Beyond the Extended Self: Loved Objects and Consumers' Identity Narratives

AARON C. AHUVIA*

This article investigates the possessions and activities that consumers love and their role in the construction of a coherent identity narrative. In the face of social forces pushing toward identity fragmentation, interviews reveal three different strategies, labeled "demarcating," "compromising," and "synthesizing" solutions, for creating a coherent self-narrative. Findings are compared to Belk's "Possessions and the Extended Self." Most claims from Belk are supported, but the notion of a core versus extended self is critiqued as a potentially confusing metaphor. The roles of loved objects and activities in structuring social relationships and in consumer well-being are also explored.

I n all probability, the word "love" is used as often with objects and activities as with people. We hear it all the time, from "I love skiing" to "I love your new dress." In Sherry and McGrath's (1989, 163) study of a gift store, they note that "not only do our respondents 'love to shop' . . . but they also 'fall in love' with the items they select." In the use of products, Richins (1997) finds that love is a common consumption-related emotion. Love is so prevalent in consumption that when Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan (1989) asked participants to list feelings that they experienced when they thought about objects with which they had an emotional attachment, love was the second most commonly listed emotion, superseded only by happiness.

The people, and things, we love have a strong influence on our sense of who we are, on our self. Using response time studies, Aron et al. (1991) have shown that interpersonal love involves a fusion of identities in which one's sense of self grows to include the loved other. In the consumer behavior literature, consumer identity has frequently been linked to constructs related more or less directly to love, including special possessions (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), involvement (e.g., Celsi and Olson 1988), cathexis (e.g., Rook 1985), and consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998). Love differs from

these constructs in the specific items discussed by informants. Whereas special possessions are limited to privately owned physical objects and cathexis is usually applied to one's own body, clothing, and grooming products, the things people love are a broader category that includes public objects like nature as well as consumption activities. Involvement also differs from love. People can be very involved with things they detest and can love things that they are not currently involved with, as in the case of the informants who loved books they hadn't read in years. Consumer-brand relationships are at once broader than love, since love is only one type of relationship, and narrower than love, since they focus exclusively on brands. Nonetheless, all of these constructs share a strong focus on the way people use consumption to maintain their sense of identity through time and define themselves in relationship to other people.

The publication of Belk's (1988) "Possessions and the Extended Self" solidified and accelerated an interest by consumer researchers in the ways consumption helps define people's sense of who they are. Since that time, issues related to how consumers use products to construct their identity have permeated interpretive consumer research and become major topics in experimental and survey-based work as well. Belk (1988) brought together a large body of literature to support the thesis that consumers use key possessions to extend, expand, and strengthen their sense of self. Belk also elaborated on how this occurs and explored some special cases, like collections, where this phenomenon is particularly prevalent. The current article will present an empirical study on love in consumption contexts that highlights identity issues and use these findings to reflect back on Belk's major propositions. The primary research question of the current study is how these case studies of love in consumption can support, challenge, and update the perspective put forward in Belk (1988).

*Aaron C. Ahuvia is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Michigan–Dearborn School of Management, Fairlane Center South, 19000 Hubbard Drive, Dearborn, MI 48126-1491 (Ahuvia@umich.edu; Web site: http://www.som.umd.umich.edu/about−ahuvia.html). The author thanks Sid Levy, John Sherry, Brian Sternthal, and Mara Adelman for their oversight on this project, and Beth Hirschman, Craig Thompson, Arthur Aron, Syd Bernard, Naomi Roslyn Galtz, David Aron, David Rosenberg, and Aura Ahuvia for their comments. The author is particularly grateful for the tremendous patience and hard work of several editors, associate editors, and reviewers who saw this project through numerous revisions. Finally, the author thanks all the respondents who gave so generously of themselves by participating in this research.

Belk (1988) uses the terms "self," "sense of self," and "identity" as synonyms for how a person subjectively perceives who he or she is. Belk rejects any definition of what is included in the self that can apply uniformly across individuals and cultures because he believes that what constitutes the self is a subjective assessment that changes between people and over time. Nonetheless, Belk suggests a consistent structure for the self, at least in Western individualistic cultures. Belk sees consumers as possessing a core self that is expanded to include items that then become part of the extended self. For example, summarizing earlier research, Belk concluded that for those particular respondents the "body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences" are likely to be part of their core self, whereas "persons, places, and things to which one feels attached" are more likely to be seen as part of their extended self, and items to which they do not feel attached are not part of the self (141). The self also includes various levels of group affiliation, specifically individual, family, community, and group, that become further from the core self as they become larger and more impersonal. Items that are part of these group identities, such as a national flag, are also part of the extended self to the extent that the individual identifies with the group in question and the item is important to the group identity.

When using the current case studies to reflect back on Belk (1988), the interviews will be read in light of research on identity conducted since the publication of that seminal article. Post Belk (1988), two of the major developments in consumer research on identity have been a conceptualization of self as narrative and a concern with the complexities, conflicts, and challenges of identity construction.

It has become common to view a consumer's sense of identity as structured in terms of a narrative (Escalas and Bettman 2000; Fournier 1998; Giddens 1991; Thompson 1996, 1997; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). This means that in addition to seeing one's identity as a list of attributes (e.g., I am tall, I value achievement), these attributes are linked in memory to key episodes in one's life, which in turn are strung together to form a story. This story line allows people to make sense of who they are and provides a connected identity from past, to present, and into possible imagined futures. This narrative also explains one's affiliations with certain people and rejection of others based on their roles as other characters in the narrative. This narrative view is consistent with metaphors that see identity as a kind of performance in which consumers use goods to enact personalized versions of cultural scripts (Murray 2002).

Current research has also focused on the difficulties consumers face in developing and maintaining a coherent sense of self. Today we have a great deal of choice about who we want to be and the kind of life we want to lead. Therefore discovering one's true preferences, navigating choice, and representing the self—both to oneself and to others—has become an overwhelming concern and a primary driving force in consumption (Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Lasch 1979, 1984; Sennett 1977). This general orientation, in which much contemporary consumption is a process of identity construction, gives rise to two major discourses: postmodern fragmented multiple selves and the empty self.

Postmodernist researchers such as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) see the contemporary consumer as possessing a fragmented and multiple sense of self with no need to reconcile identity contradictions to produce a unified experience (260). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) see this as a positive development because it represents "freedom from . . . having to seek centered connections or an authentic self" (233). However, Gould and Lerman (1998), Thompson and Hirschman (1995), and Murray (2002) have not found many examples of consumers abandoning the desire for a coherent identity narrative, and their research explores the ways people use consumption to cobble together a coherent identity within the context of a fragmented society.

In contrast to the postmodernist view of contemporary consumers as possessing a sense of self that is overflowing with a cornucopia of different identities, Cushman's (1990) empty-self critique sees identity as a black hole into which the consumer relentlessly feeds objects but which never fills up. Cushman argues that the problem arises owing to a poor fit between consumers' continued desire for a coherent identity narrative and a lack of social and cultural support for this project because of a "significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. [The individual] experiences these social absences and their consequences 'interiorly' as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger" (600). Thus people are provoked to engage in serial (and potentially endless) rounds of lifestyle consumption—attempting to identify and master the lifestyle and accoutrements that will bring fulfillment.

