

Navigating the Shadow of Death: Vital Possessions of Marginalized Consumers

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Abstract: Possessions are found to carry meaning throughout life. We examine the roles for possessions when consumers are living with the threat of death. More specifically, we examine the role of possessions for the severely disadvantaged urban consumers who are deprived of most consumer options as they navigate life-threatening diagnoses. Our research questions are twofold: What are the valued possessions of these consumers? How do they use them as a lifeline? Based on in-depth interviews with three socioeconomically challenged HIV positive consumers, we expand our prior understanding of Belk's (1988) extended self. We identify four approaches individuals employ through vital possessions: inter-personal, intra-personal, compensatory, and sublimating extension of the self. These vital possessions function as a means of coping particularly when individuals are devoid of intimate relationships and empathetic social support.

Keywords: vital possessions, extended-self, HIV/AIDS, consumer behavior, interpretive phenomenological analysis

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*"Now show me
the signs for love,
the practices,
the vital signs."*

-- Essex Hemphill (1994), "Vital Signs"

In his poetic narrative, Essex Hemphill, a prominent Black gay intellectual of the late 1980s and early 1990s, speaks powerfully about AIDS as raw, private inquiry. Betrayed by the body, he re-appropriates the meaning of vital signs which navigate the shadow of death in the finality of life.

The study investigates the vital possessions of marginalized consumers living with the threat of death. Prior research investigated the changing significance of consumption for people with a limited time horizon (Carstensen 1992). Pavia and Mason (2004) found consumers living with uncertainty of life use consumption to navigate the threat. While Belk (1983) criticizes the desire for material possessions as "deadly sin," Belk (1988) contends that the possessions can allow consumers to extend their selves beyond their death. Belk (1988, 141) sees that "persons, places and things to which one feels attached" at different levels of group affiliation are part of the consumer's extended self. Our research questions are: What are the valued possessions of these consumers? How do they use them as a lifeline?

While Ahuvia (2005) explores the role of possessions and self-extension strategies for creating a coherent self-identity in structuring social relationships, Ruvio and Belk (2018) discuss how possessions and self-extension strategies can be used to manage the identity conflict of trans people. On the other hand, Hill and Stamey (1991) discuss the role of possessions for the homeless in America. None of these prior studies, however, seems to address the intersection: the role of possessions for the severely disadvantaged underclass urban consumers who are deprived of most consumer options while living with a threat of death. This paradox of affluent American society has gained limited attention from consumer researchers as the subject of inquiry (Brady and Parolin 2020, Creamer, Shrider, Burns, and Chen 2022, Peterson 1991). This is hence the focus of our inquiry.

The role of possessions for people living with AIDS as well as rituals of disposition of their possessions have been examined (Adelman 1992; Kates 2001). Our study examines the experiences of gay male consumers of African descent who are HIV positive. This group of consumers has suffered from not only socioeconomic disadvantage, but also threats of racism, homophobia, and AIDS (Entress and Anderson 2020). Their masculinity is attacked by other Black people (Harper 1996), and they tend to be silenced by "elites" within Black communities, a phenomenon called secondary marginalization (Spence 2019). This study contributes an

understanding about the meaning of possessions beyond that of managing identity with self-extension strategies (Ruvio and Belk 2018); it examines how possessions are employed when faced with the threat of death.

This study advances current knowledge in consumer research from two streams of theoretical perspectives. One is that it extends our understanding of self-extension and possessions. Another is that it creates a dialogue with the existing literature on death in consumer culture (Dobscha 2017). The vital possessions here resonate with the human and non-human objects used by people engaged in end-of-life activities, making plans for postmortem rituals (Minowa 2022). The current study enriches our knowledge in both streams of consumer research endeavors.

Methodology

Context. This study was conducted when antiretroviral therapy to treat HIV was not as effective as today (Tseng, Steet, and Phillips 2015), and there still was an immediate association with AIDS. The deaths caused by AIDS had shrunk social networks and devastated gay communities in major U.S. cities. Medical advancement has since made HIV preventable. HIV has been considered a chronic, rather than fatal, manageable disease in developed nations, although more than 38 million people worldwide were infected with HIV, and about 650,000 died from AIDS-related complications in 2021 (Ebbini and Lamont 2021; UNAIDS 2022). The recent nationwide “Let’s Stop HIV Together” campaign run by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the problem is still persistent and inexterminal.

