



Digitally extended self: Are we happy or sad?

Dr. Manoj Das,

Assistant Professor, Marketing, Institute of Management Technology, Hyderabad.

Abstract

Over the last few decades consumers have become more and more attached to their online consumption of goods and entertainment. With people increasingly spending so much time online for various things such as chatting on Facebook, creating stories on Instagram etc., it has become an integral part of our lives. As a result of which there is a blurring of boundaries between the real world and the digital world, thereby attracting the fascination of academicians and they are trying to understand what implications it will have on people and how can it benefit companies. This study concludes by highlighting a review about digital extended self, its conclusions etc.

Keywords: digital extended self, materiality, consumption, computer mediated technology, Possession.

Introduction

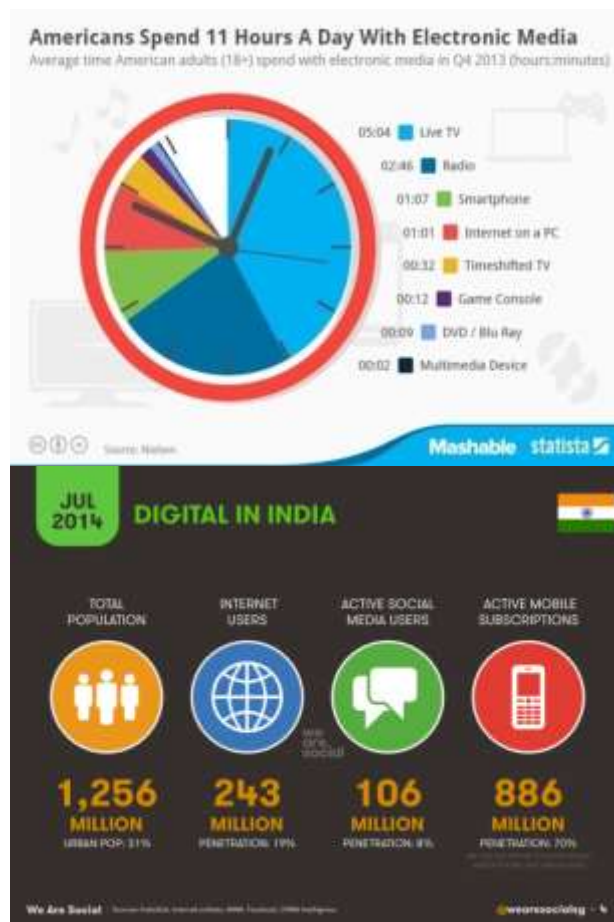
When Russell Belk introduced the concept of "Extended Self" in 1988, little did he realize that it would lead to a plethora of articles with researchers in consumer behavior using it to predict how people define themselves by different consumption patterns. Now there is a renewed interest in the topic due to the advent of internet and digital technologies, people are increasingly spending more time online than in the real world. Due to the blurring of boundaries between the real world and the digital world, this topic has acquired the fascination of academicians and they are trying to understand what implications it will have on people and how can it benefit companies.

Average Time Spent per Day with Major Media by US Adults, 2010-2013
hrs:mins

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Digital	3:14	3:50	4:31	5:09
—Online*	2:22	2:33	2:27	2:19
—Mobile (nonvoice)	0:24	0:49	1:33	2:21
—Other	0:26	0:28	0:31	0:36
TV	4:24	4:34	4:38	4:31
Radio	1:36	1:34	1:32	1:26
Print**	0:50	0:44	0:38	0:32
—Newspapers	0:30	0:26	0:22	0:18
—Magazines	0:20	0:18	0:16	0:14
Other	0:42	0:36	0:20	0:14
Total	10:46	11:18	11:39	11:52

Note: ages 18+; time spent with each medium includes all time spent with that medium, regardless of multitasking; for example, 1 hour of multitasking online while watching TV is counted as 1 hour for TV and 1 hour for online; *includes all internet activities on desktop and laptop computers; **offline reading only
Source: eMarketer, July 2013

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Theoretical framework

The concept of extended self was introduced by Russell Belk in his 1988 seminal paper, "Possessions and the Extended Self". It provided an overarching framework for understanding the role of possessions and other external elements which we use in defining our self-identity. It has solidified the belief that understanding consumption patterns can help in defining people's sense of who they are. Since its publication, it has been one of the most cited papers in the field of consumer research (Cohen, 1989). Belk (1988, p. 152) observed that the extended self is also hierarchical because "we exist not only as individuals, but also as collectivities." Although previous research has revealed as many as 11 layers of self, Russell's original focus was limited to the following four: individual, family, community, and group.

