

Beyond Material Possessions: The Emergence of Extended Self in Experiential Settings - Insights From Toulouse Lautrec Consumption

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Abstract: *The current research investigates consumers' self extension and emergent identity through the lenses of the multidimensional self concept theory. The notion of emergent identity is largely context-embedded and suggests that consumers' self identities are (re)-affirmed through experiences that individuals' live in a certain context. Following a phenomenological approach, this article unravels the pathways by which visitors extended and attached themselves in Lautrec's museum experience. The current study highlights the importance of fit and conflict occurrences in self extension, which have rarely been discussed in consumer behaviour literature.*

Keywords: *Museum experience, attachment, self extension, shadow, phenomenology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Consumer Culture Theory the consumption of experiences constitutes a contextual subjective episode that consumers undergo so as to construct an individualised consumption narrative (Thompson, 1997; Carù & Cova, 2007). This conceptualization of consumption experiences as idiosyncratic episodes highlights their biographical significance in consumers' lives and their role in consumers' attempts to create meaning in their lives. The meaning of consumption experiences is phenomenological and symbolic in nature, since it occurs within the act of consumption and relies on the interpretative frameworks of the beholder (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). The symbolic and phenomenological aspect of consumption experiences invites a multidimensional self-concept theory in order to understand how consumers construct and maintain their self identities through consumption in certain contexts (Thompson, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005).

The extant literature considers that the self is composed of different self identities that emerge through an individuals' experience in a certain context (Erikson, 1968; James, 1910). Erikson (1968) defined identity in terms of self, which as stated by James is (1910) "*an object of knowledge which is consisted of whatever the individual views as belonging to himself*". The self, thus, is a knowledge structure that helps people organize and give meaning to memory and behavior (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994). A person's overall self is represented as a set of categories, each of which represents a distinct identity (i.e. self as a consumer is an identity) (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In consumer behaviour literature, the self identity is actively created through consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Within this field, scholars have examined the notion of self identity from three different perspectives. The first viewpoint relates to the notion of consumption in terms of possessions, which contributes to the emergence of an extended self (Belk, 1988). The second perspective is associated with the notion of symbolic consumption, which approaches self identity as a critical component of creating and maintaining the self (Wattanasuwan, 2005). The third standpoint coincides with "situated identity theory" (Alexander & Wiley, 1981) that has brought into light the notions of multiple selves or multiple identities, which contribute to the construction of emergent identity. The concept of emergent identity is largely context-embedded and suggests that consumers hold a set of multiple identities, "*which have been designed to fit in particular situations, needs and opportunities*" (Falk, 2009, p. 73). The current paper borrows ideas from the second and third viewpoints in that it considers emergent identity as a response to the needs and realities of a specific context (Schachter, 2005).

Despite the fact that previous research in consumer behavior have examined aspects of identity (e.g., self-extension, self-congruity and self-brand connections) in terms of material possessions, limited research has addressed the concept of emergent identity in terms of experiences. There is a dialectic relationship between emergent identity and experience. Both concepts take place in the dimension of time and space. Emergent identity is defined by the "moment", notably the experiences that consumers live in a certain context. The self is (re)-affirmed by the emergent identity, that is shaped without purchase and ownership (Kleine & Baker, 2004; Chen, 2009) and adheres to spatial and temporal boundaries.

An identity in order to be emerged requires a context where its significance is apparent and meaningful (Rounds, 2006). Viewed in this light, museums serve as private mnemonic environments (Umiker-Sebeok, 1992) that offer to visitors

opportunities to enact their identities (Falk, 2009; Rounds, 2006). To illustrate this, museums encounter objects in an order, where *“their meanings can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived”* (ibid., 2006, p. 141). Therefore, within museum contexts visitors are able to perform their identities so as to create contextually relevant experiences and to express themselves. Despite the fact that there has been a growing interest in emergent identity within museum contexts, limited empirical evidence has investigated how emergent identity, museum experience attachment, artwork content and self-extension intertwine (cf. Kleine & Baker, 2004). This is vividly described in the words of Gadamer (1993, p. 70): *“... the power of the work of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence”*. The objectives of this study are twofold, notably to understand: 1) how consumer competencies reflect on emergence of the consumer extended self, and 2) how fit and conflict occurrences associated with the museum context or content contribute to self-extension, in terms of the experience attachment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Self extension and consumption experiences

