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### Deposited in DRO:

15 December 2014

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Ladik, D. and Carrillat, F. and Tadjewski, M. (2015) 'Belk's (1988) "Possessions and the extended self" revisited.', *Journal of historical research in marketing*, 7 (2). pp. 184-207.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JHRM-06-2014-0018>

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## Belk's (1988) "Possessions and the extended self" Revisited<sup>i</sup>

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to revisit Russell Belk's (1988) landmark article "Possessions and the extended self". We provide a prehistory of related ideas and then examine the controversy it triggered regarding the different paradigms of research in marketing (Cohen, 1989) some twenty six years ago.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – This paper takes Belk seriously when he argues that his work is a synthesis and extension of prior studies leading to the novel production of the "extended self" concept. Via a close reading of the history of self-constitution, we highlight a number of thinkers who were grappling with similar issues now associated in our disciplinary consciousness to the idea of the "extended self". To assess the contribution of Belk's work we engage in citation and interpretive analyses. The first analysis compared scholarly citations of Belk (1988) with the top ten most cited *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)* articles published in the same year. The second citation analysis compared Belk (1988) to the top ten most cited *JCR* articles in the history of the *Journal*. We follow this with an interpretive analysis of Belk's contribution to consumer research via his 1988 paper.

**Findings** – Belk (1988) had the most citations (N=934) of any article published in *JCR* in 1988. When compared to all articles published in the history of *JCR*, Belk (1988) leads with the most overall citations. Moreover, Belk (1988) is the most prominent interpretive article that appeared in *JCR* and one of the top three regardless of paradigm. The analysis illustrates diversity in topic and methodology thus indicating that Belk's contribution impacted a wide variety of scholars. Interpretive analysis indicates the importance of Belk's work for subsequently impactful consumer researchers.

**Originality/Value** – We offer a prehistory of the "extended self" concept by highlighting literature that many consumer researchers will not have explored previously. With citations spanning over three decades, consumer behavior scholars recognize Belk (1988) as an important article. Our analysis reveals that contrary to received wisdom it is not only important for interpretive researchers or scholars within Consumer Culture Theory, it is significant for the entire discipline irrespective of paradigmatic orientation. The research presented here demonstrates that Belk's (1988) article is arguably one of the most influential papers ever published in *JCR*.

**Keywords** – Russell Belk; "extended self"; Consumer Culture Theory; Interpretive Research; Paradigm Debates; Prehistory methodology.

**Paper Type** – Research paper

## Belk's "Possessions and the extended self" Revisited

### Introduction

Russell Belk's publication "Possessions and the extended self" changed the landscape and lexicon of consumer research (Brown and Schau, 2008; Schau, 1998). And Belk's contribution marked his own intellectual movement from a positivist scholar to one who embedded himself firmly within the trajectory of interpretive social science. Through his research, charisma and ability to mobilize scholars around his ideas and endeavors like the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, he helped legitimate this variant of social research for those seeking an alternative (Belk, 2014a; Bradshaw and Brown, 2008; Sherry, 2014) to the positivist, hypothetico-deductive approach.

As he describes the process that culminated in his most famous contribution to date,

"...my project on the meaning of possessions in our lives began with my acquisition and possession of relevant material. Indexing it was the first step in organizing it. As with most research, this wasn't a linear process of accumulating, sorting, allocating, and assorting materials. It was instead a cyclical iterative hermeneutic tacking between materials, concepts, and the library (always a seductive trap). Similarly the writing process didn't flow from outline to draft to manuscript to revision. It was more a continual process of writing, searching, re-writing, and researching. I wrote until I lost inspiration and then turned to something else. Or, troubled by a conceptual dilemma, like how possessions relate to our sense of the past, I pondered or headed off to the library in search of clues. Others' references led me to more sources. I read, underlined, thought, and then forgot about it as I shifted my attention elsewhere. Ideas woke me from sleep or emerged on my morning run, and I scribbled them down or rehearsed and elaborated on them so they wouldn't be lost... Unlike the more systematic indexing process, this stage usually results in lots of little Post-it notes and scribbles on the backs of envelopes, napkins, and anything else to hand when the muse visits. (Belk, 2002)"

His 1988 paper, combined with a series of other works during the 1980s (e.g. Belk, 1987) was groundbreaking as it distanced itself from the study of buyer behavior and gravitated toward a more encompassing view of consumption by studying the behavior of consumers. As stated by Cohen (1989), Belk's 1988 article is important because "it reminds us that what consumers do (e.g., the products they buy, use, save, and give away) and why is at least as important as how." As claimed by Sherry (1991), the publication of this manuscript – among others (e.g. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) – acted as a tipping point for alternative thinking in the world of consumer research. As we shall see, both positivist and interpretive scholars alike appreciate the conceptual merit of the manuscript (e.g. Brown and Schau, 2008; MacInnis, 2011; Schau, 1998). Moreover, it has played a role in helping Belk secure institutional recognition. In 2005, for instance, the Sheth Foundation awarded Professor Belk its *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)* Award for Long Term Contribution to Consumer Research. He was also awarded the American Marketing Association's Paul D. Converse Award in 2004 granted to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to marketing scholarship.

Not surprisingly, the 1988 manuscript polarized the field, as most consumer researchers were more comfortable with positivistic approaches than interpretive research. His core arguments were radical in terms of the way they shook disciplinary assumptions about consumer behavior which was generally viewed in “cold” information processing and cognitive terms and restricted to buying rather than the consummation process as a whole (Belk, 2014b). Now, of course, his arguments, like the very best that are produced, seem obvious and are embraced by the discipline as a whole. Nonetheless, the concept of the “extended self” was not welcomed by all. Soon after its publication, a “Comment” by Cohen (1989) followed in the *JCR*. Cohen criticized the scientific relevance of the “extended self” as a construct. He asserted that it “lacks meaning,” “lacks empirical identification,” and “lacks explanatory power.” Ultimately, Cohen (1989) doubted the rigor of the research conducted due to its interpretive nature. As a result, his assessment of the potential contribution of the “extended self” construct was grim stating that a “liberal use of such an all encompassing current conception of the “extended self” may not take us very far down the road to a genuine understanding of consumer behavior” (p. 128).