METHOD

The relationship between loved possessions and identity construction suggests that a hermeneutic approach is appropriate here (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). The two cases reported here were selected from a set of 10 depth interviews, which in turn followed up on 70 phone interviews asking informants what, if anything, they loved and discussing these loved items. Depth interviews lasted 2 to 5 hr. and were conducted in the informants' homes. Questions covered the informants' life history, things other than people that they loved, their history with these loved items, people that they loved, and objects that they felt neutral about. Over the review process it was determined that detailed case studies were needed, and space allowed for reporting only two interviews. Two cases were selected that were representative of the interviews as a whole and that provided good illustrations of major findings.

CASE STUDIES

Pam

Pam's Life Narrative. Pam is single, 29 yr. old, and embarked on a career composing music for film scores. She

lives in a mixed neighborhood in Chicago containing a large Mexican community and, like Pam, a gentrifying group of mostly younger singles looking for a hip neighborhood with low rents near nightlife and cultural attractions.

Pam's parents were physicians who emigrated from the Philippines to Canada and then to America. "My parents come from very different backgrounds. My mother came from a very poor family and my father from a very wealthy family. So my father was very indulgent and my mother wasn't and that was sort of what you expect from their backgrounds."

When they first arrived in Canada, Pam's parents had little money despite her father's affluent background in the Philippines. "My father was a poor doctor, he had family money but he didn't want to take it. He felt it would be somehow giving in, I think. He wanted to make his own way. As an immigrant doctor, you just don't make a hell of a lot. Especially in the '60s he was getting slave wages. He was getting $600 a month to support a family of five in Canada."

Pam's mother was also a physician, but she made career sacrifices to raise the children. As Pam said, "She gave up her practice in OB/GYN for a very long time because she wanted to have children. . . . My mom went through a lot of hard times with my Dad. I can't say that their marriage was one of the easiest I've ever seen. I think my mother always sort of, I'm not even going to pretend, my mother resented giving up her practice. It was a love/hate thing. She loved her children, but she hated giving up her profession. She was angry."

As the children got older, Pam's mother resumed her career. With time their fortunes changed dramatically, and they became quite affluent. In her adolescence Pam spent several years with her parents in London, where she attended debutante balls and other society functions as a peripheral member of elite society. Pam's parents created an extremely culturally rich environment for her.

> My parents considered it their duty to try and expose their children to as much art as humanly possible. It didn't necessarily have to be confined to museums, although they were very conscious about taking us to museums, they always took us to very big sort of Broadway musicals. My father knew of course about my passion for classical music and he made great efforts. I saw Andre Watts play when I was 12. They were both very good about trying to feed our interests. . . . Reading was big time in our family. All of us read newspapers every day.
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> They bought us like little science kits when I was really into computers. Dad bought me a little kit, "My First Soldering," so I could put together my first basic circuit board.
>
> It sounds awfully busy but it was more casual than you'd think. You know it wasn't so overt I guess is what I'm trying to say. It just, that was just the environment that they chose to create. My mother was an amateur jazz singer, jazz pianist in her youth. My father has a lovely tenor. Music was huge in our house.

Pam maintained her passion for music and after high school she entered a world-renowned conservatory of music. She left after a year because she "couldn't make it as a performer," took some time off, and went back to school as an engineering major at a large midwestern university. This would be the first of several vacillations back and forth between working in the arts and more conventional career paths.

Postcollege, Pam worked for 4 yr. in investment banking. Her career was going well until she switched firms "from a really cool funky Harvard Jewish firm to an uptight Dartmouth WASPY firm." This move turned out to be "a huge mistake" since "I really hated the people I worked with and as a result it made it very hard for me to want to stay. So they're like 'do you want to leave or do we have to fire you?' And I'm like 'I'm outta here.'" Pam seized upon her break with investment banking as an opportunity to follow her lifetime interest in music to try to make a living as a composer doing film scores. At the time of the main interviews for this research she was working part-time as a waitress to support herself while finishing her first commissioned musical pieces.

What Pam Loves and Identity Conflicts. Pam reports loving a wide range of objects and activities, including music, CDs, popcorn, Bugs Bunny cartoons, and her collection of vintage purses and cigarette lighters. The things Pam loves are related to two major identity conflicts; the first involves her lifestyle identity, the second her gender identity. Pam's lifestyle conflict plays out largely through her choice of possible selves as a musician versus a businesswoman. These career choices have profound implications for Pam's sense of identity and are reflected in a series of binary oppositions associated with each choice (see table 1).

Pam spoke about corporate work as practical and con-

TABLE 1

BINARY OPPOSITIONS UNDERLIE PAM'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONFLICT

Investment banker	Composer
Associated with recent adult past	Associated with present and aspired to future
Safe	Risky
Parents approve	Parents resist
Status primarily from economic capital	Status primarily from cultural capital
Practical	Self-expressive
Dull	Passionately enjoyable and engaging
Routine	Creative
Undiscerning	Connoisseur
Conventional taste	Iconoclastic taste
Instrumental labor	Mild hedonism
Eminently respectable	Breaking the rules
Mundane	Elevated
Mundane object associated with investment banker identity: table	Love-objects associated with composer identity: music, CDs, popcorn, Bugs Bunny cartoons, and a collection of vintage purses and cigarette lighters

venient, as "something that will give you a pension fund," but not as self-expressive. Throughout the interviews she never made a single statement to indicate that her businesswoman persona represented a deeply felt aspect of herself. In contrast, Pam describes music as "intrinsic to my being." A composing career would allow her to build a strong public and private identity around the arts, which she sees as an authentic expression of herself. This project of identity creation is important to Pam, and she sees her transition from investment banking to composing as a move toward a more consciously achieved identity: "I worked in investment banking for a long time, 4 years, and I finally left. . . . I guess I've finally grown up. So, instead of just falling into something, I've been to sort of, to use a wretched investment banking term, proactively seeking my future."

This proactive choice of being a composer, however, runs into two obstacles: Pam's parents don't support this choice, and Pam is unsure if she has the talent to succeed.

> I ended up with a music minor, philosophy minor, and a business major because my Dad didn't think I would make it in music and he wouldn't pay for a degree. Actually that's really harsh. He encouraged me strongly to take a business degree because he's a very conservative person and he felt that it'd be better suited for me to have a career to fall back on.
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> It's been very hard and I really love writing music, just never thought I was any good at it. Depression babies' children aren't encouraged to go into the arts. . . . It's hard to break away.

Pam experiences a conflict between Pam the composer, a risky choice but one she sees as an expression of her inner self, versus Pam the businesswoman, a practical choice supported by her family. Within this identity conflict, Pam's loved objects all played a partisan role, serving to buttress her artistic persona and distance her from the businesswoman persona. This can be seen both in the way the things she loves are linked to her artistic persona and in the way mundane or neutral objects that she does not love are symbolically linked to the same kinds of practical considerations that underlie her businesswoman persona. Here she talks about her dining room table as a good example of an object she has mundane feelings for.