Studies concerning the concept of the extended self propose that experiences most closely identified with an individual's sense of self are made part of the self (Van Boven & Gilovich 2003; Arnould & Price, 1993). These experiences become part of an “extended self” and represent consumers’ attachment to them. In these accounts, self extension entails that an experience carries symbolic meanings that consumers employ for the purposes of self creation and self understanding (Schouten, 1991). Although the notions of self-creation and self-understanding mainly emphasize the influence of the accepted meanings of consumption occurrences in the process of identity construction, this process also entails rejected or unwanted meanings that take place within a consumption episode. This dark side of consuming experiences embraces the excluded and alienated meanings and sensations that may arise within the act of consumption and are approached as shadows, in terms of Jung’s theory (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2010). According to Jung (1959), the archetype of shadow constitutes the dark side of one’s self which exists in each individual and is manifested in waking life as negative projections onto other people.

In the domain of art consumption, shadows give meaning and accompany each experience of art. According to Perniola (2004), the shadows constitute a framework, which explains the shape of the works of art and represents the “experience of difference”. Moreover, the existence of ugly elements or figures in art and especially in modern and contemporary art often elicit terror, trepidation or astonishment. The presence of ugly within a work of art constitutes a part of an aesthetic whole (i.e. a painting that aesthetically represents the beauty) and allows the shadow qualities (of the artwork) to be incorporated into the aesthetic experience and consequently to be part of consumers’ interaction with the artworks. As such, the beautiful and the ugly go beyond the *“reaches of ordinary experience of the individual ego”* (Johnston, 1997, p. 13) and provide to the aesthetic experience its transcendental dimension. Furthermore, Chen (2009) also emphasizes the transformative nature of art consumption and proposes that aesthetic experiences provide value of the extended self. In a similar vein, Horner (1988, adapted from Wetzl-Fairchild, 1991) argues that art consumption elicits personal and subjective responses to museum visitors and as a result aesthetic experiences provide to the viewer greater self-understanding. Going beyond the artworks, consumers recognize and reframe their personal histories (Umiker-Sebeok, 1992). This state of identification with the artworks can symbolize powerful convictions or passions through which the life of the viewer is led (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Viewed in this light, a museum experience is made part of the viewer’s self, when this experience represents personally significant events in the visitor’s life (Burriss & Rempel, 2004).

According to Berger (1974), consumers make an experience part of their self through identifications. Visitors often identify with emotionally charged experiences (cf. Berger, 1974) and this identification describes the internalization of the relationship between the visitor and the museum experience content and context. However, such identifications are incorporated into the extended self once consistent with the individual’s competencies, (e.g. visitors’ ability to control the environment) (Berger, 1974). In a museum context, visitors connect what they know with what they experience and who they are. However, not all visitors are adept to making such connections as they do not possess the adequate competencies (e.g. skills, prior experiences, knowledge) for achieving these associations (Elliot & Dweck, 2005). Thus, visitors’ competencies contribute to the emergence of an identity within a museum context and content. This emergent identity leads to the construction of a personally expressive meaning of the perceived museum experience and consequently affects the experience attachment (e.g. labeling the experience as “my experience”) (Falk, 2009; Kleine & Baker, 2004).

2.2 Museum experience attachment

According to Belk (1988), consumers’ attachment to an experience constitutes a process that leads one to extend the self. Museum experience attachment represents *“a personal, psychological bond to situations that deliver sought-after symbolic benefits”* (cf. Kleine & Baker, 2004, p.23). Consumers extract the symbolic benefits of their aesthetic experiences through their interaction with the artworks (Dewey, 1980). Within this interaction museum visitors perceive and rearrange the meaning from the artworks to their personal lives, so as to shape their experience. As such, art communicates the stories of others and archetypal images through which the symbolic meaning and identity are emerged (Mead, 1934). The symbolic benefits that aesthetic experiences offer are either self-definitional benefits or self continuity/change benefits. The former

