

Using Clothing to Bring Alive Autobiographical Memories

Susan Schultz Kleine, Ph.D.

Bowling Green State University

Abstract: Clothing is most often studied as a symbolic vehicle of adornment and outwardly directed self-display. While the impression-management view is important, it ignores the inwardly directed uses of clothing as symbols of a person's life story – who I was, who I am, who I am becoming, and with whom I am connected. People use clothing symbolically to bring alive and contemplate autobiographical memories that portray their life stories. Q methodology is used to study how key life story themes of affiliation versus autonomy and self-change versus stability are represented in young adults' descriptions of most and least cherished clothing. Results show that both most and least cherished clothing items evoked autobiographical memories that portray the life story.

Introduction

Clothing is most often studied as a symbolic vehicle of adornment and outwardly directed self-display, appearance management, and collective identity negotiation. We manage others' impressions of us via the clothing we wear; other people regard us differently according to appearances we project (Davis 1992; Kaiser 1990; McCracken 1988). Appearance obtains for us a sense of belonging and acceptance (e.g., Miles 1996) or announces that we are not conforming (Kaiser 1990). On a group level, clothing styles and the fashion system reflect cultural values and serve to negotiate collective identity ambivalence, such as what is considered to be masculine versus feminine (Davis 1992; Kaiser et al. 1993).

The impression-management view, while important, ignores the inwardly directed uses of clothing as personal symbols of "my life" — who I was, who I am, who I am becoming. People do, indeed, use clothing possessions to help remember and tell their life stories. ("This old pair of jeans? I wore them the night I proposed to my wife." "This dress? I wore it for our twentieth anniversary party." "That sweater? I hate it and never wear it, but my Mom gave it to me.") Self-adornment and appearance management are secondary when clothing items are used in this way. Instead, the clothing item is used for

Author's address: Department of Marketing, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, 43403, skleine@cba.bgsu.edu.

Operant Subjectivity, 2000 (January), 23 (2), 92-115.

its special capacity to carry and convey symbolic meanings about “me” and “my life” (McCracken 1988; Stone 1965).

Literature and poetry provide abundant examples of how people use material objects, including clothing items, as talismans to evoke self-descriptive images that comprise the life narrative, or autobiographical memory (Singer and Salovey 1993). Yet social scientists have not studied this phenomenon. Consumer researchers have examined how material possessions are used for self-recollection and identity development, but have not focused explicitly on issues of memory. (e.g., Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; McCracken 1988; Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

The goal of the research described here is to connect information from consumer research about the self-symbolic uses of material possessions with the personality psychology literature about life narratives and autobiographical memory. The use of clothing to manage identity and self-concept by constructing a life narrative from autobiographical memories is explored.

Background

Clothing that signifies the self belongs in a category with other symbolically meaningful possessions (Kaiser 1990; Solomon 1985; Stone 1965). Such possessions are mnemonic devices to stimulate reflection about self and/or serve as depositories of displaced meanings about “me” (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988). McCracken argues that symbolically meaningful possessions convey nuances verbal language cannot.

Certain possessions — typically identified as “favorites,” “cherished,” or “deeply meaningful” — have personal meaning because they are part of a person’s *extended self* (Belk 1988) and are associated with a central aspect of “who I am” (Kleine et al. 1995). Conversely, “least cherished” possessions say something about “who I am not” (Freitas et al. 1997; Kleine et al. 1995). This use of clothing is vital to the self-concept (Stone 1965), and involves the *inner* dialogue of self-indication (Blumer 1969). Studies that examine the meaning of possessions in relation to self typically contrast “most cherished” with “least cherished” possessions. The descriptors “most” and “least cherished” indicate the degree of attachment the individual feels to the possession (Schultz, et al. 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). This distinction provides contrast and aids in understanding the “me/not-me” boundaries of identity and thus, a person’s extended self. Possessions that are “not-me” can reveal as much about a person as those identified as “me” (Freitas et al. 1997; Schultz et al. 1989).

Meaningful Clothing Items, Life Narratives, and Autobiographical Memory

A person’s self-concept can be thought of and studied empirically as though it were a narrative construction that is told and retold based on selected life

events (e.g., Bruner 1987; Gergen and Gergen 1988; McAdams 1993; Singer and Salovey 1993). Life narratives are not self-documentaries but constructions that use cultural forms to present a coherent account of a life. Life narratives employ self-indicative themes and meanings that portray "my life" or "me" (McAdams 1985, 1993). They provide practical guides about how to approach everyday living. In the personality psychology literature, life narratives are considered part of, or constructed from, autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memories derive from everyday memories of our ongoing lives and our selves and have been of enduring interest in psychology (e.g., Conway 1991; Neiser 1982; Schank 1990; Schank and Abelson 1977). This interest focuses on how *autobiographical* memory works in contrast to other forms, such as *semantic* memory (Singer and Salovey 1993). Recently interest has turned to the *functions* of autobiographical memory and its important role in forming and maintaining self-concept. Autobiographical memories are those memories that mean the most to us, give shape to our lives, and define who we are. As such, autobiographical memory is central to understanding the self.