Almost all of the concerns raised by Cohen can be directly attributed to his positivistic perspective (Belk, 1989). If Cohen’s (1989) assessment of the scientific relevance of the “extended self” and the epistemological soundness of alternative paradigms was shared by other scholars – which it was (Arndt, 1985) and continues to be (Belk, 2014a; Sherry, 2014) – one would expect this article’s influence to be comparatively weak over time.

Although commentaries such as Cohen’s (1989) are highly visible at the time of publication or in its wake, the dialogue around Belk’s (1988) “extended self” is not limited to this type of exchange. In this paper we propose to gauge the contribution of Belk (1988) from an historical perspective. By this we mean to take Belk seriously, chart the influences on his thinking, and its ultimate impact. Since this is an historical paper and marketing is well known for its amnesia when it comes to our predecessors (e.g. Fullerton, 1988; Jones and Richardson, 2007; Tadajewski and Saren, 2008), we embed Belk’s contribution in the wider historical literature, literature that Belk did not engage directly with, yet which echoes his own conceptual interests. We do so in order to continue the historical efforts that Belk himself initiated and thereby add further socio-historical background to his own immense conceptual efforts.

Above and beyond this task of crafting a prehistory to Belk’s paper, we explore the resonance of his ideas via citations of his 1988 paper. As such, our research effort is essentially pluralistic, combining a close reading of the history of ideas and perspectives that resonate with those later articulated by Belk, with citation and interpretive analysis that traces the influence of this article through to the present day. Clearly Belk (1988) profoundly shaped the consumer behavior field, but what we do not know is *how* much impact it has had. We contend that the citation impact by researchers within and outside the discipline is an appropriate judge of the influence of Belk’s (1988) ideas on other scholars. This provides us with a way to estimate the contribution of Belk’s article and allows us to confront Cohen’s (1989) prognosis with other researchers’ opinions via their citations and articulations of the impact of Belk’s work – a task we undertake in our interpretive analysis.

## **Selecting a Topic**

As much as we selected this topic to revisit Belk (1988), perhaps a more accurate account is that the topic found us. When sitting in on a doctoral consumer behavior seminar at a nearby university, one of the authors of this manuscript was surprised when the students' assessment of Belk's (1988) impact was significantly slanted towards the Cohen (1989) side of the continuum, even though the professor presented a more pluralistic interpretation of the discussion. In their eyes, impact was defined as *recent impact only*. Obviously, the doctoral students were missing the point that influence happens over time, as they were unaware of the number of scholars who have been influenced by Belk (1988).

It would be easy to shrug off this discussion as a "rookie" mistake for not knowing their history. However, a thorough examination of the influence of Belk (1988) from the past to the present was absent in the literature to refute arguments like those brought up in the seminar discussion. To rectify this gap, we felt the evidence for such a project needed to come from different perspectives as well as different sources. After extensive discussions, a mixed method approach was put forward including a prehistory of the work that provided some of the conditions of possibility for the production of the 1988 article, citation analyses of within and out of *JCR*, and an analysis of how Belk's (1988) ideas filtered through the literature and spurred further developments.

We combed the historical literatures from archaeology, literary studies, Victorian studies, American studies, sociology, psychology and a host of other disciplines including marketing and consumer research, to produce our prehistory of the ideas deployed by Belk using sources that he neither cited or that would be familiar to most marketing scholars, historians included. This is a continuation of the project started by Belk in the 1988 paper inasmuch as it adds further historical validation of his original conceptual analysis.

Following our prehistory of ideas that share a "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1953) to Belk's articulation of the "extended self" concept, we then compare the scholarly citation of Belk (1988) with all of the *JCR* articles published within the same year. Next, we compare Belk (1988) to the top ten most cited *JCR* articles in the history of the *Journal* in order to compare this article to other equally prominent publications. Finally, an analysis of the top ten articles from the marketing literature that reference Belk (1988) is combined with the reflections of key scholars within the discipline. The aim here is to highlight the role played by the "extended self" as a basis for the theoretical development of subsequently impactful papers and on the career trajectories of scholars who have been influenced by Belk.

### **Toward a Prehistory of the "extended self" Concept**

In his 1988 article, Belk states that his "premise that we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves is not new" (1988, p. 139). His contribution is that he synthesizes the literatures from multiple disciplines and extends the existing understanding of the concept of the constitution of self to include not only those items we buy or the services and experiences we consume, "but also includes persons, places, and group possessions as well as possessions [such] as body parts and vital organs" (Belk, 1988, p. 140). Despite recent research which stresses that some consumers do view themselves as defined by one brand in particular (e.g. Archer *et al.*, 2007), Belk is more circumspect in appreciating that in constituting our sense of self we draw from the

variety of resources available in the marketplace rather than just “one product or brand”. As he puts it: “only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self” (Belk, 1988, p. 140).

Belk’s paper exhibits a high degree of generosity in crediting others, particularly historical precursors, with articulating arguments and examples which help flesh out his conceptual contribution. For example, he draws from William James and Thorsten Veblen from the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries to illuminate his central premise about the constitution of self through products and personal relationships. Indeed, his article is rich with historical examples compared to many marketing publications in that he cites the purchase of a parlor organ during the nineteenth century and underscores its centrality for consumers in helping them remember their pasts and enjoy the present (Belk, 1988, p. 144).