> ["Can you think of something you own that is mundane?"] I bought this table because it was useful. You see, it's a refractory. It's a copy of an old 17th-century table. You pull it out, underneath here is a second level. . . . Very practical, because I tend to lose things and if I had a leaf for a table, that's very bad because I'll leave it somewhere when I move. I did that once before so I learned my lesson and bought a refractory. It's a very workmanlike table, it suits the purpose, it's a cheap copy. . . . It does the job, you know . . . it suits my purpose. I like to have large dinner parties and go for hours at a time and this room suits me very well, too. It's just sort of ordinary.

This practical orientation is also linked to practical job choices, as we see in Pam's response to a projective question.

> ["If the table were a person, who would it be?"] He's been reliable. Doesn't wiggle. Pretty sturdy, doesn't break. [Would he have a job?] Oh yeah. He would have a job. Something eminently respectable. . . . Maybe a computer programmer, maybe an engineer or specialist, some kind of consultant. Something like that.

Pam likes this table for its practical benefits. It's a safe choice; it is conventional rather than creative (a copy of an old design) and average in quality. If it were a person, it would be eminently respectable and apply itself diligently to its daily routine in some technical field. But love for Pam requires something more than practicality and responsible hard work. It requires a deep connection with what she sees as her desired identity as a culturally sophisticated bohemian. This composer persona contains several interrelated elements: connoisseurship, creativity, iconoclastic tastes, and a mildly rebellious focus on pleasure and enjoyment. Pam's love objects support this identity in that her love of them, the way she appreciates them, and the way she talks about them all signal that she has these personal characteristics. When asked during the interview what loved item she'd like to focus on first, Pam picked her collection of vintage purses from the 1950s. These hard-sided Lucite handbags are visually striking with highly stylized and structured designs. As with everything Pam loves, this collection supports her identity as a creative, rebellious, bohemian connoisseur. Pam received her first Lucite purse as a gift from her mother and then started a collection.

> I was in college. It was my first year and I was broke, you know. I wanted to look interesting but I didn't have enough money to buy good, expensive things. So I would go with my mom—she's very Catholic you see—and she would have these huge garage sales for like the poor Indians out West or she'd pick a charity of the year. . . . These bags kept appearing and I thought they were beautiful. So I bought them for like $.50 or $1. Then I would wear them to the bars and stuff because it looked kind of cool. Years later I found out they were actually valuable. . . . ["What makes that one valuable?"] These are made only by a certain . . . dressmaker in Florida Miami for the rich old bats down there. And he only made like 50 of each bag. This has actually appeared (in) . . . a bag book that tells you all about bags.

Here we see the outsider status of wanting to "look interesting" and the classic bohemian discourse of "so much taste, so little money" implicit in a narrative about purchasing items for $1 that can be found today on eBay for $300. Whereas her sturdy but unloved table is all business, her beloved purses are all play.

> ["If your purses were a person, who would they be?"] She's a lady of leisure, as she ought to be. She was never meant

for work. I imagine she was very pampered. [She would have lived in the] '20s, '30s . . . a flapper . . . taken out to a lot of expensive dinners, operas. She was somebody's pet. She has good lines . . . she's very beautiful. . . . She definitely has her own style.

This pattern of loved items representing connoisseurship, creativity, iconoclastic tastes, and pleasure continues in her discussion of a music CD she loves.

This is the second recording of the *Goldberg Variations* of Glen Gould; much more mature, a lot better to listen to. . . . I love this because Gould himself was a very unique person. If you listen very carefully to his recordings, you can hear him humming in the background, because of the sheer pleasure of playing these things. . . . Bach was a marvel because he was able to take a genre and make it sound fresh every time he used it. . . . There were a lot of other Baroque artists, but they were just hacks. And I'm sure they were very good, but they just didn't put the same joy of playing into it. I think of modern writers of music, such as Ginestera, who are like the pianist's pianist, you know, who write things that happen to be very beautiful to the ear, but also wonderful to play. Bach was also one of those people. . . . This particular recording is strange, like I said, because you can hear Gould humming . . . he loves playing it. He had a real joy about it. . . . He just enjoyed it so much, it was so obvious, it was a real love.

Bugs Bunny and popcorn aren't always associated with sophisticated artsy bohemian taste, but for Pam they also support these elements of her identity. Pam is a good example of what Peterson and Kern (1996) label the change in highbrow taste from snob to omnivore. In the past, many high-culture consumers like Pam were "snobs" who rejected popular pleasures (Peterson and Kern 1996, 900). But now this social group has become more omnivorous, enjoying both high and popular culture, both Bach and Bugs Bunny. Following Bourdieu (1984), Holt (1997, 1998) argues that these omnivorous consumers rely more on how they consume than on what they consume in shaping their identity. By how people consume, Holt means different ways of using, thinking about, experiencing, and talking about products—which he calls a "consumption style." For someone other than Pam, loving Bugs Bunny might not be an expression of a sophisticated bohemian artistic persona. But Pam's consumption style—the way she thinks and talks about these cartoons—reinforces her artistic persona by transforming these popular entertainments into an arena for connoisseurship, the appreciation of creativity, the display of her iconoclastic tastes, and asserting the value of pleasure and fun.

I love Bugs Bunny cartoons, but it's really the pre-WWII Chuck Jones–produced ones. I have loved these cartoons since I was a kid and there's only certain ones that I like. ["Which ones?"] The ones that I love were the ones that were done pre-WWII because I like the solidity of movement in the cartoons themselves. I also love all the Chuck Jones ones . . . and the Saville and all the Bogner ones, those ones I liked the best—because I thought they were very funny then, I think they're funnier now that I'm a grown-up. The modern, the '70s, '80s Bugs Bunnys I don't like because the movement's so choppy. Just really, just second-rate animation. I loved them mainly because of the animation—the sheer whimsy behind the movement. The cleverness of Carl Stalling's scores. He was a genius. Just very well made. A lot of fun went into it, a lot of obvious enjoyment.

We see all of the bohemian artistic traits in Pam's comments. For Pam pleasure is not just a good feeling, it is a personal value (Bensman and Vidich 1995; Bourdieu 1984, 367; Brown 1995, 80). She not only appreciates the pleasure she gets from watching Bugs Bunny but also appreciates the fun and enjoyment the creators of these cartoons (and the Bach recording) had in their production. Her appreciation for creativity can be seen in her comments about "the sheer whimsy behind the movement. The cleverness of Carl Stalling's scores." With regards to iconoclastic tastes, many people enjoy Bugs Bunny, but Pam's dedication to them is unusual within her peer group. What's more, she is perfectly comfortable making Bugs Bunny part of her public identity: "All of my friends know that they can't call me between ten and eleven on Saturday mornings because on channel 7 that's when the Bugs Bunny cartoons are on, and I don't answer the phone."

One of the more interesting aspects of how Pam's love objects support her bohemian identity is through their validation of her connoisseurship. The essence of connoisseurship is discernment, in this case between the "pre-WWII Chuck Jones–produced" Bugs Bunny and the rest. This discernment in everyday objects is replete throughout her interview. Take her love of popcorn, for example: "It has to be a special kind of popcorn. It has to be salty, fluffy popcorn like fresh popcorn because stale popcorn kernels (make for) little nasty popcorn. (It should be) the really fresh, the big, fat bloomy ones, the kind they have in the popcorn commercials, it has to be really fresh and really salty."

