

POSSESSION RITUALS OF THE DIGITAL CONSUMER: A STUDY OF PINTEREST

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Abstract

This study examines how consumers collect, organize, and categorize images they find using Pinterest, a bookmarking and image sharing website. We re-visit McCracken's (1986) theory of cultural meaning of consumer goods in the age of digital consumption to determine how virtual possessions have become an integral part of the user's extended self (Belk 1988). Based on interviews, netnography, and participant-observation, our findings shed light on the possession rituals of digital consumers. We found that consumers' image collection activities include claiming, personalizing, storing and hoarding, and sharing. Our research demonstrates how consumers engage in digital possession rituals and how they develop a symbolic sense of ownership even though they only possess a visual representation of that item and not the physical product.

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Traditional consumer possession rituals occur when a product moves from the marketplace to the home, and consumers demonstrate their ownership of goods by removing tags, packaging, placing, customizing, and using the items (McCracken 1986). But what if the actual physical product does not move from the marketplace to home, such as in the case of digital consumption? Using online image-sharing sites such as Pinterest, consumers now feel a symbolic ownership of items even though they do not possess the physical product, but only a mere visual representation. By utilizing these sites, members of online communities consume the images of the items rather than the actual goods.

In our study we investigate the possession rituals employed by digital consumers. The primary focus of our exploratory research is to discover how consumers collect, organize, and categorize images they find using Pinterest. We re-visit McCracken's (1986) theory of cultural meaning of consumer goods, in light of the age of digital consumption, to determine how virtual possessions have become an integral part of the user's extended self (Belk 1988).

Our research questions for this study include:

- 1) How has the traditional framework for the structure and movement of cultural meaning changed due to digital consumption?
- 2) What are the possession rituals digital consumers utilize?
- 3) How do consumers find symbolic meaning and value in digital goods such as images?

We start the paper with a review of the literature where we discuss possessions and digital consumption. After a description of the context of our study and our data collection techniques we discuss our preliminary findings in the next section. We conclude the paper with the main contributions of the study, its limitations and plans for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his influential article, Grant McCracken (1986) provided a framework for the structure and movement of cultural meaning. In this model, the meaning of goods shifts to the individual consumer through the act of acquiring and using a good. Consumers obtain, utilize, and enhance the meaning of goods, in order to align their sense of self and identity with the meaning embedded in a particular product (Holt 1997). Through possession, exchange, grooming and divestment rituals, goods become individualized by consumers with new symbolic meanings (McCracken 1986). Possession rituals of goods include activities such as “cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off and even photographing” (McCracken 1986, p. 79). These activities allow the consumers to claim possession of the item as their own, and these rituals allow individuals to transfer cultural meaning from their goods into their lives and sense of self. In this way, a manufactured anonymous good becomes a personalized possession belonging to the consumer (Belk 1988).

In today’s digital age, consumers lead second lives online claiming ownership to virtual goods and images, using social media to create, control and consume content (Hoffman and Novak forthcoming, cited in Hoffman, Novak and Stein 2013, p. 29). Currently, technological advancements are changing the modes of consumption activities (Siddiqui and Turley 2006, p.

647), and material objects are being replaced by electronic versions of these items. This replacement brings with it the question of how the consumers' self and relationship to their possessions are affected and reformulated due to the virtual possession phenomena.

The Internet allows the individuals to become window-shoppers of images, stimulating desire and allowing the actualization of consumer daydreams through digital consumption. (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). Individuals find "the experience of simply viewing goods online to be pleasurable, as they consume idealized images attached to goods" (Denegri-Knott, Molesworth 2010, p. 119). Consumers browse the online environment primarily due to the continuous and extensive supply of new images, which provides an ever-changing series of innovative, elusive and desirable goods (Falk and Campbell 1997; Campbell 2004). Therefore, in digital spaces, such as Pinterest, consumers are continuously motivated to explore, discover, and acquire new images (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010; Zwick and Dholakia 2006).

Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010, p. 109) state that digital virtual consumption differs considerably from traditional consumption since the object is experienced as owned within the boundaries of specific digital space, and cannot be utilized in material reality. By reflecting on the traditional model of meaning transfer, we recognize that this prior framework needs to be modified to more accurately represent how consumers claim ownership of goods in the virtual realm.

METHODOLOGY

Context

For the context of this study we chose Pinterest, due to its growing popularity among consumers, recently becoming the third largest social media site in the US after Facebook and Twitter in March 2012 (Todd 2012). Pinterest is a social bookmarking and image-sharing website where individuals create virtual “pinboards” of digital images. These images are organized into collections which users name based on themes, topics, or categories. The website enables users to discover new products, share ideas, and inspire one another. Initially Pinterest was considered a niche social network, but the site has quickly expanded its user base to become one of the fastest growing websites to date (King 2012). During the time period of October 2010 to October 2011, membership increased from 40,000 users to over 3.2 million. In February 2012, Pinterest was hailed as the “social media site to watch this year” (Helweh 2012).