Continuing this historical thread, he mentions numerous papers from a variety of decades throughout the twentieth century. He points to the work of the radical humanist, Erich Fromm, who is famous for his distinction between “having” and “being” orientations (Tadajewski, 2010) and whose influence feeds through Belk’s oeuvre from the 1988 paper through to the recent work on sharing (Belk, 2010). Other important sources include the literature associated with impression management and he thus calls forth the figure of Goffman (1973) and notes the significance of the “extended self” in offering “a more promising way of considering the symbolic importance of consumption” (Belk, 1988, p. 160), thereby also calling forth the symbolic interactionists like George Herbert Mead (1925), Herbert Blumer (1966) and symbolically oriented marketing scholars like Sidney Levy (Harris, 2007). In this gesture to symbolism and indirectly to Levy, Belk provides us with a framing mechanism via which we can track a prehistory using the ideas of self-constitution and the symbolic aspects of consumption as our sensitizing devices for a first interpretive interrogation of the prevalence of these ideas throughout the historical record.

### **The Soul, the Self and the Symbolic Dimension**

The idea of the self is considerably older than the William James citation that frames Belk’s analysis and has been traced back to the work of the philosopher John Locke in the last decade of the seventeenth century. As Zussman (2005, p. 48) points out, it is effectively a secular interpretation of the religiously oriented soul which became more widespread during the middle of the nineteenth century (Desmond, 1995). Despite the use of the term at this point, it is apparent that an interest in self-presentation, even if it is not described in those terms, has been acknowledged for a substantial period of recorded history. Archaeological records, for instance, indicate that peasants in the medieval period – hardly a time of great disposable income for many – wore decorative clothing and accessories. The elite, in equal measure, attempted to legislate through sumptuary laws what could and could not be worn by those not admitted to certain social positions (e.g. knights could wear items peasants could not). As Smith points out, “In the middle ages what people wore was seen as exemplifying who they were” (2009, p. 319). Literally wearing a particular item “made you... somebody particular in medieval England” (Smith, 2009, p. 328).

By the fifteenth century guidebooks were being published which helped women fashion a

sense of self and adopt appropriate patterns of behavior that would secure their virtue in the eyes of others and enable them to successfully negotiate the “prevalent misogynist attitudes of the day” (Mirabella, 1999, p. 10). The eighteenth century saw revolutions in manufacturing and production that brought the ability to engage in “self-formation” to larger swathes of the population (Trentmann, 2009). Trentmann highlights the important role played by cotton in manufacturing clothing for a wider audience and the use of goods as a way of indicating cultivation and distinction. Throughout Europe the production of larger ranges of textiles and the improvement of dyeing techniques enabled people to select those items most appealing to their eye and social network.

As we move through history, then, what became of greater concern, particularly during the mid-nineteenth century, was the malleability of identity. With the profusion of product offerings this meant that people could select a particular self-image with greater ease than had been possible to date, so that it was no longer possible to easily identify the class position of an individual. The emergent consumer culture thus effectively destabilized social relations – with the middle classes, in particular, striving to use the resources of the marketplace to modify their presentation of self – helping make identity more fluid than it had been previously for greater numbers of people (Cohen, 1990; Sassatelli, 1997). This, in itself, was a cause for concern for those who wished to ensure they remained distinguished from the masses. It was even more problematic when those who were able to modify their identity were funding their lifestyles through the oldest trade in history: prostitution (Valverde, 1989). Indeed, without a hint of irony, it was argued that the desire for nice clothing, fine commodities and conspicuous consumption, led women down a dark path of “depravity”. For social commentators of this period, consumerism and prostitution often went hand in hand (Cohen, 1990).

By the early twentieth century, an understanding of the constitution of self-image through clothing, accessories and related items was increasingly widespread. It was most advanced in the ruminations of some highly successful female marketing practitioners and scholars (Zuckerman and Carsky, 1990). A female scholar-practitioner who wrote textbooks for correspondence courses, like those offered by the Sheldon School (e.g. Tadjewski, 2011), as well as for her own correspondence program, Katherine Blackford (1918) keyed into ideas later articulated by Belk (1988). Blackford’s work was a mixture of phrenology and physiognomy. Put simply, she looked at the shape of the body and head to determine the type of character an individual possessed. These character profiles were then used to determine the type of approach made to a customer as well as to target product offerings likely to be commensurate with the specific customer’s taste.

In her own correspondence school course she argues that the types of clothes a person wears will provide knowledge about their character. Some people are “vulgar” types. These can be identified by their clothing being “gaudy” with “glaring colors, and extreme styles” (Blackford, 1918, p. 39). She is particularly critical of this type of individual, saying that their choice of “conspicuous” clothing indicates that “his taste is coarse, crude, and vulgar” (Blackford, 1918, p. 38-39).

In her work she points out other character types including those with “refined taste”, those who like to demonstrate “prudence” in their everyday life, those who exhibit sound “financial judgment”, those who are unclean (“The man who is filthy in his personal habits, who neglects

his teeth, his fingernails, his hands, his neck, his linen, his clothing and his shoes, or any of these, has something of the moral filthiness in his soul” (1918, p. 41)) as well as those who are megalomaniacs – the figure of the Kaiser of Germany with his taste for elaborate military uniforms is the exemplar of this character profile. In somewhat bad taste she also provides a profile of those people that are likely to be psychologically unbalanced. In an extended quote worth reprinting in full given the unusual source material, these people can be identified by:

“Anything extreme or conspicuous in the dress, the hair or the carriage of the man or woman instantly indicates a lack of balance. He or she may be a great and wonderful artist, singer, musician or poet, may indeed be a genius, but it is perfectly idle and silly to expect any such person to be sensible and well balanced. It is well to bear in mind in this connection that these eccentricities are sometimes merely the exuberant affectations of youth. The youth who wears long hair, flowing ties, tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses with a big flat ribbon on them and wide, soft collars, may grow up to be a sensible, respectable citizen. On the other hand, when a grown up man shows off in this way, expect anything else you like from him, but do not expect him to be well balanced, moderate and sensible. (Blackford, 1918, p. 40)”

Character analysis, while remaining popular among practitioners until the 1960s (Tadajewski, 2012), nonetheless was fairly unpopular among academic circles for its presumed pseudo-scientific structural-physiognomy which was often easy to refute empirically by pointing out that people occupying very different stations in life have similar facial and physical features.