According to Singer and Salovey (1993), autobiographical memories have the following properties: affective intensity, vividness, repetitiveness, and linkage to other memories. They also focus on enduring concerns and unresolved conflicts. Such memories may serve as reminders of earlier concerns that were resolved or unpleasant memories that need further resolution, or they may simply be enjoyable, self-defining themes. Rehearsal of autobiographical memories allows confrontation and resolution, reassurance, comfort, or encouragement. These memories are likely to be triggered via external cues that evoke certain emotional reactions. Consumer research about material possession attachment suggests that clothing items may be among the cues that evoke autobiographical memories.

Themes Underlying Life Narratives in Autobiographical Memory

Autobiographical memories become linked across the life span and integrated into scripts or schemata that carry thematic meaning (Schank and Abelson 1977). Themes work in a top-down manner to influence selection and reconstruction of memories and connect new information with existing themes (Conway and Rubin, 1993). They become the underpinnings of life narratives in autobiographical memory, and they belong in one of two general categories: *autonomy seeking versus affiliation seeking*¹, and *self-continuity versus self-change* (McAdams 1985, 1993). These themes are reflected across the social sciences as key forces underlying identity development (Kleine, et al 1995).

¹ A variety of terms that refer to concepts of affiliation and autonomy seeking are found in the literatures on self, identity, and life narratives. McAdams (1985), for example, uses the terms *agency* and *communion*, while others may use the terms *integration* and *individuation*. To avoid confusion, *affiliation* and *autonomy* will be the terms used here to refer to these key concepts.

Affiliation seeking involves a person's motives to connect with others and define one's self relative to them. *Autonomy seeking* involves a person's motives to establish a unique identity that is distinct and apart from others. The natural tension between these two motives propels self-development onward. Similarly, striving to maintain a sense of self-continuity (i.e., a coherent life narrative) while negotiating life experiences in domains previously unexplored yields self-development. This evolutionary character of the self (Kegan 1982) is observed in people's life stories (McAdams 1985, 199).

The consumer research literature shows themes of autonomy versus affiliation and self-change versus stability reflected in meanings individuals ascribe to special possessions (e.g., Kleine et al. 1995; Schultz et al. 1989). Possessions help to retrieve memories and provide cultural categories useful for telling a particular story about "me" (McCracken 1988). As natural changes occur in the life story, specific material possessions become more or less important parts of the extended self (McAdams 1985); attachment to those possessions and their self-story meanings waxes and wanes (Myers 1985).

The work of collecting, categorizing, storing, retrieving, and using key memories to develop a coherent portrayal of one's life is an internal, contemplative, self-focused process. The often-intense emotions associated with autobiographical memories lead to this inner focus on the self. Examples abound in poetry and literature portraying how people use material objects to "summon emotional memories to soothe, excite, and encourage them in pursuit of their desired goals" (e.g., Singer and Salovey 1993). The scientific literature on life narratives and autobiographical memory, however, ignores the use of material goods. A related omission occurs in the literature on clothing that concentrates on its use for outward display and to invite others' appraisals. This focus ignores the self-reflection that clothing appears to facilitate.

Memories elicited by clothing should reflect the characteristics of autobiographical memories. Clothing items of stronger attachment (i.e., those that are cherished, special, or favorite) should be associated with autobiographical memory (life story) themes of affiliation and autonomy; also, they should be associated with a past self, a present self, or a desired self (Kleine et al. 1995). Clothing possessions of lesser attachment (i.e., those that are not favorite, cherished items) may also communicate something about "not me" (Freitas et al. 1997; Kleine et al. 1995). Some clothing items may be associated with happy memories, or pride-eliciting events, while others may evoke sadness or even unresolved guilt. Some clothing may serve as a "nostalgic retreat," or reflect enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts (Singer and Salovey 1993).

The purpose of the project described here is to examine the role certain goods, specifically clothing, play in life narrative recollection and retelling. As a category of goods often employed for self-expression and identity negotiation, how is clothing used as a cue for, or reflection of, the more private, inner world of autobiographical memories? The research question is how clothing items symbolize various meanings typically associated with life narratives. There was no intention to portray *all* possible types of clothing possession meaning, but to see whether meanings tend to follow the same thematic lines found in life narratives.

Methods

The symbolic code of clothing is frequently processed at an unconscious level (Kaiser 1990; McCracken 1988). Therefore, research on the identity-related meanings of clothing calls for a projective methodology that engages participants in expression of subjective meanings. Q methodology is uniquely suited to this aim.