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews. We conducted ten semi-structured long interviews (McCracken 1988) with female user-participants of Pinterest between the ages of 21 and 65 to better understand how they utilize the website. We specifically chose only female participants because according to statistics 80% of Pinterest users are women (Smith 2013). Our interviews began with a general overview of the participants’ backgrounds and lifestyles and then progressed to more specific questions regarding their collections and collecting behaviors as they emerged

through dialogue (Arsel and Bean 2012; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). To provide a context to the interview, we began with open-ended questions about the participants' selection and arrangement of images in their collections and then allowed the course of the interview to be largely set by the participant. During these interviews, we also included our commented observations (Emontspool 2012) in which the participants gave the interviewers a tour of their Pinterest boards, describing images chosen and taste preferences (Epp and Price 2010; Hoskins 1998; Kopytoff 1986).

Netnography. Netnography, a qualitative research method, utilizes ethnographic research techniques to study online communities through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets 2010; Kozinets 2002). This process is based upon observation in online cultural websites, blogs, and chatrooms. Since Pinterest is an online community site, the use of Netnography in this study was crucial to understanding the true nature of the group activities and the level of community engagement. Netnography provides information on the trends, symbolism, meanings, and communication patterns of online communities. Individuals participating in the community virtually, share in-depth insights on themselves, their lifestyles, and the reasons behind the choices they make. Using Netnography allowed us to keep record of interactions, and perform analysis on the collected data. The type of data collected includes the text that online participants type directly into "comments" section, and observational data from us as researchers.

Participant-Observation. Finally, we used participant-observation and introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). One of the authors has been a regular user of Pinterest since November 2011. This in-depth study allowed us to subjectively experience collection activities. Using this method

led us to better understand how the value system of this taste taxonomy becomes “internalized and naturalized through ritualization” (Arsel and Bean 2012).

FINDINGS

Our research revealed that consumers spend a great deal of time on image-sharing sites creating collections of their tastes. Consumers spend a considerable amount of this time utilizing possession rituals, which include: claiming, storing and hoarding, personalizing, and sharing their collections. These behaviors may be considered updated versions of McCracken’s description of the possession rituals where the “consumers spend a good deal of time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and even photographing many of their possessions” (1986, 79). Below we discuss the four main possession rituals of our participants.

Claiming

One of the unexpected habits of these users we discovered was the claiming ritual. In the claiming process consumers assert territoriality through ownership, which has interesting implications to the notion of possession. Does an item actually belong to you if you only possess an image of that item, rather than the physical item itself?

For example, our respondents claimed that they possess an item on Pinterest board, and some of the respondents said that they did not like when someone would re-pin their items and “copy” them. They felt that something that they had found first was being taken away from them.

“At first I didn’t pin them on my board, I would pin them to my sister’s board because I didn’t want the other teachers to see what I was going to do and copy me” (Katrina).

“I think I must have copied that from somebody. I go in to see what other people like that I can just save for myself” (Loretta).

Intangible images in their Pinterest collections became tangible manifestations of identity for our respondents. By claiming the images, these items became a source of meaning and if the images were re-pinned they felt like something was taken from them. Respondents used these items to represent identity placeholders, and when the image was “re-pinned” by another member they felt that their space in the online social sphere had been removed or changed. Also although image-sharing sites are public, a few respondents still felt that their privacy was violated when people they did not know chose images from their boards.

“It’s like waiting in line outside of something and it’s like hey... I was here” (Rachel).

“It’s a little bit weird because it’s kind of like why would someone reach in and look into your day. Honestly I’m uncomfortable when someone I feel like... even though some of my stuff is public, I don’t like people to like it if I feel like I’m being invaded on is private” (Korie).

Personalizing

In accordance with the literature on collecting (Campbell 2005; Belk 1995), our respondents actively re-contextualized the images they collected, situated them in a larger

collection and gave them new meanings and significance. This involved the consumer's self to be invested in the process.

Studying how digital virtual goods transform into meaningful possessions, transformation begins with the “domesticating process”, as one becomes familiarized with the technology (Denegri-Knott, Watkins and Wood 2013). Our respondents said that when they first began using Pinterest, they did not know how to use the site features and so they just clicked on the “like” button which left the items uncategorized and difficult to find. Once they spent more time on the site, they learned how to create boards and edit comments, they were better able to personalize the images and make the items their own.

“You know what’s interesting, these are all things I had a long time ago. I didn’t know where I put them” (Loretta).

Consumers also engage in crafting activities to personalize virtual goods in ways similar to the traditional possession rituals (Denegri-Knott, Watkins, and Wood 2013, p. 82). Through the crafting process consumers de-commodify the goods and attach their own symbolic meanings. The first of these activities is to categorize the images by labeling the item and creating board names. Next, consumers organize their images on boards, sometimes rearranging the order of images or boards to reflect level of importance of item. The Pinterest users would also remove comments from others and develop their own comments such as: how one plans to use this item, amendments (i.e “add more eggs to this dish”) or who to pass info onto (i.e “share this with Lindsay”).