enables “an understanding of ourselves in and through the artwork” (Costantino, 2002-2003, p. 80). Specifically, the self-definitional benefits are used to define the “me” and “not me” boundaries, which influence visitor’s process of understanding and interpreting the museum experience. The latter benefits facilitate a dialogue between aesthetic experience and visitors’ negotiation of the meaning of art, since “viewers’ interpretations are conditioned by their own preconceptions and traditions” (ibid., p. 80). Museum experiences deliver the self definitional and self-continuity/change benefits through the fit and conflict occurrences (cf. Constantino, 2002-2003). The fit occurrence serves as a confirmatory mechanism of visitors’ existing identities (self continuity) while the conflict occurrence serves as a trigger for self-change (ibid. p.60). Since museum experience attachment leads to self-extension (Belk, 1988) the fit and conflict occurrences constitute a pathway for visitor-experience interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is rooted on the existential phenomenology tradition as outlined by Heidegger (1962). Phenomenology holds the position that the experience is understood in relation to the context of that specific “life world” from which it emerges. Parry (2011) elaborates on the dialectic relationship between art and phenomenology. He notes that phenomenology uncovers the meaning of art and art is a phenomenological activity. In order to meet the objectives of the study, we conducted a single interpretive case study (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Stake, 1995) of Toulouse Lautrec’s comprehensive collection of works hosted in 2011 in Greece. The artwork of Toulouse Lautrec served as a critical case and as the museum content for enhancing our understanding on the transformative nature of aesthetic experiences. According to art critics, the realistic art of Lautrec and his contemporary resonance lead to the awareness of the pragmatic status of humanity (Gimferrer, 1993). His depicted obsession with the larger-than-life personalities and with the anti-establishment culture “stages” the biggest insecurities and anxieties of human beings. As such, his artworks are described as “distasteful”, “shocking” or even “liberating”, since his cult personalities share with their viewers the secret nature of the theatre of life (Thomson, Cate, & Chapin, 2005).

The case study evidence emerged from multiple sources of evidence, including 50 in-depth, on-site consumer interviews (Kvale, 1996), participant and systematic observation within the museum context (Baker, 2006) and archival records of Toulouse-Lautrec’s exhibition (Welch, 2000). We interviewed visitors from diverse demographic and psychographic backgrounds so as to unveil rich and unique stories of the museum experience attachment. The respondents were invited to share their personal stories in the form of narratives that constituted parts of qualitative interviewing. These narratives offered a sequential order of events that connected the museum visit, content and context with emergent identity. As Leavy (2009) put it, narratives give voice to experience. The researchers employed intratextual and intertextual cycles of interpretation (Thompson, 1997) and narrative analysis (Elliot, 2005) in order to flesh out the role of content and context on visitors’ emergent identities and self-extension.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The role of visitors’ competencies and identifications in the emergence of the extended self

As far as the first research objective is concerned, i.e. how consumer competencies reflect on emergence of the consumer extended self, the case study evidence highlighted the importance of visitors’ competencies (e.g. knowledge, visitors’ background) in the process of identification. According to the findings, visitors’ capabilities contributed to the emergence of a relevant identity to the museum content and context. This identity seemed to emerge from visitors’ interpretation of the museum experience. The evidence suggested that the relationship between identification and visitors’ competencies served as the basis for identity to be emerged and for building either associations or disassociations with Lautrec’s exhibition. Our case study evidence illustrated, that visitors’ familiarity with Lautrec’s artworks, interests in the artworks, prior museum experiences and context’s facilitators (guides, labels) enabled individuals to make sense of their museum experience and to label it as relevant to their self (i.e. this experience symbolizes me):

When I was 10 years old I had seen the documentary about the life of Lautrec and I clearly remember that he (Lautrec) had greatly amazed me... Today I had the opportunity to realize why he had impressed me so much. I realize that I as an artist - I’m a musician - should allow my internal self to surface so as to produce my own “artworks”, just like Lautrec did. This was an eye-opening experience to me that allowed me to discover my identity as a musician! [Vasilis, 41 years old, musician].

The above narrative extract shows that this visitor’s artistic related background and his familiarity with the museum’s content served as necessary aspects for his perceived ability to successfully perform in the given situation. Moreover, his expression “This was an eye-opening experience to me that allowed me to discover my identity as a musician!” illustrated the redrawn of the boundaries of himself. This visitor’s psychological association between his experience and his own self resulted in the projection of himself into the content of the aesthetic experience.