Q Sample

Protocol data from a pilot study (Schultz et al. 1989) provided a pool of natural language from which phrases were purposively sampled. In that study, judges coded subjects' open-ended responses about most and least cherished possessions into the categories of affiliation or autonomy, and past, present, or future temporal orientation. To compile the Q sample, the concurrence of concepts was first specified via the factorial design portrayed in Table 1. It models strong attachment (those items that are most indicative of the self and are incorporated in the extended self) versus weak attachment (those items least connected with the present, extended self); within these main effects lie

Table 1. Factorial Design of Structured Portion of Q Sample

<i>Main Effects</i>	<i>Levels</i>	
Strong Attachment ("me")	(a) past autonomy	(d) past affiliation
	(b) present autonomy	(e) present affiliation
	(c) future autonomy	(f) future affiliation
Weak Attachment ("not me")	(a) past autonomy	(d) past affiliation
	(b) present autonomy	(e) present affiliation
	(c) future autonomy	(f) future affiliation

the fundamental life narrative themes of autonomy versus affiliation seeking and self-change versus self-stability. Writing Q statements to represent a past, present, or future aspect of a life story addressed the change/stability theme.

The unstructured portion of the Q sample includes 12 affect statements (e.g., feelings such as like or dislike, pride, nostalgia, or sadness). Pilot study respondents frequently used these feeling statements when describing most or least cherished possessions (Schultz et al. 1989). Four statements (47-50) that directly address whether the possession holds any special importance to the person were also added to the sample. The semi-structured Q sample (Appendix) consists of 54 statements. The number of statements chosen was sufficient to adequately represent a multifaceted, complex concourse. Pretesting indicated that the Q sample was not so large or complex as to overtax respondents.

Participant Sample

Thirty individuals constructed Q sorts. The participants were young adults between the ages of 20 and 28. Many were married and/or co-op students working their way through college. All came from mid-western middle class or working class backgrounds. These participants are in an age group of special interest in studies of life narratives and autobiographical memory because they are in a critical period during which enduring self-themes emerge (Conway and Rubin 1993). This age group is likely to exhibit combinations of affiliation and autonomy as well as temporal change and stability. Of all age groups, young adults are likely to have the greatest variety of meanings for their special possessions (Cszikentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). They are old enough to have a past to reflect upon and young enough to have an extended future to imagine. They are at the height of establishing their own identities and at a developmental stage where they continue to experiment with self (McAdams 1985), theoretically leading to a greater variety of possession meanings compared to those of another age group.

Procedures

Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to understand individuals' special possessions and that their responses would be confidential. Pre-sort questionnaires were used to identify clothing items each participant selected to be the objects of the Q sorts. Instructions were to "list 3-5 favorite, cherished, or difficult-to-part-with pieces of clothing" and then to circle the most cherished item. Similarly, a least cherished (but still possessed) clothing item was elicited. Four Q sorting tasks were performed; the data reported here are from two of the sorts for *most* and *least* cherished clothing items.

For the most cherished piece of clothing Q sorting task, instructions were to read the statements and categorize them into three piles: (1) most characteristic of the clothing item; (2) least characteristic; and (3) irrelevant,

not understood, or otherwise non-descriptive of their feelings. After this initial sorting, the participant moved to a more detailed sorting according to the 11-column distribution, identified below with the number of statements (bottom row) placed beneath each of the columns (-5 to +5).

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
3	3	4	6	7	8	7	6	4	3	3

Participants were told to follow the specified distribution, but that slight deviations were acceptable. After completing the sorting task, the participant reviewed the item placements to ensure accuracy. Finally, the participant responded, in writing, to the questions “Why is it a favorite?” and “How did you acquire it?” The participant was then invited to comment on his or her Q sort. Similar procedures were used to guide the Q sorting for least cherished clothing items. Each sorting task took about 10-15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Standard Q methodology analysis procedures were followed (e.g., Brown 1980; McKeown and Thomas 1988; Stephenson 1953). Principal components analysis followed by varimax rotation identified the viewpoints represented in the data matrix for each of the two sorting tasks. The following heuristics guided the determination of the number of factors to retain (Brown 1980, pp. 222-223): “(1) retain factors on which at least two sorts load significantly at the 0.01 level (i.e., a loading that exceeds 2.58 (SE) = 0.35), (2) retain factors for which the cross-product of a factor’s two highest loadings exceeds twice the standard error of a zero-order loading (i.e., 2 (SE) = 0.27), and (3) conceptually sensible factors.” A representative Q sort for each factor was determined and, along with questionnaire responses, formed the basis for interpretation of each group’s viewpoint.