Pam's comments about the "solidity of movement" in the Bugs Bunny cartoons and the "really fresh, the big, fat bloomy" popcorn are excellent examples of connoisseurship in which everyday items are appreciated in terms of abstract aesthetic properties and high levels of expertise. In this way, even these seemingly mundane items join with the more straightforward examples like Bach CDs and her collection of vintage purses in supporting her bohemian artistic composer persona.

The Conflict between Feminist and Upper-Class Traditional Female Ideals. In defining her gender identity, Pam experiences a conflict between a self-actualizing feminist ideal of womanhood and a particular traditional upper-class ideal of decorative femininity. This identity conflict also surfaced when she discussed her collection of elegant

vintage purses and cigarette cases. Pam's collections are linked to her parents. Pam talks about how she started adding cigarette cases and lighters to her purse collection to create a decorative feminine public image more to her father's liking: "It really goes back to my dad. . . . We used to go out for these once-a-month dinners and the one thing he couldn't stand . . . I'd be sitting down with him in a really nice place like the Everest Room for dinner. I would pull out this ratty, tatty pack of cigarettes. He would be like this is so unfeminine and so he bought me my first [cigarette] case. They were very pretty."

Pam's mother is also closely associated with these items. The first purse in Pam's collection was a gift from her mother: "She gave me a very beautiful bag, it was the bag that she bought to go on the first date with my Dad, a beautiful black lacquered Channel bag in the shape of a kidney." Pam's mother put raising the children and supporting her husband's career ahead of her own professional advancement. She was also a role model for a particular feminine ideal of an elegant society socialite. Pam's family struggled financially in her early childhood in Canada but later became fairly wealthy and enjoyed an elegant lifestyle while living in England, filled with nightclubs and debutante balls: "We lived in Hyde Park in London for a long time while the kids I went to school with were diplomats' children. . . . Knowing the people that they knew it was not unusual for them to get invited in the fall season to you know the deb balls. . . . Oh, well, my parents used to take me out with them in the evening. . . . Um, they didn't believe in babysitters at that time."

These purses and cigarette cases aren't just linked to Pam's parents as individuals but to an elite lifestyle set in a past era. The items are circa 1930–60, most from the 1950s. Several quotes from her interview reveal a consistent theme about this prefeminist era in which some upper-class women led elegant but restricted lives. As noted above in the discussion of Pam's bohemian identity, when asked to project a favorite purse from her collection as a person, she envisions the purse as a flapper who lived a decadent life of leisure as a kept woman. When Pam referred to this flapper as "somebody's pet," the comment carried a tone of disdain revealing an implicit critique of this dependent stereotype. Pam's concerns about decorative femininity aren't just abstract politics; she saw firsthand the toll this role took on her mother's career. Pam believes this caused considerable stress in her parents' marriage and unhappiness for her mother, whom Pam recalls saying, "I gave up so much for you, to raise you kids."

Talking about her collection, Pam says, "They are awfully feminine. I mean the '50s was a terribly repressed time for women, but they did have pretty things." Similarly, talking about the 1940s and 1950s, she says, "That time period is not a great period for women in general you know. . . . Basically we were just—you know—either wives or cosmetic clerks . . . very repressive for women, I mean certainly the clothing styles showed that. But I have, I guess, a weakness for pretty things."

These quotes show an attraction to the beauty and elegance of decorative femininity, but they also contain a feminist discourse that critiques it as repressive. Pam experiences this as a tension within herself. Pam loves these items not in spite of their decorative femininity, but "because they're very feminine." Pam describes herself as "not the most feminine woman you'll ever meet, as far as being real frilly and stuff, but I do have feminine weaknesses." The phrase "feminine weaknesses" combined with earlier statements about having "a weakness for pretty things" is particularly revealing about Pam's ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, she associates "frilly" (decorative) femininity with many positive traits that are very important to her such as beauty, style, and a sense of the dramatic. On the other hand, she also sees this particular construction of femininity as weak, dependent on male largesse, and self-sacrificing in a negative way. Creating a sense of self that includes what Pam sees as the positive attributes of decorative femininity without betraying her sense of feminism is a significant tension for her, but one she has made progress toward reconciling (see table 2).

In discussing her collection, she revealed her identity conflict around gender, but the collection itself also symbolizes her attempted synthesis of these competing feminine ideals. Pam associates these collections with a time period that she sees as repressive for women. But she also sees them as associated with the competent, self-assured female characters from old movies depicted by actresses like Lauren Bacall, Jean Harlow, Claudette Colbert, and Myrna Loy. Pam mentions that one of her bags has "been used a few times for movie shoots," and the styles of these bags and cigarette cases are similar to those used in these films. Pam mentions these old movies throughout the interview, at times specifically praising the female leads: "When I was growing up as a kid the noontime movies, they used to show these movies during the day . . . Bogart movies and anything that John Huston did and Sam Spade stuff and I just thought Bogey was like really this tough guy and Lauren Bacall was his tough girl. . . . Nick and Nora [the lead characters from

TABLE 2

BINARY OPPOSITIONS UNDERLIE PAM'S GENDER IDENTITY CONFLICT

Feminist	Decorative femininity
Ethics: advocating liberation from repressive women's roles associated with a time that was "not a great period for women"	Aesthetics: "pretty things" that are stylish and dramatic rather than "ratty-tatty" and "dirty"
Strong	Weak
Self-actualizing	Self-sacrificing
Financially self-reliant	Financially dependent on male largesse
Common	Classy
Contemporary	1920s–60s

Love objects associated with both her feminist and decorative feminine identities: Collection of vintage purses and cigarette lighters

the 1930s *Thin Man* movies] know each other's faults, there's absolutely no tensions about it. . . . And I like [Nora], considering she's in the '50s [*sic*] and stuff, she's a very, very hip person."

The type of character Pam calls a "tough girl" or a "very, very hip person" has been identified by the film scholar DiBattista (2001) as a feminist role model: "This (was) a new kind of woman, who really has to be reckoned with, who gets her man and gets her say. . . . [These characters are] articulate, independent, fun-loving and sexy women who were unselfconsciously living their lives" (Altmann 2001, 1). DiBattista talks about the demise of this character type in the 1950s and its replacement by more domestic images. It is interesting then that Pam's statement that Nora was "in the '50s" is factually inaccurate, but it positions Nora as a hip contemporaneous alternative to the stereotypical 1950s housewife. This character, exemplified by Lauren Bacall or Myrna Loy (Nora), is perfectly at home in a high-society function or elegant nightclub and represents a synthesis of feminine elegance and assertive strength. Pam's love for her collections comes in part from their power to represent this persona. In so doing, these loved collections represent a potential solution to an identity conflict—decoratively feminine and assertively feminist at the same time.