This research context was selected for its potential to provide theoretical insights by foregrounding the role of possessions across spatial and temporal circumstances (Arnould, Price, and Moisio 2006; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004): consumer phenomena of understudied, socioeconomically challenged, and stigmatized Black gay consumers in the pre-gentrified urban metropolis.

Data collection. We employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith and Nizza 2022) as the method of study, as its focus on in-depth personal experiences and sense making upon those experiences. Semi-structured interviews explored the meanings of possessions for socioeconomically challenged underclass consumers who were threatened by death. The data were collected in the fall of 2000. It was prior to major gentrification. Poverty and violence were more pervasive in the local area in those days.

Three males were purposively recruited through the community-based organization in a major metropolis in the U.S. that provides support for gay men of African descent who have contracted HIV. They were between 32 and 40 years old. Two were from the inner city of the

Northeast and one was from the Deep South. At the time of interview, one was working part-time; two others were unemployed and on welfare. Their profiles are summarized in Table 1. The author's graduate assistant was a member and volunteer of the organization, and he arranged interviews. The author met with two informants in the brownstone that housed the organization and another informant in the school conference room.

Each informant spent the first 10 to 15 minutes describing his past, starting from the birthplace, family background, and some educational and work experiences. Participants were then asked, "Would you tell me about your favorite things?" As the individuals seemed more involved with the discourse, more specific questions related to their health issues were addressed by asking questions such as "How did your life change after learning that you were HIV positive?" Then, the core issues were addressed by asking questions such as "What was the most important thing to you when you went through that traumatic period?" or "Did the meanings of possession change after you learned that you are HIV positive?" Throughout the interviews, the informants were encouraged to tell their stories as freely and in as much detail as possible with minimal interruption from the interviewer. Each interview varied in duration between 45 minutes and one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each informant and other identifiable information was anonymized.

Data analysis. Data were analyzed in part-to-whole interpretation strategy. Based on our data analysis, we found four superordinate strategies related to "vital possessions" that provide an alternative typology of the extended self (Belk 1988). Our participants describe these as strategies they employed to cope while facing the threat of death.

Results: Vital Possessions of Marginalized Consumers

We develop a typology of strategies derived from the nature of being and its organic state (Figure 1). While prior notions of the extended-self focus on identity and representation (Belk 1988), we find that individuals may additionally employ the extended self as a means of navigating difficult circumstances. The four superordinate strategies are (1). inter-personal extension of the self, (2). intra-personal extension of the self, (3). compensatory extension of the self, and (4). sublimating extension of the self. Our data showed that more than one coping strategy may be used simultaneously.

Given the socioeconomic circumstances of our participants, our informants often acknowledged lack. They would often recount not having adequate material possessions in support of being or doing. They attributed this lack to their problematic childhoods that led to delinquent adolescence.

Although there was often mention of material deficits, they each spoke of a profound psychological dependency on or obsession with their mother. Indeed, one topic that emerged recurrently and was most enthusiastically discussed by all three informants was their mothers. Their childhood memories and, undeniably, entire lives seemed to be affected by their memories of their mothers in either positive or negative ways. While describing their relationships with their mothers, each seemed emotionally absorbed and enthralled by their own recollections. Accordingly, it is not surprising that their valued objects are directly related to the mother.

Inter-personal extension of the self. One of the ways that informants made sense of facing the threat of death is by having other beings as extensions of the self. Without intimate romantic relationships, their mother was undoubtedly a first and last resort, in whom they sought the salvaged and revitalized self. Recalling his unstable rough childhood, Sean left the family home at 16:

Sean: My mother is a very sweet person. She's very kind, and she's giving. And she's very understandable. She's a very Christian lady... I love her, I love her, I love my mom so much... She tells people that I'm a mother's boy, you know, because regardless of the problems that my mom gone through, I was there with her...I was there for her, and I would even hurt for my mother, because my mother was hurting herself, you know. But I don't know what I'd do without her. I love her so much.

When he thinks of his favorite things, important things, and what he values most, he thinks of his mother. He explained, "I value my mother more because of the problems that she was going through, ...and me and her gone through those problems together..." When he had a fight with two boys at school, his mother came out to rescue him. She told them, "If you fight my son today, I'm gonna fight y'all...so it'll be me and my son, and it'll be y'all two." Sean and his mother shared comradeship. They went through hardships together. They prayed a lot on the phone. And, when they prayed together, Sean felt his mother was with him. Akin to Belk's (1988) notion that people are part of the extended self, we find that inter-personal relationships allow the extension of self. Expanding on prior notions, we also find that such inter-personal relationships enable the navigation of troubled times knowing that one is not alone.