Studies in various streams like sociology, psychology have different visualizations of self-such as "Fluid"(Sociology) where we seek to understand meaning in different contexts (Solomon 1983),or "Possible selves" (Psychology)wherein we define ourselves based on our fantasies, aspirations etc thereby exploring what roles we are playing in each of them (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The Digital Extended Self

Digital Extended Self refers to the expressing ones identity via permutations of bits and bytes. (Sheth, 2014) .The online persona which individuals creates marks a significant departure from Belk's Delineation of 3 layers (having, doing, and being).This is due to the fact that there is ambiguity regarding what can be considered as an extension of the user, what is owned by

him and what is he doing in contrast of his online avatar. We are slowly merging our physical bodies with our online selves and moving from "you are what you wear" to "you are what you post".

Is digital self a revolutionary concept?

Schultz (2014) questions the "extended self," by raising an important question that isn't it simply doing what advertising and marketing professionals have been doing for so many years: helping humans to escape from their realities, giving them hope and dreams but restricted to their own minds. For academicians the concept of digital self" raises many interesting questions on the sound beliefs of many disciplines economics, consumer behavior, communication, psychology, and others.

SUMMARY OF DIGITAL MODIFICATIONS OF THE EXTENDED SELF		
Digital dimension	Self	Possessions
Dematerialization		Attachment to and singularization of virtual possessions; almost, but not quite the same
Re embodiment	Avatars affect offline self; multiplicity of selves	Attachment to avatars
Sharing	Self revelation; loss of control	Aggregate possessions; sense of shared place online
Co-construction of self	Affirmation of self; building aggregate extended self; "Attachment to Virtual Possessions in Videogames"	
Distributed memory	Narratives of self	Digital clutter; digital cues to sense of past

Adapted from: Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3),pg 478.

Rematerialization vs. materialization

Although consumer behavior in both online and digital context has been continuously studied for the last two decades ,the latter still occupies the fascination of many researchers who consider it as an underexplored area .This maybe in part due to the realization of internet as a specific context wherein consumers do not detach themselves from their offline selves rather they exercise their choices and decisions which are embedded in their offline experiences.(Garcia; Standlee; Bechkoff & Cui, 2009; Jurgenson,2012).

Previous studies have focused their attention on how online consumption differs from offline world by drawing distinctions based on adoption of the media used as well as the offline consumption (Cotte & Latour, 2009; Giesler, 2006; Schau & Gilly, 2003). However such a conceptualization ignores the fact that "offline" is the material backbone of "online"(Leonardi, 2010). Hence we can conclude that there are no clear cut boundaries between these two domains and they both permeate within one another.

Materiality has emerged as critical factor in the consumption domain in particular for digital consumption wherein the traditional notions of materialism are being challenged by dematerialization and digitization (Borgerson, 2005). In the recent years, researchers have laid the groundwork for articulating materiality in digital consumption (Denegri-Knott, Watkins & Wood, 2012; Magaudda, 2011, 2012)



What is materiality?

Materiality has defined in various ways by different authors in different streams .Some of the conceptualizations are "stuff" like clothes, books, etc. (Orlikowski, 2007), "the world of objects and things" (Pinch, 2008) and "quality or state of being physical" (Merriam -Webster, 2011)"the relative quantitative importance of some piece of financial information, to a user in the context of the decision to be made"(Frishkoff, 1970, p.116). All these conceptualizations indicate that scholars have had a tough time defining materiality as they begin with some reference to physical objects, but inherently point towards digital artifacts like software.

What is dematerialization?

As per Ishii and Ullmer (1997), "we live between two realms: our physical environment and Cyberspace" (p. 234). The "physical environment" represents the habitat in which we, humans, live (Gibson, 1979). "Cyberspace" is the intangible world of bits and bytes, which we will refer to as the "digital world". Both worlds are said to be "parallel but disjointed". (Ishii & Ullmer, 1997).

Dematerialization, is said to have occurred when an artifact from the physical environment has been incorporated into the digital world (Dourish, 2001).An interesting question about dematerialization is that how can we consider something which does not have a physical form an extension of ourselves. This presents an interesting situation because in the digital context all of our possessions like photos; books and so on are stored in either local storage or cloud storage. Some researchers have found that people are increasingly attaching more importance to their digital possessions to the extent that their theft or loss can cause depression in them.(Denegri-Knott, Watkins & Wood, 2012, Lehdonvirta,2012) whereas others have reported that the lack of the ability to display the digital possessions leads to lesser attachment.(Siddiqui & Turley,2006, Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010) Hence in the process of dematerialization "what matters most about an artifact is not what it's made out of ,but what it allows people to do". (Leonardi, 2010)

Computer mediated technologies have changed the forms as well as modes of consumption of various things, along with changes in the objects of ownership and their collection being dematerialized. Some common examples of such replacements are emails, e cards, eBooks, digital music collections, online newspapers, digital photographs. Although some people may contest that some of these objects are consumables and hence may not qualify as possessions but the fact remains that they are replacements of their tangible versions and hence can be considered to be a part of the extended self.

Conclusion

We have tried to draw attention to the concept of extended self in the digital age through our arguments in this paper. We hope future researchers would build more on this concept through either experimental research studies to test the extent of materiality or through qualitative surveys.

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