Cindy

Cindy's Life Narrative. Cindy, 35, is a single marketing executive. She lives in a fashionable neighborhood on Chicago's North Side that is popular with affluent younger professionals. Cindy's lineage is half German and half Danish. Her family background is "very important" to her, and she is presently tracing her German ancestry. Cindy's family had rural roots before immigrating to America. In the 1940s her family took over a ranch in Nebraska, where Cindy was later raised. "I did a lot of manual labor: every summer I was on a tractor." Cindy retains a warm attachment to the ranching lifestyle and ethos and to the property itself. In her view, this ranching experience "forms my character and my personality. It's really the backbone of my personality."

What Cindy Loves and Identity Conflicts. The story line of Cindy's life narrative traces her move from a rural rancher lifestyle to that of an urban marketing professional. Cindy's loved objects include her antiques, her parents' ranch, baseball, her baseball memorabilia, and cooking/entertaining. Her interview reveals various ways that Cindy uses these love objects to concretize her rancher and urban identities and weave them into a single life narrative. I will begin by discussing her rancher identity and then contrast this with her cosmopolitan self.

Cindy's rancher identity is expressed through her love for the ranch itself and, in a more complex manner, her antique collection. Most of the antiques are heirlooms brought by her family from Denmark and carried across America to their new home on the Great Plains. In response to projective questions that asked her to personify the ranch and the antiques, these love objects have represented a consistent persona and lifestyle that might be called "rural basics." This ethos places a strong emphasis on practicality, functionality, ruggedness, perseverance, hard work, and a quite personal presence.

["If the ranch were a person, who would it be?"] Mr. Ranch would be 60 [years old]. When I think of rancher, everything from J. R. Ewing to my father to every rancher that I ever grew up with, 60 is just the age that sticks in my mind. My father is 78 now, but he'll always be 60 to me for some strange reason. . . . Strong personality and very soft-spoken, understated, strong, tough . . . very quiet, very quiet. . . . Very strong moral beliefs, very focused on it and yet not necessarily concerned about going into a sanctuary on Sundays. . . . Not educated [but] very intelligent, uneducated because it's not necessarily for survival but intelligence is. ["How would he dress?"] Any way he wanted, just wouldn't matter. No fashion, no anything useful. The most practical way possible. ["How would he spend his money?"] Very practical, probably just on survival, very long-term purchases. . . . Nothing frivolous. Everything's got to have use and be necessary.

["If the antiques were a person, who would they be?"] She would have been a farmer and a housewife, she would have been a prairie homesteader type person. Very strong, sturdy, dedicated, hardworking, intelligent, but soft-spoken and yet diligent. Probably no time for hobbies, because she would have been raising 12 kids and you know, cooking, and working in the fields, all the above, she would have been very adventurous, but probably no hobbies, all just the essential skills in getting by in a 24-hour day, just those skills—cooking and cleaning and mending and sewing to get you through. ["How would she dress?"] Understated, very almost dull colors, a lot of cotton, a lot of, I don't know, very plain. ["How would she spend her money?"] On essentials, day to day, just the very basics.

This Apollonian, humble, no-frills approach to living focused on survival and practicality contrasts sharply with the Dionysian, sophisticated, aestheticized, urban "good life" enacted through Cindy's love of baseball and cooking. Cindy's description of baseball emphasizes the more hedonistic, aggressive, and flamboyant aspects of this lifestyle. Although baseball is sometimes used as an icon for small-town America, for Cindy it is connected to Chicago and an urban lifestyle.

I got into [baseball] 11 years ago. I dated a guy who played AAA ball and I honestly did not enjoy baseball back then, I thought it was very boring. He was roommate with Ryne Sandburg and so about 3 years after he quit he called me and said "all the guys are going to meet in Chicago" because four of them were playing for the Cubs. It was Ryne, Bobby Dernier, and Warren Brusstar and Dicky Knowles and Burke and he said all the guys want you there and we were going to have a big reunion and we want you to come in for a

game. So I came in and I had Burke sitting next to me [at the game] and he was explaining the different geometric formations of the players and when this person does this, then this person is going to back up then you got a left hander up and this person is going to throw a slider to the . . . and on and on and on and I thought he was making it all up, [but] everything happened the way he said it would. Everything down to the T. So from that point on I was amazed at the process. So it was from that moment on that I was hooked. That was more like 7 years ago. So it was really when I moved here [Chicago], I started going to the games and about 3 years ago, I started going to spring training. It was probably 3 years ago when I got serious about it.

["If baseball were a person, who would it be?"] Male, because baseball is a male sport. . . . Wild, adventurous, fun, athletic of course, footloose I think those are all describing the same thing. They would probably be racecar drivers or they would have a hobby of owning cars, antique Corvettes. ["Antique Corvettes?"] They would want something really racy and fun and wild, again, and expensive. ["What would he do for a living?"] Sales because you have to be . . . another characteristics of theirs would have been aggressiveness and that's sales and high energy and that's sales and what were some of the other characteristics I said about them . . . wild, footloose, that's sales. Probably personable—sales. ["How would he dress?"] Ooh, very trendy. He could afford the best so he would have consultants because he wouldn't have any taste, so he would have someone buying his clothes for him and he would look good.

As with baseball, Cindy's love of cooking and entertaining is part of her urban professional identity. Cooking shares some of baseball's hedonism, but it places much more emphasis on warm personal relationships, creativity, individualism, and aesthetic sophistication.

I love to entertain, and I love to have people help me in the kitchen and help me cook and I like making it a big social event itself, the cooking.

["You said you just had a dinner party yesterday."] It was great, it was a theme party. We have a group of women that got together. It started [with] a big auction last fall. Six women joined me that night after the very successful auction for me and we decided that all six of us, they were all friends of mine, but they were all total strangers, everyone got along so well in the group that we decided to make it a monthly thing of going out socially or having people into our homes. Jane did a dinner at Christmas time and January was my turn. I decided what I had that nobody else had was a lake view so I did a tropical, I had fish, I had the sun, I had every imaginable kind of fruits that people had never seen before or tasted before and I made tropical Cornish game hens and went all out. It took about 2 weeks, I had set the table on Tuesday night for it. Gotta make sure you've got all the right colored dishes and right colored napkins. Gotta make sure you got the right serving bowl, yeah, oh yeah, that's what makes it fun.

["If cooking/entertaining were a person, who would it be?"] His personality: hardworking, creative, fun, social, dedicated. There are some cooks that are very anal retentive and measure things and follow recipes and there are other cooks that don't have a clue. There is certainly the middle group, which I think is what I am, which is I try to follow a recipe and if it doesn't work, then I just go off on my own. That's where the creativity comes in figuring out flavors and measurements. Creativity also comes in when you are figuring out the menu itself and which is why it takes so many hours. ["How would cooking dress?"] Cooking would not really care what others thought but would always be appropriate. They would definitely want to be appropriate for the situation because they are very concerned with appearance and about the food and the menu and everything fitting in place. But it would be very avant-garde kind of stylish. One thing that he would have spent a lot of his money on would have been a huge entertainment or a big social area of some kind be it a kitchen or a dining room or whatever or a weekend house or whatever. But something where people could gather and entertain.