Intra-personal extension of the self. Although human relationships are a source of solace, our informants also describe the roles of objects as surrogates to internally extend the self.

While each study participant spoke of their relationship with their mother, not all had a mother who was still alive. Jake described having a strong bond with his mother, though she was deceased and no longer available for help. He shared that his poor health and criminal record made it difficult to get a job to have stability in life. He described his two most valued possessions as the last letter his mother wrote to him and a picture of her:

Jake: ... those are my two possessions, especially the letter because I received that letter the same day my mother was buried and that's the most, my most prized possession is that last letter from her...I was incarcerated when my mother died. [The wardens] brought me down just to view her body and then took me back [to jail] and this was on Sunday. Her funeral was that Monday, and I was back upstate and in the mail that day that Monday the day she was being buried was a letter from her...They confiscated the stamps because it was contraband, but I received them when I was let go... So very few people I would use those stamps. It would have to be someone special, and I got down to five stamps left and that's it, the rest I keep. Those are my prized possessions: the letter, the stamps, and this picture that I have framed of her... Nothing means more to me than those items, nothing..., and there was a point where like the letter for instance I would read it every month and doing that was kind of painful...I don't want to be in that state of mind always. So, I just take them out on special days like Mother's Day or her birthday.

These possessions serve as a proxy for Jake's beloved mother. Notably, the same possessions that draw him near to his mother—a state he desires—also result in pain. Thus, instead of interacting with those vital possessions regularly, he only does so on special occasions so as to manage the pain of her loss. Thinking of his diagnosis, he recounts how he anticipates the pain of her loss will recur as his disease advances:

Jake: Well, my mother meant the world to me. I love my mother so much... My mother was a very kind, compassionate, sweet person. ...I have a total of maybe eight or nine friends who have died of AIDS, and my mother was very supportive to them. She helped in any way she could and knew about their conditions and she accepted them, she didn't look down on them and this was in a time when people shun people who had AIDS. Unfortunately, for me I won't have her there for me and that hurts, because I know that there would not be a time in my life when things got so bad if the disease progresses. I knew I would be taken care of if my mom was still here. (Sobbing) And she is not here for me no more, and I have to do this alone... (Cry) ... I used to cry every day...

While the mother meant nearly everything to his life, Jake shared that he never wished to possess her, since he *had* her.

Jake: I am a part of her. I'm an extension... Of her.

Jake did not see his mother as his externally extended self. But being himself as her extension, he eternally had her in him. When there is no externally extended self—either human or non-human objects—that serves as a lifeline as in Jake's case, introspecting the intra-personal extension of the self could result as a coping strategy.

On the other hand, another informant Mike was brought up by an abusive mother.

Mike: When I was a kid, it was not really structured in the way that a normal child would get. I was mostly really kind of secluded. My mother secluded me away from the rest of the world... She locked me in her house. I've been in the house when my other brothers come outside. It was a form of abuse...

Mike was also physically abused by his mother not only for his lack of knowledge about “how to socialize with others,” but also for the false accusations his brothers and sisters put on him. Mike explained how he created “a mother” by himself to make up for the absence.

Mike: I had to create my own mother. I had because [she] ruined the structure of my life. My possession became now, this is another possession that [I] picked up because my mother became an alcoholic, and she would spend all the money that they would give her from the city. And I became the mother and father of the family. And I went to jail for being a mother and father to the family.

Mike often replaced the word obsession with possession. He said that they were same as his mind was possessed when obsessed. His mother was the object of his obsession. Despite all the atrocious childhood and adolescent experiences, how intricately complex human emotions are: Mike kept all the Christmas cards he had received from his mother.

Mike: I don't read them. They're in my storage. I don't value them too much because I don't carry them personally on me... In most cases, really guilt makes you do anything... My mother was just a channel to bring me here... My mother doesn't even know me. My mother only knows me for what she did to me.

If the cards symbolize his mother or his mother's extended self, his behavior appear to be a manifestation of his unconscious desire to punish her and lock her up in the storage. He was imitating what his mother did to him by using the cards she gave him. While he spoke, however, he did not seem to realize that he did choose to keep the cards when he could have alternatively discarded them. His recurring narratives about mothers and children—for both

humans and animals—suggest that he was obsessed by the thoughts about mother’s love, as the “mother” should be the guardian when the child is in trouble. As an object of obsession, his mother, the most fundamental extended self, possessed Mike’s mind and internally resided in him as his dormant extension. He wanted the “mother” to be his protector to cope with the threat of death.