Taking us into the early 1920s, we see the continued expansion of the home economics movement – a discipline with very close ties to marketing – and whose female practitioners were among the first to champion focusing on the consumer and the formation of their needs, wants and desires. They appreciated the benefit that knowing about these factors might provide to business. Zuckerman and Carsky (1990, p. 315) remind us that the work of scholars like Hazel Kyrk, Pauline Arnold, Elizabeth Hoyt and Christine Frederick produced some “seminal” insights into consumer behavior. The writings of many of these female thinkers have been explored in the pages of this *Journal* recently, with Jones engaging with Arnold’s work (Jones, 2013), Parsons’ examining the contributions of Hoyt (Parsons, 2013) and Tadajewski (2013) reviewing Kyrk’s contributions. Since Kyrk’s work is flagged up by Zuckerman and Carsky (1990, p. 315) as dealing with issues similar to those tackled by Belk (1988) (among others), it is to her work we will turn.

Hazel Kyrk states explicitly that she is interested in the process of consumption, that is, with how human beings go about consuming in their everyday lives and what factors shape their choices in the marketplace (social, in-group and so forth). Put otherwise, she is interested – much like motivation research during the 1920s to 1960s (Tadajewski, 2006b, 2010) and CCT research today – “in the “why” of consumers’ desires and their relative intensity” (Kyrk, 1939, p. 16).

In her writing she avoids an overly agentic view of the consumer, stressing the background factors that shape subjectivity and consumer practice. The consumer, for Kyrk, is influenced by their social group which partly structure the choices which are made. Other influences include “custom, convention, fashion, opinion” (1923, p. 45). And she echoes Veblen in noting that people like to engage in conspicuous consumption and draws a picture of consumer socialization



that reflects a trickle-down theory (see also Plotkin, 2014):

“...the elite, who set the pace and establish the standards for others to follow, are the well-to-do, the successful in pecuniary exploit. Pecuniary emulation colors and shapes our standards of success, of the worthy, of the desirable. Economic goods and services are valuable and desirable as symbols of success and distinction in the great game at which all are entrants. High pecuniary value makes a good desirable. Consumption becomes a process of displaying pecuniary status and command over resources; it becomes a competitive process, each family seeing which can spend, or seem to spend, more money. (Kyrk, 1923, p. 53)”

What is clear is that Kyrk’s work does have affinities with the arguments later put forward by Belk and which were refined by an important book published in 1930 which sought to highlight the various character profiles of different groups and how they used clothes to signal their identities and group affiliations. Flügel (1930), for example, points out that some people like to parade their rebellious nature by wearing clothes which deviate from the mainstream. Importantly, he asserts that while culture might account for certain patterns of clothing being adopted throughout a population, we should not neglect human individuality either – an argument about structure versus agency that continues to be played out in contemporary CCT (Arnould, 2007).

Also gaining ground were variants of motivation research and qualitative methods that arguably provide the foundations for Belk’s work and CCT more generally (Tadajewski, 2006b). An important proponent of qualitative methods during this time was Sidney Levy. From the 1940s onwards, first with Social Research Incorporated, a cutting edge behavioral science consultancy group which was constituted by scholars and graduate students from the University of Chicago (Levy, 2003), and drew upon a range of qualitative methods in their projects for major multinational corporations, Levy used the insights generated during these consultancy projects to inform many of his major contributions to the discipline, whether these related to consumption and symbolism (Levy, 1959), brand image (Gardner and Levy, 1955) or the broadening of the concept of marketing (Kotler and Levy, 1969) (see Levy, 2012). In his seminal article entitled “Symbols for Sale” (1959) Levy reaffirms some of the arguments we have already heard from Hazel Kyrk (1923) who, in turn, drew from an interdisciplinary range of sources herself, including Veblen. For Harris (2007, p. 12) Levy’s scholarship was a key influence for Belk’s conceptualization of the “extended self”. Indeed, his research for Social Research Incorporated, most notably a study for the Chicago Tribune on automobiles and their meaning for American consumers, actually calls them “an extension of the self” (Levy, 2006, p. 8; see also Bastos and Levy, 2012, p. 357).

Levy’s key point in his 1959 article is to further deflate the viability of assuming that people acted in the manner proposed by the dismal science, that is, as economic men, who were guided by logic, rationality and using cost-benefit analysis to calculate the products or services liable to generate the highest level of utility available. This was simply not the way the majority of people acted, the majority of the time, according to Levy. As Belk would later echo, “The things people buy are seen to have personal and social meanings in addition to their functions. To ignore or decry the symbolism of consumer goods does not affect the importance of the fact” (Levy, 1959, p. 119). Developing this point further,

“...modern goods are recognized as essentially psychological things which are symbolic of personal attributes and goals and of social patterns and strivings...In this sense, all commercial objects have a symbolic character, and making a purchase involves an assessment – implicit or explicit – of this symbolism, to decide whether or not it fits...A symbol is appropriate (and the product will be used and enjoyed) when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself. We are dealing here with a very plain fact of human nature. In the broadest sense, each person aims to enhance his sense of self. (Levy, 1959, p. 119)”

Levy is writing at the point when marketing and consumer behavior studies would undergo a revolution stimulated by the Ford and Carnegie reports into business education and research. These reports asserted that business education lacked rigor, a sufficient analytical research base, and relied too much on descriptive studies. The large sums of money allocated by the Ford Foundation for training a new generation of scholars who would be extremely research active, set the intellectual terrain for marketing management research that still exerts considerable force today, and was embodied in the training given during 1959 and 1960 at the Foundation funded Institute of Basic Mathematics for Application to Business (Tadajewski, 2006a).