This general contrast between the rancher and the urban professional identity positions can be broken down into a series of specific binary oppositions including scarcity versus abundance, functional versus hedonic consumption, practical creativity versus aesthetic creativity, humble versus status-seeking self-presentation, and simple versus ornate tastes (see table 3). Examining these binary oppositions illuminates the tensions between these identity positions.

The rancher lifestyle is associated with scarcity. The quest for "survival" puts one in the position of having to "weather all kinds of difficulties." Money would be spent "on essentials, day to day, just the very basics." In Cindy's own life, the ranch and antiques are associated with memories of "hard manual labor." Because of scarcity, the rancher life-

TABLE 3

BINARY OPPOSITIONS UNDERLIE CINDY'S PRIMARY
IDENTITY CONFLICT

Rural basics	Urban good life
Associated with childhood on the ranch carried through to the present	Associated with contemporary urban professional lifestyle
Scarcity	Abundance
Functional consumption	Hedonic consumption
Practical creativity	Aesthetic creativity
Humble	Status-seeking self-presentation
Simple tastes	Ornate tastes
Work hard	Play hard
Love object associated with rural basics: the ranch	Love objects associated with the urban good life: cooking, entertaining, baseball, and baseball memorabilia

Love objects associated with both rural basics and the urban good life: antique furniture

style is functional. Consumption is very pragmatic and utilitarian. "Nothing frivolous. Everything's got to have use and be necessary." Creativity is important, but it is practical creativity in the services of greater functionality. Mr. Ranch is seen as very intelligent because that is needed for survival. But indications of aesthetic creativity are entirely lacking from Cindy's discussion of the rancher ethos. In contrast with scarcity, the urban good life is based on abundance. Money is plentiful; characters drive antique Corvettes and buy exotic cooking ingredients and equipment. In Cindy's own life, baseball involves vacation trips to spring training. The abundance of Cindy's upscale urban environment frees consumption to be less functional and more hedonistic. Characters are "wild, adventurous, fun." In Cindy's own life, the cooking she loves is for elaborate entertaining, and baseball is associated with weekends with the Cubs. Whereas in the rancher lifestyle creativity, like everything else, is a practical affair, for Cindy's current upscale urban professional lifestyle creativity is about its own intrinsic pleasure and aesthetic self-expression. Aesthetic creativity is replete throughout Cindy's discussion of cooking, which she sees as a major creative outlet in her own life. This creativity is supported by the claim to resist conformist social pressures—"Cooking would not really care what others thought." When this independent thought is combined with a strong concern "with appearance," it yields a persona who cares about style but approaches it as a form of individual creative self-expression rather than rigidly conforming to fashion (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Nonetheless, Cindy is a moderate, not a radical. The end result of this creativity must still be "appropriate for the situation." This necessitates some compromises with convention. For example, in cooking she neither follows the recipes to the letter nor abandons them completely. If she followed them to the letter there would be no creativity, but if she abandoned them completely the outcome might be a failure.

How does Cindy deal with the tensions summarized in table 3? Cindy's discussion of cooking and baseball includes evidence from her current life, which is not the case for the ranch. This is because the ranch represents her past (both childhood and family lineage), whereas cooking and baseball represent her present and aspirational future self. By conceptualizing these two personas as existing along a narrative time line, from past to future selves, she makes sense of their contrasting elements within a unified, coherent story of transition. This partially ameliorates the tension between these two personas, but for Cindy, it does not completely eliminate it. Cindy sees her rancher persona as part of her past, but she doesn't want to leave it behind. Cindy's rancher identity might better be described as "past—but still me" as opposed to "not me anymore." She values the rancher identity, and she keeps it alive within her despite the tensions with her urban professional self.

Cindy is looking for a both/and solution to this identity conflict, a synthesis that will let her be both a rancher and a trendy upscale urban professional at the same time. Cindy finds a symbolic expression of this synthesis in her much-loved antiques. Cindy's love for her antiques seemed especially strong. They are visually predominant in every room in her home, and her enthusiasm for them came through clearly in her interview. How do these antiques represent both the ranch and the urban good life? The connection to the ranch is clear enough: "There are these antiques that come from Nebraska, and here I am in a high rise in Chicago and part of Nebraska is here." At the same time, the antiques also represent a sophisticated upscale identity. Discussions with antique dealers revealed that in the years prior to this interview, prairie-style antiques had come into vogue, so that these antiques simultaneously allowed Cindy to be rural and display a sophisticated trendy aesthetic: "I think [the antiques] show a lot about me, some taste." Cindy strives to create a unified sense of self that incorporates both her rancher and her urban identities without watering down either one. Her antiques play a role in this attempted synthesis. As they sit in her home, they embody both her rural and urban personas, a piece of her past that fortuitously also allows her to be a stylish upscale urbanite.

DISCUSSION

The Centrality of Identity Issues in Consumption

"That we are what we have . . . is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (Belk 1988, 139). Belk's related assertions that (*a*) identity issues are central to consumption and (*b*) that possessions are a part of the self are important and lasting contributions of his classic article. The current research is completely consistent with these claims. This research began not as an exploration of identity issues but as an exploration on the psychology of love in which respondents were asked in open-ended questions to talk about the things and activities that they loved. Across the 70 phone interviews and 10 depth interviews from which the two cases presented here are drawn, issues related to the construction and maintenance of a sense of self permeated the responses. Love objects serve as indexical mementos of key events or relationships in the life narrative, help resolve identity conflicts, and tend to be tightly embedded in a rich symbolic network of associations. Identity issues emerged as the primary theme, which led to the repositioning of this research around the nature of the self. Nor is the prevalence of identity issues limited to this type of very high involvement context (e.g., see Miller [1998] for examples in a mundane shopping context). It is not surprising then that identity issues have become, and are likely to remain, a major area of inquiry for consumer researchers.

How Useful Is the Metaphor of Core Self versus Extended Self?

Like all metaphors, the framing of identity as consisting of a core versus extended self both illuminates and obscures. One advantage of this metaphor is that it frames identity as a continuous variable. Rather than something simply being

self or nonself, objects, experiences, groups, beliefs, and so on, range from intensely identified with the self (core self), to marginally identified with the self (extended self), to not identified with the self (nonself). This gradualist orientation fits with the fact that in these interviews the extent to which items were seen as part of the self varied continuously over the full range of levels of attachment.

At the same time, the metaphor of core self may inadvertently suggest the romantic notion of a core, true or authentic self (Campbell 1987; Gergen 1991, 18–47; Giddens 1991, 78–79). In this romantic view, each person has a true or authentic inner core self that is given to him or her from an external source, be that genetics, socialization, or God. The individual must then discover this true self, often referred to as "finding yourself," and live authentically in accordance with this given inner nature. This notion accurately describes the phenomenology of respondents like Pam, who sees herself as "proactively seeking" her future when she left the business world to become a composer because, as she says, "music is intrinsic to my being." But important as this notion of an authentic self is, it only tells part of the story. The current study found that loved items were connected to the self both by expressing the self (i.e., making visible internal dispositions, preferences, and impulses [Wong and Ahuvia 1998]) and by transforming the self into some new desired form. Here is an example of Cindy talking about the self-transformative power of clothing: "I try to be avant-garde. . . . I've got a friend who is creative in her dress and so every time I buy something I try to think. I don't think I'm very creative, so I always try to look at the stuff and say, 'Okay, would she be wearing that?' and if it passes that, then it's mine."