Compensatory extension of the self. While human objects were sought as possessions, the other ways informants made sense of their being and doing to manage threat of death was to hang on to non-threatening non-human objects. Small animals—either living pets or stuffed animals—were often employed.

For individual consumers, animals may mean friends, self, or family members rather than objects of domestication for utilitarian necessity (Hirschman 1994). In void of trustworthy human relationships in particular, companionship with animals, or species other than humans, may approximate interpersonal bonding. For Mike, his “main possession ... and the most valued thing in the world is dogs and cats and animals.” He would take these animals from the street into his mother’s house, which she could not stand and threw out. Mike did not give up and continued picking up and bringing them home to have his mother throw them out. The mother and the child repeated this cycle of ritual compulsively. Mike had the reason to like animals:

Mike: I really don’t trust humans. I could trust a cat and a dog quicker than I could trust a human. And that’s a highly valued possession...My feeling towards them was like the same thing as a mother’s love. I knew that dog would not, you know, lock me in a closet somewhere and whip me with a strap.

Mike said he felt pet animals were part of him. He said he felt “all-togetherness.” Pet animals, particularly their traits, behaviors, and appearances, are extensions of how the owners see themselves (Belk 1988, 1991; Hirschman 1994). Mike’s relationship with pet animals were more than companionship with affectionate emotional involvement. He said that his feeling towards his animals was same as the *mother’s love*, while describing the animals as harmless: the antithesis of his own mother. Here again, he was obsessed by the thoughts about ideal mother’s love. His narratives hint at his desire to regress to these pet animals worthy for “mother’s love.” In other words, these animals that functioned as a psychological compensation—how the pet owners would like to be—are used as vital possession for coping.

On the other hand, when Sean found he was HIV positive in 1989, he had just moved to Atlanta alone and did not know anybody. He recalled, “when I found that I was HIV positive, I lost myself. I didn’t know what to do anymore. I had given up completely, you know. I wasn’t mentally right. I thought it was all over. I started drinking real bad, drinking, drinking, drinking.

I wasn't working. I thought it was all about dying." He was not speaking to his mother then. Nobody knew what he was going through; he had no support. He was not receiving any kind of benefits. For the job he had, he got fired. So, he had nothing to hold onto. Meantime, he bought a stuffed animal at Walmart and started to accumulate them, because, he said, they are very valuable to him.

Sean: I think my first stuffed animal I received was in Atlanta. And at the time I was going through some problems, I had found out that I was HIV positive, and I had this little bear that I had received with a balloon. And I would sit that bear down on the bed, and I would like lay on the bed, I would cuddle with that bear, just hold the bear. And I would talk to the bear, it's like, well, you my friend, you're going to be my friend forever, you know. When I would cry, I would hold the bear in my hand... And I bet that bear really means a lot to me. I called the bear Cuddly ... And the bear has been with me through hard times...The bear meant a lot to me. I would never leave that bear behind.

For Sean, it did not seem that Cuddly was merely a transitional object to reduce anxiety resulting from the absence of his mother (Belk 1991) or a mundane, stuffed animal to compensate his lack of human relationships. It seems, for both Mike and Sean, animals meant sacred objects and extended selves, which signified their connection to their spiritual selves (Hill, Gaines, and Wilson 2008; Hirschman 1990). They were sacralized and believed to have amulet-like magical efficacy during the period of liminality (Turner 1969; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Adelman 1992). Animals, live or anthropomorphized, played multiple roles of friend, self and family for both informants. As Hirschman (1994, 620) claims, "for consumers for whom human companionship has been difficult or strained, animal companionship can provide deeply needed emotional support and solace."

Sublimating extension of the self. One way to manage the threat of death is to overcome it by transcending the self beyond mortality with self-esteem. In discussing valued material possessions, Mike discussed his books. He explained that what he owns was not the books per se, but the ideas he got out of them. He possessed the thinking. According to Belk (1988), ideas and internal processes are part of consumers' core self. Thus, Mike's valued possession was to nurture his core self. He described himself as a free-spirited person and spoke about the importance of spiritualism which he learned from reading. Then, he explained how he applied spiritualism for coping with the threat of death.