These courses were attended by many marketing luminaries (e.g. Philip Kotler, William Lazer) and to complement them funding was provided to support the publication of textbooks that sought to promote the behavioral sciences. These philanthropic-epistemological movements helped foster positivist perspectives in marketing and foregrounded the emergence of cognitive psychological perspectives that remain prominent, but which are best exemplified by the information processing views of the consumer that took hold of the discipline during the 1970s and that continue to be refined in the literature on “constructive consumer choice processes” (Bettman *et al.*, 1998). This is not to say that information processing perspectives have gone uncontested or that the prior theoretical works that attracted attention during the early to middle of the twentieth century such as the work of Veblen, Freud and so forth were completely neglected – they were not, after all, Kotler continued to engage with their work (e.g. Kotler, 1965). The point is that they were gradually sidelined in favor of perspectives that could marshal the symbolic currency associated with advanced mathematics and various forms of modeling (Tadajewski, 2010).

Nor would information processing perspectives avoid critique. James Bettman, perhaps the most famous exponent of the information processing perspective, has acknowledged that his model of consumer choice was too “cold”, lacking an appreciation of the role of emotion in decision-making (Bettman, 1993). Belk (1987) also launched a satirical critique of perspectives that equated the consumer to a computer which drew a firm line in the sand between such perspectives and interpretive research. Indeed, as time went on, Bettman’s own shifting viewpoint brought information processing research more in line with interpretive perspectives and their valorization of “fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) – elements of human behavior that were largely ignored by the mainstream until Holbrook and Hirschman’s stream of path-breaking papers on related topics such as the hedonic consumer (Belk, 2014a).

Having now reviewed the varied debates taking place in different disciplines around ideas that share a resemblance to those promoted by Belk, and which further underscore the historical validity of his 1988 paper, we now turn our attention to demonstrating the impact of his work on more recent research.

### **Belk's Impact**

We first compiled all citations for full articles published in *JCR* in 1988 via Web of Science in order to compare Belk (1988) to other manuscripts of its era. Citations were examined in journal articles ending with a 2010 date for consistency. Second, we determine the 100 most cited *JCR* articles through Web of Science. Three articles in our 1974-2010 top ten were already present in Cote et al.'s (1991) 1974-1986 ranking (i.e. Green and Srinivasan, 1978; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Petty *et al.*, 1983). This is to be expected, as older articles are more likely to gather more citations; this also provides some evidence of validity. In order to offer insight beyond the number of citations received, we accounted for the quality of each citation. For example, an article may seem very influential until it is acknowledged that its numerous citations come from journals with limited scholarly influence. Conversely, another article might be more influential than its few citations suggest if they come from very prestigious journals (Palacios-Huerta and Volij, 2004). Consequently, we weighed each citation received by the impact factor of the citing journal.

Our last analysis is an attempt to assuage the crudeness of citation analysis that cannot convey what kind of influence Belk (1988) has on these articles. Therefore, we asked how crucial was the "extended self" for some of the most important articles from the entire marketing discipline. In order to answer this question we first identified the most cited marketing papers among those that reference Belk (1988) which we then examined to determine to what extent Belk (1988) is at the crux of these articles. Let us now turn to our citation analyses and interpretive account.

### **Analysis 1: 1988 analysis**

Initially, we analyzed the top ten most cited 1988 articles from *JCR* (displayed in Table 1). Citations per article were organized by the number of references as follows: 1) from 1988-2010, 2) since 2000, 3) in the Association for Consumer Research proceedings (*ACR*), 4) in the *JCR*, 5) in marketing journals (including consumer research outlets), and 6) outside of marketing journals. Articles on this list averaged 346.1 citations, 51% occurring since 2000. *JCR* and *ACR* featured heavy citations with, on average, 10% and 19%, respectively. In addition, articles compiled in this list average 63% of the citations in marketing journals, while 37% appeared outside of marketing journals.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Sheppard et al. (1988), as well as Belk (1988), garnered far more citations than the others with about twice the count of the third ranked article by Celsi and Olson (1988). Sheppard et al.

(1988) had a very high number of citations over this time period (N=721). However, it virtually had no impact on consumer research scholars (i.e. five total citations in *JCR* for 0.69% of total citations and 20 in *ACR* for 2.77% of total citations) and exercised most of its influence on researchers outside of the marketing discipline (nearly 85% of citations from non-marketing publications).

In contrast, Belk (1988), the first ranked article (N=934), is highly influential among consumer researchers, researchers in marketing, and even those outside of these disciplines. For consumer researchers, Belk (1988) received 81 citations in *JCR* (or 8.67%) and 352 citations in *ACR* (or 37.69%). Beyond these two outlets, the manuscript received 666 (or 71.31%) of its citations in marketing publications, while 28.69% concerned research published outside of the discipline. This indicates that Belk (1988) had the greatest influence on consumer researchers among 1988 *JCR* articles as it has the most references from both *JCR* and *ACR*. Contrary to Cohen's (1989) assessment, it seems that the format used to flesh out the "extended self" did not preclude its contribution. Furthermore, although Belk's (1988) impact is extreme, it is not an anomaly. Among the top ten articles, three are identified as belonging to the interpretivist perspective (i.e. Belk, 1988; Belk *et al.*, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988); although interpretive papers were rare, they received a disproportionate amount of attention from scholars.

However, it is important to note that Belk (1988) has been cited almost 4 times more frequently than the nearest interpretive article (i.e. Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988) testifying to its leading role in representing this paradigm. In order to strengthen this claim, we undertook a more comprehensive citation analysis with the 100 most cited *JCR* articles.

## **Analysis 2: A Classic among the Classics**

Our results indicate that citations ranged from 934 for Belk (1988) (the most cited article) to 180 for Holt (1995) as the 100th ranked article. The tenth ranked article was Bettman and Park (1980) with 332 citations. The next two analyses focus on the top ten articles.

In the first analysis, two sets of criteria were used to evaluate the influence of the articles: 1) the volume of citations, and 2) the number and category of citing journals (e.g. marketing, consumer research, economics, psychology, etc.). In researching the volume of citations, Table 2 presents: 1) the total number of citations, 2) the number of citations per year, and 3) the percentage of citations since 2000. Regarding the types of journals, Table 2 also provides the number of different citing journals (citation breadth), a ratio of the total number of citations over the number of different citing journals (citation depth), and the number of journals from disciplines other than marketing and consumer research that most often cite the article.