In contrast to self-expression, self-transformation can involve a distrust of one's personal tastes. Although Belk (1988) shows an interest in the transformative power of possessions, the metaphor of core self, by recalling the romantic idea of an authentic self, tends to highlight self-expression but obscure self-transformation. Future research may wish to explore the complex relationship between self-expression and self-transformation. For instance, Kates (2002) addresses the socialization of adult consumers into the gay subculture, a change that might well combine feeling of exploratory self-transformation with discovery of an authentic but repressed inner gay self. Kates's description of socialization into gay subculture (396–98) is very similar to what the current study found in straight respondents who moved from one social class milieu to another, suggesting that this experience is not unique to gay respondents.

The confusing potential of the core-self metaphor can also be seen in statements in which only those possessions that are linked to the "I" by extending the will into the physical world can "literally" become part of the self: "Objects in our possession literally can extend self, as when a tool or weapon allows us to do things of which we would otherwise be incapable" (Belk 1988, 145). In contrast, possessions whose primary importance lies in their sign value are not in the same literal category: "Possessions can also symbol-

ically extend self, as when a uniform or trophy allows us to convince ourselves (and perhaps others) that we can be a different person than we would be without them" (ibid.). There is a legitimate distinction between possessions whose value is primarily physical and instrumental versus those whose value is mostly symbolic, but there is no reason to see one category as more literally part of the self than the other. If anything, the current data suggests that possessions steeped in sign value are often the most intensely integrated into the respondent's sense of identity.

Much of the difficulty with the core-self metaphor arises from the image of the core self "reaching out," as it were, to expand itself by incorporating a new object. This can give rise to the idea that the core self is prior to, and ontologically distinct from, the extended self. We might think more clearly if we speak in terms of strong versus weak identification with objects, hot versus cold cathexis, or more versus less salient aspects of our identity. We should acknowledge that selfness is a continuous variable with a gray area between possessions that are, or are not, part of a consumer's identity. But it need not imply an authentic core self, or that two objects can both be part of the self yet one be more literally part of the self than the other.

Person-Thing-Person

"Relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)" (Belk 1988, 147). Belk was referring specifically to the fact that part of our desire for an object reflects a competitive relationship with other people who may also want the object—a tendency particularly visible in toddlers' competition with other children for toys. While I'm cautious about using the terms "never" and "always," (147), the underlying truth of this person-thing-person insight extends far beyond this specific example of competition for goods. Pam begins her discussion of her collection of cigarette cases by saying "It really goes back to my dad," and Cindy explains how her antiques "came from Denmark," and her family "brought all their furniture with them across the plains." The idea that consumption is often person-thing-person is central to the brand community literature in which social relationships are overtly structured around shared product ownership (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koening 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), and it is also central to the literature on gifts (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Wooten 2000). But even far beyond brand communities and gifts, the person-thing-person connection was still present. For example, Pam's love of popcorn or Bugs Bunny cartoons involved her social relationships in the way these items supported her bohemian identity and through that were ultimately used to manage her relationships to social groups. As Miller (1998, 46) notes, "Relationships to brands certainly matter, but they are important because of the way they express and mediate the relationship to other people." These cases, then, reaffirm the fundamentally social nature of consumption and reiterate the importance of the trilateral person-thing-person framing

of consumer behavior. In these two case studies, we also saw that the social nature of consumption was often experienced interiorly by the respondents as an identity conflict where the question of "which group should I belong to" became framed as "who should I be." This brings us to the larger issue of identity conflicts and solutions.

Demarcating, Compromising, and Synthesizing Solutions

Since the publication of Belk (1988), narrative theory, in which our sense of identity is structured as a story, has emerged as the dominant conceptualization of the self. Stories are usually structured around conflicts and their eventual resolution. These conflicts define what the story is about, what issue or topic it addresses. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) and Murray (2002) found that young adults experience a tension in their sense of identity as they strive to be both unique individuals and part of a group and that fashion is used to help address or resolve this tension (see also Fournier 1998).

Consumers attempt to reconcile identity conflicts in three ways, which I call "demarcating," "compromising," and "synthesizing" solutions. Suppose a consumer is experiencing a conflict between possible identities A and B. A demarcating solution endorses identity A and rejects identity B. A compromising solution assumes the conflict between A and B is a zero sum game and tries to create an identity partway between identities A and B. But a synthesizing solution assumes the conflict is not a zero sum game; a synthesizing solution is a novel resolution to the conflict that is more attractive to the consumer than a simple compromise would have been. A synthesis of A and B may offer the consumer most or all of the advantages of both A and B, or it may constitute a new possible identity that offers advantages not previously considered.

Demarcating solutions "express symbolic statements of membership and demarcation" (Murray 2002, 428) and are most attractive to consumers when one alternative is strongly preferred over another. As Wilk (1997) points out, it is often the products that consumers reject (and their associated rejected identities) that say the most about the consumers' desired self. In Pam's identity conflict between creating a life as a composer and pressures to pursue a less risky career in business, all the objects she claims to truly love demarcate and reinforce the boundary between her desired composer identity and rejected businesswoman identity.

Compromising and synthesizing solutions appeal to consumers when all alternatives possess desirable aspects. In a compromise solution, consumers give up what they see as some of the attractive features of each identity position to stake out a middle ground between them. Miller (1998) sees much of everyday shopping as a series of compromise solutions between products that are appropriate to socially defined roles (gender, parental, professional, etc.) and products that reflect the consumer's individual preferences—or the preferences of people for whom the products are being

bought. While compromising solutions are ubiquitous in everyday life, they are rare when talking about the things people love. Loved items feel right; they are not common compromises that satisfice. In the full set of interviews from which Pam and Cindy were drawn, respondents sometimes reported loving things in spite of their imperfections, but no one ever mentioned a flaw or imperfection as contributing to their love for an item. As Cindy says about her experiences with the things she loves, "Some are complete positive, (some) are negative and positive. But certainly, the positive far outweighs the negative." In these interviews, too much compromising was incompatible with love.

What I am calling synthesizing solutions get their name from the Hegelian notion of two opposing ideas (the thesis and the antithesis) being resolved within a synthesis (Holt 2002; Miller 1998). The pure type of synthesis is a complete have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too solution. In the current context, a synthesizing solution occurs when an object or consumption activity successfully combines the previously conflicting aspects of the consumer's identity in a way that comes reasonably close to giving the consumer the best of both worlds. Consumers loved objects and activities for many reasons, not only because they provided synthesizing solutions to identify conflicts. But whereas compromising solutions are rare in object love, synthesizing solutions are plentiful. Both Cindy and Pam provide examples of synthesizing solutions to identity conflicts. Because of a fortuitous fashion trend in home decor, Cindy's antiques allow her to be simultaneously rural and urban, contemporary and traditional, aesthetic and functional, scrappy rancher and affluent connoisseur—thus creating a new synthesis of these formerly opposing identity positions. Pam's discussions of her collection of elegant vintage purses and cigarette cases revealed how they symbolized what she called "a tough girl" persona from old movies and created a synthesizing solution—a persona that is decoratively feminine and assertively feminist at the same time.