Mike: ...I'm just not attached to things. I'm not moved by [them]... I'm not into materialistic things. There's something greater than materialism. All of it comes from spiritualism. That's just the manifestation...I am a spiritual being...

Mike was influenced by a new religious movement. Its principal belief is that a human is an immortal, spiritual being, and is improving that spirit on Earth using the religion's methods. When asked about his job, he said, "I work for planet..." But, for the most important thing he owns, he said "the person is really, physically, me... I'm possessive over myself in the external way." He explained its association with his other valued objects.

Mike: The other things else is like really my books, my sociology books. I'm, like, a book buff. And my metaphysical books. That's what I solely possess. Even when I go home, it's just reading... you read a book, then you own it. You own the thinking.

In response to the question if he was mentally affected by being HIV positive, he said, "it doesn't affect me" first. Then, after a brief pause, he rephrased his answer, adding some explanations.

Mike: I mean, it has definitely affected. Mentally, I always know that that's part of the homework I got to work on this physical body... You know, it doesn't really bother me. I'm not really on that phase... I'm just physically there, but I'm way somewhere else...

He explained that he was not into medication, as he learned by reading about "the technology of self." According to the Terror Management Theory, driven by a self-preservation instinct, people protect themselves against a threat of death (their own mortality) by subscribing to meaningful worldviews or cultural beliefs that permit them to feel enduring self-worth (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2000). Mike was coping with the threat of death by projecting the self—his most important possession that internalizes his thinking he obtained from the valuable books—as a spiritual being, the sublimating extension of the self, evading corporeal anxieties.

Conclusion

This study explores the vital possessions of marginalized consumers living with the threat of death. Extant research does not fully address the role of possessions for the socioeconomically disadvantaged urban consumers who are deprived of most consumer options while living with the threat of death. Based on the in-depth interviews with consumers who are HIV positive, we find an emerging alternative typology of the extended self (Belk 1988). We identify four approaches individuals employ through vital possessions: inter-personal, intra-personal, compensatory, and sublimating extension of the self. These vital possessions function as a means of coping particularly when individuals are devoid of intimate relationships and empathetic social support.

Building on Belk's (1988) study on the extended self, the subsequent research has discovered its complexities unbound with the multiplicity of selves from the authentic and fragmented self to the empty and torn self. The consumer has been found to utilize their extended self for different ends, such as expressing and transforming the self for crafting a coherent self-narrative and managing the identity conflict (Ahuvia 2005; Ruvio and Belk 2018). While our informants placed strong emphasis on forming and dissolving relationships with beings rather than acquiring or disposing material objects, their narratives also revealed that consumers use self-extensions through possessions, and their investment of energy into their vital possessions make them existentially meaningful and help cope with life-threatening disease.

There are ample areas of possessions and dispossessions of marginalized consumers that remain unexplored, which could benefit from increased research attention, such as homeless or runaway children who are sexually trafficked with AIDS around the world (Belk, Østergaard, and Groves 1998). Transformative consumer research should expand to further understand the role possessions play and enhance the wellbeing of and social justice for marginalized consumers (Crockett et al. 2011; Scott et al. 2011; UNAIDS 2022).

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Appendix

Appendix 1. A Profile of Informants

	Time since diagnosis (years)	Age	Occupation	A Brief Bio
Jake	4	40	Unemployed, on welfare	A native of the metropolis in Northeast. He grew up in a very strict family, with a strict father, lieutenant, and an affectionate mother, a schoolteacher; an inner-city native, he went through troubled adolescence and incarcerated in the federal prison.
Sean	11	32	Child relief worker in the juvenile detention center	Originally from Deep south. A son of a mechanic and a state bus driver, while growing up, he had to deal with his abusive father's drinking problem and domestic violence; left home when he was 16 years old, lived in several southern states, prior to arriving the metropolis in Northeast.
Mike	7	35	Unemployed, on welfare	A native of the metropolis in Northeast. While growing up with stepbrothers and stepsisters, his mother locked him up in the home; he took care of his family in place of his alcoholic mother; he was detained in the federal prison for 23 months.

Appendix 2. Typology of Vital Possessions and Strategies of the Extended Self

		Nature of Being	
		Human	Non-human
Organic State	Living (Organic)	Inter-personal Extension (Interaction)	Compensatory Extension (Regression)
	Non-living (Inorganic)	Intra-personal Extension (Introspection)	Sublimating Extension (Projection)