The journal categories used to determine the last column of Table 2 were selected *a priori* based on the disciplines that frequently cite articles from the *JCR*: marketing, management, consumer research, psychology, economics, information science, decision science, general business, communication, operations, humanities, natural sciences, and technology. The journals citing *JCR* articles much less frequently (veterinary, medical, computer sciences, transport, urbanism, etc.) were all coded in an "other" category. Journal category assignment was based on the journal title. If the name of a category was included in a journal title, that journal

was assigned to the category. If a journal title included one keyword that was used as a substantive category name and one keyword assigned to the “other” category, it was classified according to the former category (e.g. *International Journal of Transport Economics* was classified as an “economics” journal). If a journal title included two or more of the same keywords as substantive categories (e.g. *Industrial Journal of Technology Management*), it was assigned to the category that provided the theoretical background mostly found in the journal, or to the category that did not serve as a context defining variable (*Industrial Journal of Technology Management* classified as a “management” journal).

In the second analysis, the citation scores of each classic article were computed for all citing journals (i.e., at least one citation) together as well as separately for marketing (e.g., *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Marketing Letters*, etc.), consumer research (e.g. *JCR*, *ACR*, *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* etc.), and the different support field categories, which could vary with each article (psychology, economics, management, etc.). In our scientometric approach we weighed each citation for a classic article with the number of citations received by the citing journal as well as by its 2-year (i.e. the average number of times articles from a journal published in the past two years have been cited) and 5-year impact factor.

As a result, Table 3 includes for different journal categories (i.e. Total, Marketing, Consumer research, Support field) the following weighed indicators: 1) Citations: weighed by the number of citations received by the citing journals. W2: weighted by the two-year impact factor of the citing journal, 2) W2/Y: W2 divided by the years in print of the classic since publication, 3) W5: weighted by the five-year impact factor of the citing journal, and 4) W5/Y: W5 divided by the years in print of the classic since publication.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2 reports that Belk (1988) has the highest total number of citations with 934, while Petty et al.’s (1983) manuscript on the central and peripheral routes to persuasion received 887 citations. Although these two articles are from distinct paradigms, their profiles, according to our citation analysis, are quite similar. They both received the majority of their citations since 2000 and the number of distinct journals citing them is almost the same: Belk (1988) had 218 while Petty et al.’s (1983) paper had 216 and their citation depth is virtually identical with 4.28 for Belk (1988) and 4.11 for Petty et al. (1983). Additionally, both employ the support field of psychology although Belk (1988) has been cited by a greater number of distinct journals than Petty et al. (1983) (42 vs. 26). A slight divergence exists when examining the number of citations per year with Belk (1988) being cited at a faster pace than Petty et al. (1983), which explains why Belk (1988) has received more overall citations despite being published five years later than Petty et al. (1983). In addition, Belk (1988) ranks third on a per year basis with 42.45 citations. We also note that three top 10 articles are anchored within the interpretive paradigm: Belk (1988), Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), as well as Fournier (1998). This indicates that Belk (1988) is not the sole member of its category although it is probably the most impactful since it gathered 50% more citations (934 vs. 664) than the next ranked interpretive article by Holbrook

and Hirschman (1982). Overall, this analysis suggests that Belk (1988) is one of the most influential articles from *JCR*.

Our data also show that highly influential articles from the *JCR* come from a blend of different research paradigms. The top five articles feature a conceptual article (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987), an article based on secondary data (Sheppard *et al.*, 1988), another positivistic article based on primary data (Petty *et al.*, 1983), a methodological paper (Green and Srinivasan, 1978), as well as Belk's (1988) conceptual article.

Table 3 reports that Belk (1988) has the third highest total when considering the number of citations received by journals citing his work (225,090). The strongest classic using this criterion was Sheppard *et al.* (1988) with a total of 322,907, followed by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) with 251,683. Within the marketing category, the number one article was Petty *et al.* (1983) with 56,480 citations, followed by Belk (1988) with 55,127. When considering the support field, Belk (1988) had the third highest citation score (156,925) behind Sheppard *et al.* (1988) with 262,499 and Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) with 203,506.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Belk (1988) has the third highest overall scholarly influence when considering the impact of his research weighed by the two-year impact factor (W2: 845; per year: 38). Petty *et al.* (1983) is the most influential based on this criterion with a W2 of 1,221 (45 per year). Belk (1988) is the sixth most influential in marketing (W2: 305; per year: 14), a category dominated by Alba and Hutchinson (1987) with a W2 of 623 (27 per year). In its support field, Belk (1988) is the third most influential with a W2 of 189 (9 per year) behind Sheppard *et al.* (1988) and Petty *et al.* (1983). Sheppard *et al.* (1988) dominates this category as its W2 reaches 511 (23 per year), followed by Petty *et al.* (1983) with 302 (11 per year).

Sheppard *et al.*'s (1988) influence in psychology is the highest among all the classics' support field. Sheppard *et al.* (1988) is the least influential classic in marketing (W2: 127; per year: 6), while Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) is the least influential article in consumer research (W2: 9, per year: 1). In the consumer research category, Belk (1988) has the third strongest influence with a W2 of 350 versus a W2 of 404 for Alba and Hutchinson (1987), the article ranked number one in this category. However, when considering the W2 per year, Belk (1988) becomes the fourth most influential article with 16, while Bettman *et al.* (1998) is ranked first with 22 followed by Fournier (1998) with 17. When considering the five-year impact factor, the influence scores are higher for each classic (both in total and per year), but the rankings they achieved are the same and the substantive interpretations above are still warranted.

