the market (von Hippel 2001; Lüthje 2004; Hienerth 2006), peer recognition (Jeppesen and Molin 2003; Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006), and intrinsic motives like it is fun to innovate (Franke and Shah 2003; Füller 2006; Füller et al. 2006; Shah 2006). We propose that something deeper is at stake. Operating in the intersection between the "inside" and the real world, consumer innovations are at one and the same time "creative work of the imagination" and "grounded in the real world" (McAdams 1993: 112). We assert that these characteristics make consumer innovations especially good for telling stories of self. In fact, we find that the creation of identity through the expression of "inner" and unique ideas represents the ultimate in self-definition. Regarding the question of what inspires consumer innovation, we assert that the realness and authenticity of consumer innovations, that they are objects that can be touched, looked upon, and discussed, help stabilize and confirm the existence of self. Innovations literally and symbolically provide answers. They offer new perspectives on things, new ideas to believe in, and new solutions to be enthusiastic about and share. As such, one implication of this study for user innovation and consumer research is to acknowledge the creative and productive sides of consumption and of identity construction that go on "far removed from the corporation" (Holt 2002: 86), where companies no longer act as cultural authorities but are instead used as "original cultural material" (ibid.: 88) by the "unruly bricoleurs who," like AFOL, "engage in nonconformist producerly consumption practices" (ibid.: 88). In sum, we believe that the reason consumers find the innovation process to be fun, engaging, and exciting (Franke and Shah 2003; Füller 2006; Füller et al. 2006; Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006) is because consumers are creating solutions to real-life problems that help them execute their consumption activity more effectively (Lüthje 2004; von Hippel 2001). However, viewing consumer innovations from an identity perspective, we assert that what makes the innovation process profoundly meaningful, and what makes consumers innovate not once but several times and over a long period, is the fact that in the process, individual and communal self is created and experienced anew.

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