Storing and Hoarding

Virtual hoarding characterized by the excessive acquisition of images, also seemed to be a trend among our respondents. Through our research we found there was a sense of sacralization through the ritual of pinning. The images collected became stored and respondents did not wish to engage in divestment rituals, even though it would be an easy process to do with just one click of a button. Below is one respondent whose comment suggests that she would like to keep all of the images she pinned on her boards.

“Because I don’t think you should throw anything away” (Katrina).

Respondents admitted that they themselves or people they know have become highly involved in the acquiring and storing process. Many participants saw this involvement as potentially negative.

“Some people get too wrapped up in it. I think that when they just go on and they just pin, pin, pin, pin and then they like have thirty boards” (Alicia).

“Sometimes I don’t even know...I didn’t even realize I had so many things on here” (Loretta).

Although prior research found emotional attachment as a missing attribute for virtual versions of the tangible possessions (Siddiqui and Turley 2006), we discovered high levels of emotional attachment with digital image collections. Aside from functionality of the collections on Pinterest, our respondents found pleasure, pride, aesthetics, and value in their image collections. Informants from our study believed it just as difficult to delete an image, as it would be to throw away the physical object. In fact, our respondents had a feeling of attachment to their

items and perceived their importance to be of high value even if they had no intended purpose for them.

“Not really even knowing what it is but I would just probably pull it up and put it under party... Just to have it” (Loretta).

“And there’s some things that I can tell that I probably pinned that I might not use but at the time I didn’t want to lose it. The ideas were so genius that it was like I didn’t really want to pin it cause I don’t really care but then I was like I’m going to go, something I was going to go back and be like gosh I would have... I wish I could have remembered half of those things” (Rita).

Sharing

Embracing the cultural properties of a possession provides insights to the consumers’ value systems. Respondents disclosed that they collected a particular image because it represented their taste, or presented an ideal self that they wished to be perceived as by others. The images chosen also reflect consumer’s attitudes towards certain cultural categories considered feminine, such as recipes and home décor. In this way, users extract the cultural meaning from the images and adopt them as part of the digital self-representation, while communicating multiple selves (Belk 2012), displaying taste (Bourdieu 1984), and consuming conspicuously (Veblen 1899).

One reason consumers want to share their collections is to fulfill unmet social needs. For example, one respondent said:

“It’s real interesting because I know somebody that she’s out of work, her husband’s not working, her life’s not really good at all and I see that she spends probably three, four hours a day on this. And it’s so interesting when you look at her pins. When you look at the things she’s in to, they’re all about the same. They’re all white. So here she has all these great beautiful things like life is beautiful. Well maybe I guess this is her way of escaping” (Loretta).

Another reason Pinterest members share boards is to compete against others. This competition can be seen in the high number of boards created and frequent pinning of images.

“Somebody had more boards than I did... so that’s when I got more boards” (Katrina).

Social visibility was another dimension of sharing images on Pinterest. A prior research has shown that using self-defining possessions in a digital state reduces the social visibility function (Siddiqui and Turley 2006, p. 647), but in our study social visibility for informants was not reduced. In fact there is heightened social visibility as unlike many other social media sites, Pinterest is accessible by all public and account owners are not allowed to block anyone from seeing their boards. However, two years after its launch, Pinterest introduced “secret boards” in November 2012 which allow its users to have three boards that they can keep private. Many of our respondents admitted to using these boards for items they didn’t wish others to see either due to their private nature or to counteract the fear of being copied.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study was to explore how the traditional framework for the structure and movement of cultural meaning changed in the digital age, what the possession rituals digital

consumer adopt are and how consumers find symbolic meaning and value in digital goods such as images. The preliminary findings suggest that digital consumers of online image sharing sites engage in possession rituals that are in some ways similar to the traditional ways. They show that on a virtual platform, such as Pinterest, there are several processes happening at once from the consumer's perspective. While the digital consumers are collecting and organizing images according to their subjective, yet culturally influenced categories (McCracken 1986) they are also communicating their multiple selves (Belk 2012), displaying their taste (Bourdieu 1984), and consuming conspicuously (Veblen 1899).

One of the limitations of our study was the number of informants we interviewed and the lack of diversity among our informants. We plan to further expand our research by expanding our informant base and investigate digital consumers and addiction. Addiction is a theme that was brought up several times in our interviews and seen repeatedly in netnography. This "addiction" was characterized by daily use, accessing the site several times a day, and staying on the site for sometimes hours at a time. And this addiction was not just to Pinterest but to other image sharing sites such as Instagram. In other future studies we plan to delve deeper into the digital hoarding phenomenon to better understand this area.

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