Throughout their lives, people strive to resolve identity conflicts, although the ongoing nature of life renders each resolution inherently tentative and imperfect. These identity conflicts may not be as neatly tied up as the narrative conflicts in a 30 min. sitcom, but work on identity narratives suggests that people generally strive to resolve these tensions (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; McAdams 1993; Mick and Fournier 1998; Murray 2002). In these interviews, loved items tended to provide either demarcating or synthesizing solutions to identity conflicts. The notion of products as providing consumers with synthesizing solutions to identity conflicts provides an important counterpoint to our field's established focus on consumption as a method of demarcating social groups.

Rethinking the Postmodern and Empty Self

This article opened with a brief discussion of postmodern claims that consumers have multiple fragmented selves—and like it. The data gathered here joins a growing body of work that fails to find support for this claim (Gould

and Lerman 1998; Murray 2002; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Contemporary conditions do make the establishment of a coherent sense of self difficult, but the consumers here saw this as a challenge to be overcome rather than as the liberation from an oppressive ideal of a unified self.

Cushman's (1990) empty-self model was somewhat more consistent with these case studies. As Cushman argues, these consumers want to create a unified, coherent (although a complex) identity but face difficulties owing to their mobility, abundance of lifestyle options, and exposure to a variety of subcultures, each with competing norms and symbolic systems. However, the current study is somewhat more optimistic than Cushman about these consumers' chances for success. In Cushman's account, the things consumed remain remarkably inert. Driven by a psychic hunger, individuals consume and dispose, consume and dispose. There is little room for the idea that they might personalize the meanings of things by bringing them into a web of meaning both internally (through integration with the life narrative) and externally, through storytelling or other forms of sharing with a community.

Like Belk's work (1988), the current study shows how some forms of consumption can help us create a meaningful life. But whereas Cushman tends to focus on goods that are quickly purchased and just as quickly forgotten, loved items tended to be objects and activities that demanded a sizable investment of time and energy. This brings to mind Borgmann's (2000) claim that as technology increasingly divorces the benefits consumers derive from products from the skill and work needed to create those benefits (i.e., enjoying a frozen gourmet meal without needing to prepare it from scratch), we gain a "purity of pleasure" (421) because the negative aspects of work have been removed, but we are left with an empty experience. In contrast, what Borgmann calls "focal practices" require more effort from us, but we respond to these experiences by saying, "There is no place I would rather be. There is nothing I would rather do. There is no one I would rather be with" (421). This is precisely how respondents talked about the things they loved. In this regard, it is interesting to note how many love objects receive work and dedication from consumers rather than provide simple pleasures. Pam composed music; Cindy spent 2 wk. preparing for a dinner party. When the loved items were purchased rather than made, the shopping was typically more like a safari than an exercise in convenience. This investment of energy into the love object helps make it existentially meaningful and helps integrate it into the self.

This is not to deny the validity of Cushman's argument in some cases. Cushman's description of people running on an endless treadmill of vacuous spending might accurately describe cases in which consumers look to quick and facile forms of consumption in search of identity. And indeed, the literature on materialism (Kasser and Ahuvia 2001), and also on the lack of connection between income and happiness (Ahuvia and Friedman 1998), suggests that much of consumption is an ultimately unfulfilling activity. But the current research focuses on the exceptional consumption experiences that these respondents found most emotionally rewarding. It is worth noting how frequently these loved objects and activities required the direct expenditure of time and energy and not simply the expenditure of funds. They were, as the cliché would have it, labors of love. In these interviews, pleasure could be bought, but love was made.

CONCLUSION

Consider the vast number of objects and consumption activities that come and go in our lives: groceries, hobbies, vacations, clothing, clubs, gifts, tools, cars, movies, investments, computers, newspapers, art, books, furniture—the list goes on and on. From this vast sea, only a handful are loved. It is not surprising then that these few loved objects and activities play a special role in consumers' understandings of who they are as people. It must also be noted, however, that self-extension and love are not identical. Unless one has an unusually high level of self-esteem, there are inevitably aspects of oneself that one does not love, so love objects are only a subset of the things that make up a consumer's identity.

This article supports Belk's basic claim regarding the importance of identity issues in high involvement consumption. It suggests, however, that the metaphor of core versus extended self may not be the most useful way of describing this phenomenon. Instead, it may be simpler and clearer to keep Belk's thesis that products, ideas, activities, and so forth, have varying degrees of selfness for a consumer, without invoking the potentially misleading notion of a core self.

This research has looked at the ways love objects help resolve conflicts and tensions in the consumer's identity narrative. Sometimes love objects assist with symbolically demarcating the boundary between the self and identities that the consumer rejects. In other instances love objects help to symbolically support an identity that combines potentially conflicting aspects of self—such as tensions between the consumer's past identity versus the person the consumer wants to become, or the conflicts between ideals of who the consumer should be, which are advocated by socializing agents. Often the process of combining conflicting aspects of the self requires the consumer to make major compromises, but occasionally consumers create a synthesis of the opposing identities that comes close to giving them the best of both worlds. Often, loved objects were part of a synthesizing solution to an identity conflict. One contribution of the present research has been to show that in these case studies the loved objects derive much of their emotional power from helping resolve these conflicts. The tendency of these consumers to say they loved products that helped make these synthesizing solutions possible attests to the importance they placed on these identity conflicts and the great value they saw in finding successful solutions. These synthesizing solutions have received less attention in consumer research than have demarcating or compromising solutions, and they are therefore ripe for further study.

Without turning a blind eye to the problems of materi-

alism, Belk (1988) anticipates the interest in positive psychology by calling our attention to the fact that the "possessions incorporated in extended self serve valuable functions to healthy personalities" (159) because "possessions can make a positive contribution to our identities" (160). The concept of synthesizing solutions advances the topic of consumption's role in positive psychology by showing one mechanism through which possessions can help resolve identity conflicts. This is particularly relevant to well-being since research has suggested that conflicts and tensions within the identity narrative are experienced as psychologically problematic (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Emmons 1996; Murray 2002; Sheldon and Kasser 1995). Further research looking at issues related to consumption, identity, and consumer well-being is needed. For example, when do synthesizing have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too solutions provide long-term psychological benefits to consumers and when are they just temporary illusions that allow consumers to believe they can have it both ways when ultimately these solutions are unsustainable? What other elements of the self-narrative, beyond coherence, have implications for well-being? Is the prominence of material objects in a person's identity, in and of itself, an important correlate of well-being or is the type of role material objects play in identity more important?

This article extends this past research by showing how consumers use the things they love to construct a sense of self in the face of identity conflicts. Contemporary social forces lead consumers to focus on their identities at the same time that these social forces make the formation of a stable and coherent identity more difficult. This work has shown how each informant utilized a strategy of identity to create a coherent self-narrative out of potentially disjointed material.

[*Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Craig Thompson served as associate editor for this article.*]

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