Additionally, visitors’ knowledge about the subject matter (i.e., Lautrec’s artworks) and their personal control beliefs, notably their personal explanations for success or failure about the subject matter, constituted other visitors’ competencies, which affected the process of identification. Visitors’ competencies explained why some consumers identified similarities between Lautrec’s exhibition and their self identity and perceived the museum experience as “this

experience expresses me”. This study adds insight into the emergence of visitors’ extended self by unraveling the crucial role of visitors’ competencies and identifications in the framing of and personalizing the meaning of a museum experience. It is in line with the competence motivation theory (Elliot & Dweck, 2005) that views the need for competence as an essential motivation, which enables consumers to “find their feet” within the museum context.

4.2 Visitors’ different psychological bonds to the museum experience and self-relevant reactions in terms of fit and conflict occurrences.

Regarding the second research objective, namely the identification of the role of fit and conflict occurrences in self-extension, the case study findings illustrated that emergent identity served as a framework for museum experience attachment, in terms of fit and conflict occurrences. Particularly, visitors who mentioned that their emergent identities were “compatible” with identifications in the museum content and context characterized the museum experience as a “fit occurrence”. According to the findings, this fit occurrence underpinned the experience attachment. The museum experience attachment relies on the creation of a personally acceptable meaning, which leads to visitors’ affiliation with the museum experience. In the case of Lautrec, the exhibition’s content contributed to visitors’ self-continuity, notably to the creation of a personal meaning of the museum experience which was built upon their existing interests, beliefs and knowledge. For these visitors, the museum experience attachment represented a confirmation of their existing identity:

I hold a PhD in the art history....so first of all I know Lautrec and his artwork. For me art constitutes a significant part of my life! So, while I was observing Lautrec’s artworks, I was able not only to delve into their meanings and their styles, but also to see how his view of the world matched with my beliefs and personal life path. [Eleni, 30 years old, art teacher].

On the contrary, some visitors experienced an identity conflict during Lautrec’s exhibition. For these visitors this conflict occurrence was not characterized as a “not me” boundary rather than as an “opening horizons” episode that signals the “who I will be able to become”. According to the case study evidence, this kind of mismatching between visitors’ self identity and exhibitions’ messages led to the assimilation of the situation, notably to the change of their perception of the situation. They mentioned that this self-extension occurring via assimilation, adjusted the meaning of the exhibition to their existing beliefs and knowledge. In contrast, for some visitors the conflict occurrence seemed to hinder assimilation of the situation. According to the findings, these visitors could not adjust their self identity in the given content and context of Lautrec’s artwork due to the intense conflict they experienced. For these visitors, the dark side of Lautrec’s art (i.e. depiction of cult celebrities) produced negative feelings during their consuming episodes. These visitors appeared not to identify with the exhibition content and raised a “not me” boundary. In this case, the conflict occurrence inhibited the attachment to the museum experience and consequently their self-extension.

Today I met the one side-the underground one-of the belle époque. I knew that this époque existed, I imagined it but today I confronted it...and I was shocked, in terms of that the idiosyncrasy of the artist attracted my attention to his artworks. Despite the fact that I was able to understand the meaning of the exhibition, I didn’t find something to identify with. I mean that I didn’t find something in common either with the artworks or with the artist. I just realized that I cannot deal with people like Lautrec-I mean people with a huge amount of personal problems-. All these exhibits reminded me how I am and how I don’t want to be. [Eleni, 26 years old, stockbroker].

The narrative above illustrates a visitor who characterized Lautrec and his exhibits as something that relied outside of herself. Eleni’s expression “I just realized that I cannot deal with people like Lautrec, people with a huge amount of personal problems” shows that she encountered the artist as a person who holds denied and rejected elements of her self identity. In Jungian (1959) terms, these unwanted elements consist the archetype of shadow, notably a part of individual’s self that constitutes the dark side of one’s being. As such, Eleni’s denial to incorporate and to deal with the shadowy-side of her museum experience led her to detach herself from it. Narrative excerpts similar to the above demonstrated the dark-side of the museum experience and illuminated that consumers’ conflict occurrences acted as a mechanism for turning them away from the “Mr. Hyde” aspect of their consuming episode and maintaining their existing “Dr. Jekyll” self identities (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2010).

Figure 1 illustrates the museum experience which includes the consumer’s personal context, the museum context and the emergent identity. The emergence of consumers’ identity is stems from the interface of the viewer’s contexts and the museum content. The case study evidence provides insights into the under- investigated topic of the museum experience attachment by unraveling the essential role of emergent identity in visitors’ attempts to balance their internal identifications with external ascriptions (Kleine & Baker, 2004).