In sum, Belk (1988) can be considered the most influential interpretive article in consumer research. Although Belk (1988) is essentially tied with Petty *et al.* (1983), the latter progressed at a slower pace, and Alba and Hutchinson's (1987) paper draws research propositions intended for positivistic audiences. Moreover, Fournier (1998), as well as Bettman *et al.* (1998), are cited more often on a yearly basis, but they have had less time to create the same type of impact as Belk (1988); hence, they received significantly less citations overall (934 vs. 611 and 439, respectively).

Although we register the usefulness of citation analysis, it is appropriate to add further flesh by way of an interpretive account. We introduce the voices of contemporary interpretive and CCT scholars in order to highlight how Belk's work generally and his 1988 paper specifically, have influenced the discipline and their own intellectual self-cultivation.

### **Analysis 3: Impact on the Intellectual Process**

Gauging the role of Belk (1988) inside and outside the marketing and consumer behavior literatures, we emphasize unequivocally its remarkable impact on all sorts of audiences. Before focusing on specific set of papers, it is worth briefly considering comments offered by a number of scholars in the multiple volume tribute collection to Belk's corpus. Schouten (forthcoming) credits his exposure to the "extended self" concept during his time on the Consumer Behavior Odyssey as central to his own intellectual self-development:

"...among Russ's many contributions, the one publication that stands out as a true watershed event in the history of consumer research is "Possessions and the extended self."...Anyone that has since written or even thought about the nature of consumer self and identity, about consumer-object or consumer-brand relationships, about ownership experiences, about product symbolism or even about various kinds of consumer collectives has been influenced by it. It is nothing less than the cornerstone of all current thinking about what it means to be a consumer. (Schouten, forthcoming)"

Other scholars, including Aaron Ahuvia (forthcoming), Ayalla Ruvio (forthcoming) and Kelly Tian (forthcoming) likewise argue that the 1988 paper stimulated "a rainbow of research ideas" (Ruvio, forthcoming) or was otherwise an "epic" contribution (Tian, forthcoming). Jonathan Schroeder (forthcoming), in much the same vein, says that his exposure to Belk's paper literally reoriented his academic career.

These kinds of comments set the scene regarding the influence of Belk's work when considering the entire marketing discipline and an analysis of the top 10 most cited articles referencing Belk (1988) shows strong diversity in both topic and methodology. In their article, Arnould and Thompson (2005) delineate a research tradition they named Consumer Culture Theory (cited 225 times). They highlight four domains for CCT research: the first of these is titled *Consumer Identity Projects* and within the review of this domain, the first of two references in the first sentence is Belk (1988). The researchers define the domain as "consumers working with market-generated materials [to] forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self." Of the 20 references in this section, only one, Levy (1981), pre-dates Belk (1988). When asked about how Belk (1988) influenced Arnould and Thompson (2005), Thompson (2014) stated, the "extended self article was certainly an influential paper in developing the CCT tradition—particularly in relation to the consumer identity project motif." Arnould (2014) concurred, affirming that:

"...from my perspective, Belk's paper did a number of useful things; it identified the kind of subject that is constituted in consumer capitalism in detail; it did this for a marketing rather than sociological audience; it helped expand the scope of CB to something more than purchase behavior and decision making; it showed that identity work is an important facet of

consumer culture that one could expect to develop in diverse ways in diverse places with the spread of consumer capitalism; it encouraged the belief that CB could be a serious subject for serious social science; it opened the door to a more sophisticated kind of social psych thinking in CB too.”

While Arnould and Thompson (2005) stay within the consumer behavior domain, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) review a substantial range of poststructural and postmodern social theory (cited 218 times). Broadly speaking they, like Belk (1988), argue that traditional views of transactional and utilitarian consumption are limited. It is on this point that Belk is a hinge for them. Belk’s self-acknowledged distance from postmodernism provides a prominent argument they can counterpoint: Firat and Venkatesh make a case for a plurality of protean selves whereas Belk’s argument is a more essentialist conception of self. As Firat (2014) explains,

“Russ Belk, without a doubt, is one of the key scholars in the field and his work has advanced thinking in consumer research in a major way. He has led insights in the understanding of the modern consumer. In our paper, we were trying to develop insights regarding the development of the postmodern consumer, and his article on the extended self constituted a key comparison point in presenting the differences between the modern and postmodern consumers—one having a concept of *a* self and extending it through her/his consumption, the other constructing multiple selves through her/his consumption.”

Four of the ten articles on this high impact list have an affinity with the ideas first put forth in Belk (1988). The first, which was cited 361 times, is Belk and colleagues’ subsequent work during the Consumer Behavior Odyssey project (Belk *et al.*, 1989). Next, cited 349 times, is Aaker (1997) of which Belk (1988) is a major basis. Conceptually speaking, a Belkian underpinning is essential if the goal is to explore the symbolic use of brands and further the theoretical development of the brand personality construct.

Conceptually intertwined with Aaker (1997), Fournier’s (1998) exploration of how brands can act as an active partner for consumers finds in Belk (1988) a strong theoretical foundation. It is not only the most cited of the ten articles from this analysis with 570 citations, but it is also in the *JCR* all-time top ten. Belk (1988) is evoked in the introduction when the *Special Possession* literature is outlined. Interestingly, both Belk (1988) and Aaker (1997) are listed in the first section of the *Conceptual Foundations* titled *The Brand as a Relationship Partner*; in addition, Belk (1988) is referenced in the next section entitled *Relationships: Providing Meanings in Psycho-Socio-Cultural Context*.

In her own words, Fournier (2014) stated that:

“Belk (1988) provided the first exhaustive argument for the fact that possessions were meaningful to people, beyond their utilitarian value, serving deep purposes as people went about living their lives. This paper opened the door for the next proposition: people might actually have relationships with products, possessions and brands... These ideas are now of course accepted tenets of consumer behavior but in the information-processing dominated 1980s this was all quite the stretch. Belk’s article was so extensively researched, so grounded in the interdisciplinary reality of that which is CB that the argument was irrefutable. In 1988 I



was beginning my doctoral studies and Belk 1988 was my epiphany. It determined my life path in academe.”

Once Belk (1988) and others like Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) broadened the concept of consumer-product and consumer-brand relationships, the consumer behavior literature expanded to include subcultures of consumption (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), as well as brand communities (e.g. Muniz and O’Guinn, 2000). In their article with 214 citations, McAlexander et al. (2002) conceptualize brand community and loyalty that consumers form through their relationships with brands. Again, Belk (1988) is part of the conceptual foundations of this manuscript, which details how consumers value their relationship with brands. Also weaved in this work and used liberally are citations to Fournier (1998) and Aaker (1997) along with Belk (1988).

Although not as direct of a tie as Aaker (1997), Fournier (1988) or McAlexander et al. (2002), Sen and Bhattacharya’s (2001) article, which was cited 254 times is within conceptual reach. The “extended self” plays an important role as an indirect component of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The underlying idea being that consumers will have a greater inclination toward tangible offers from those companies whose CSR practices evoke their own values in order to nourish their self-concept through ownership.

Belk’s (1988) intellectual influence is also evident in the revival potential it brought to longstanding marketing concepts. Loyalty has been examined from many angles since its emergence in marketing (e.g. Jacoby and Kyrner 1973) and seminal contributions in this area have slowed as it matured as a domain of inquiry. However, a few papers have been able to reenergize the field such as Oliver’s (1999) article that amassed 562 citations. In this work, the ego stretching ability of earthly possessions is the main force behind the reasoning leading to new forms of loyalty such as determined self-isolation (i.e. when a consumer’s fortitude builds a loyalty more encompassing than mere product features) and immersed self-identity (i.e., when both fortitude and social environment foster unavoidable repeat usage or repurchase patterns).

Finally, we would be hard pressed to find a research tradition more foreign to Belk’s (1988) concerns for self-discovery and identity than the information processing and constructive choice cliques (see Belk, 1987). Interestingly though, the “extended self” is the only referenced interpretive article in Bettman, Luce, and Payne’s (1998) paper. In MacInnis and Jaworski’s (1989) contribution (225 citations) it is one of the 3 papers cited that is not a member of the positivistic paradigm. It is, in itself, an amazing feat and although interpretive papers do not hesitate to cite positivist ones, the reverse is seldom true (Sherry, 2012) and when this rare event occurs it is usually by citing Belk (1988).

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this manuscript was to revisit Belk’s (1988) conceptualization of the “extended self” to examine if the research stood the test of time. As was highlighted, Belk’s work has been hailed as influential, but it was unclear exactly *how* influential his 1988 paper was and who considered it to be influential. Many consumer behavior Ph.D. seminars feature Belk’s work, paying due regard to the debate between Belk and Cohen. While this debate was limited to the

pages of the *JCR* and never followed up by either author (Belk, personal correspondence), it brought the paper to the attention of scholars who might otherwise have ignored it.

A mixed method approach relying on a close reading of the prehistory of Belk's work, combined with citation and further analysis was employed to build a strong case that Belk (1988) was not just a seminal article in the history of consumer behavior, but one of the most influential articles of recent history. Although certainly unique, Belk (1988) is not an outlier on the citation count continuum among interpretive articles since both our 1988 and classics top ten included three papers anchored within this research tradition. Our analysis of the top ten most cited articles that reference Belk (1988) demonstrated that a wide array of topics and methodologies impacted scholars of varied horizons. Without the "extended self" nourishing the intellectual development of new research streams, managerially relevant concepts such as brand personality, brand community or brand loyalty would not have progressed the way they did in recent decades.

Looking back to 1988, no one, including Belk, thought the concept of the "extended self" would become so central to the history of consumer behavior (Belk, personal correspondence). Perhaps the comments made by Cohen (1989) questioning the contribution of Belk (1988) could have been expected at that time. However, in light of our analysis, Belk's 1988 paper reflects a breakthrough in the history of consumer behavior. More than this, it is perhaps the vagueness of the concept that has contributed to its longevity and the extensive literature that has flourished as a result. The very aspect of the concept that Cohen decried has turned out to be its strongest element (Zussman, 2005) as it leaves further research avenues open to scholars of all intellectual persuasions. Nevertheless Belk (2002) has registered the limitations of his concept and it is appropriate to let him recall these in his own words:

"So what would I do differently in the paper? What remains to be done on the topic of the "extended self"? The paper itself recognized that the metaphor of the "extended self" is a Western and masculine one, but I think I might have done more from a feminist, queer theory, and multi-cultural perspective on self and possessions. While I am not an advocate of postmodernism, I might have done more to consider alternative postmodern perspectives on the fragmented de-centered self and how they potentially impact our regard for possessions and material lifestyles. Subsequent contentions that the self is empty suggest that I might have done more in exploring the un-extended self in Western versus non-Western cultures."

Belk has responded to his own call via his publication record since the writing of his reflection on the 1988 paper (Ruvio, forthcoming), as have other scholars (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005). Indeed, Belk continues to refine his arguments using both related ideas and contemporary social theory. As he explains:

"I am working on some comparisons of the extended self to Actor Network Theory (Bruno Latour, Michel Callon), Assemblage Theory (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; Manuel DeLanda), Extended Cognition (Andy Clark), and Entanglement (Ian Hodder), [and the] expanded self (Arthur and Elaine Aron). (Belk, personal correspondence)"

The analyses presented here illustrate that Belk (1988) did not merely make a significant

contribution but, rather, one of the strongest in the history of the consumer behavior literature as is testified by its ongoing extension into debates around sharing and aggregate senses of self (Belk, 2010), as well as the digital realm which opens new vistas for self-extension and experimentation (e.g. Belk, 2013). The extension of the “extended self” concept thus still continues.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> We would like to thank Russell Belk for his extensive responses to our questioning and all those who responded to our call for information about the impact of Belk's work on their own research. The reviewers and editor are also owed a debt of gratitude for their attention to a number of iterations of this work.