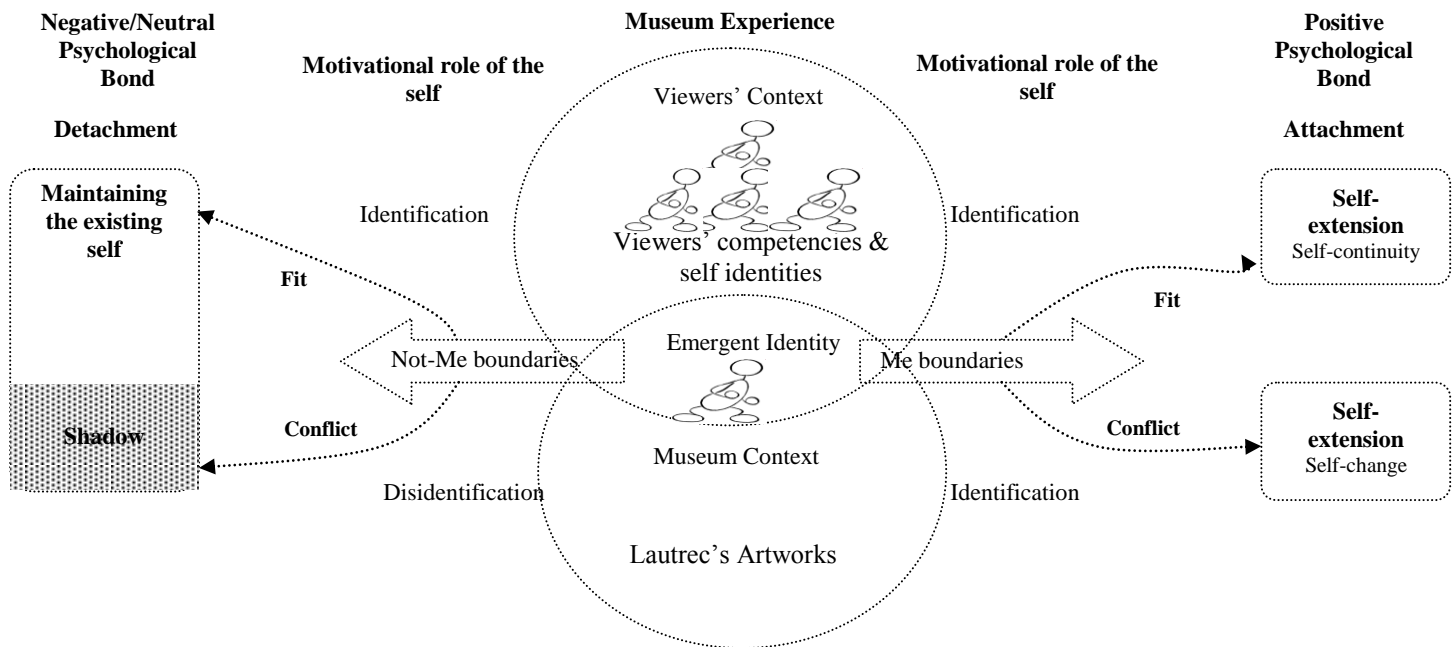


Figure 1: The development of Toulouse Lautrec's museum experience attachment (source: *the authors*).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that consumers seek museum experiences for their symbolic and personal benefits. As far as the first objective is concerned, visitors' competencies facilitated the internalization of the relationship between the visitor and the museum experience content and context. With respect to the second research objective, we suggest that the occurrences of fit and conflict defined visitors' psychological bond to the museum experience. The results showed that when visitors' felt competent and related to the museum content and context they attached themselves to the museum experience. From a theoretical viewpoint, the current study brought into light the notion of visitors' emergent identities and illustrated pathways by which visitors extended and attached themselves in Lautrec's museum experience. Furthermore, this research illuminated the dark side of Lautrec's museum experience and its influence on consumers' attachment to it. From a managerial viewpoint, the contribution of the study is twofold, notably it provides (1) an understanding of the factors that form the museum experience attachment and (2) a framework for the museum experience attachment, so as the museums to create dedicated audiences. As far as the directions for further research are concerned, future research may investigate the role of material possessions in museum experiences. The symbolic benefits of material possessions (e.g. souvenirs, photographs) may affect visitors' bonding to museum experiences (Baker, Kleine, and Bowen 2004).

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