Results

Most Cherished Clothing Item

The Q sorts from 28 participants (16 males and 12 females) were analyzed for shared patterns of thought. (Two sorts deviated widely from the quasi-normal Q distribution and were excluded from analysis.) Table 2 displays the factor score matrix. Three factors related to autobiographical motivations emerged: (1) keeping memories of “me” (self-continuity, autonomy motive), (2) the present autonomous “me” (present self-maintenance, autonomy motive), and (3) fading memories of past affiliations (fading affiliation motive).

Factor 1: Keeping Memories of “Me”

The 12 participants whose clothing items are associated with this factor

described these items as having all the ingredients of a special possession that is used to maintain a particular autobiographical memory (Kleine et al. 1995).

Individuals on Factor 1 identified their most cherished clothing item as something meaningful, worth having and keeping [statements 49, 48, 31, 40].

Table 2. Most Cherished Clothing Factor Matrix

Person	Factor			Gender	Most Cherished Piece of Clothing
	1	2	3		
26	84	32	-01	M	Garfield boxer shorts
24	79	12	03	M	concert t-shirt
12	78	14	18	F	summer dress
2	78	21	22	M	sweater from Europe
4	76	30	14	F	black velvet dress
10	66	21	17	M	sweater
3	66	38	13	F	dress
1	58	38	-07	F	white silk blouse
28	57	41	01	M	Polo jacket
8	54	45	-02	F	blue cotton shirt
9	32	-11	14	F	denim shorts
5	61	12	17	F	white wool jacket
6	15	78	17	M	Coca-Cola shorts
21	02	74	-32	F	red summer suit
22	05	73	21	F	stonewashed jeans
23	35	69	11	F	summer dress
17	50	68	-04	M	stonewashed jeans
14	31	67	27	M	summer shirt
20	16	67	19	F	Guess overalls
16	52	65	-19	M	grey pinstripe suit
13	05	62	-30	M	Lord and Taylor tie
18	36	59	27	M	broken in Levi's
27	36	58	25	M	sweater, Notre Dame
25	36	56	28	M	two-year old Levi's
19	27	-48	46	M	torn-up Nike t-shirt
11	14	30	77	F	old pair of shorts
7	07	02	67	M	old Levi's
15	44	16	58	M	old flannel shirt
	39	11	8		% variance explained

The clothing items elicited good feelings and memories associated with certain autobiographical events and experiences [15, 44, 45, 1, 46, 34, 4, 25]. For example, "I purchased [my favorite item] for a rehearsal dinner for my best friend's wedding in which I was maid of honor" (Participant 3), or "It reminds me of a gift I gave to someone else, something that the person enjoyed" (P8).

The autobiographical meanings elicited by the clothing are desirable to remember and fit each participant's self-image and style — the piece of clothing is "me." The clothing stands for a sense of uniqueness, positive self-image, and memories reflecting the autonomy-seeking agenda of the life story [7, 8, 26, 38, 43, 51]. For example, "... [my blouse] makes me feel expensive and unique" (P1), "it is beautiful and unique" (P4), and "[my cherished clothing item] is unique and funny and few other people have one" (P26). Perceived uniqueness and exclusivity of the clothing invites the admiration of others that "it was something I really wanted and now that I have it, everybody wants to wear it" (P28).

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
7	It makes me feel unique, not just like everyone else.	5	1	-1
15	It reminds me of good times with family and friends.	5	0	3
43	I really like it.	4	5	2
44	It makes me feel sentimental or nostalgic.	4	-2	2
45	It reminds me of something I am proud of.	4	-1	1
1	It reminds me of past accomplishments or other important events in my life.	3	-1	1
8	It fits my image.	3	5	-1
46	It makes me happy.	3	4	1
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-1	4	-3
26	It doesn't fit my image anymore.	-3	-5	1
31	I do not plan to have it in the future.	-3	1	4
38	It makes me feel out of style.	-3	-3	2
49	I would not be upset if it were lost or stolen.	-3	0	0
40	It is unlikely that I will keep it as a reminder of family or friends.	-4	3	0
4	It ties me with memories and experiences.	-5	-4	4
25	It doesn't have anything to do with past events in my life.	-5	3	-2
48	It has no special meaning to me, it's just something I have.	-5	1	0
51	I really do not like it anymore.	-5	0	3

Participant 5's Q sort loaded negatively on this factor, indicating that her clothing item had a meaning opposite the others. The cherished clothing item was "purchased after my divorce ... it represents a new beginning," thus aiding a difficult transition and helping to renegotiate her identity. This item symbolizes an identity in resolution (McAdams 1985). Certain autobiographical memories are recalled in order to master conflicts and resolve issues (Singer and Salovey 1993).

The other Factor 1 participants' clothing items elicited good feelings about themselves and experiences that were linked to others who helped define "me." Participants indicated they preserved their piece of clothing because they wanted to maintain these memories as part of their mental autobiography.

Factor 2: The Present, Autonomous Me

For Factor 2's 12 participants, cherished pieces of clothing symbolize the present "me;" they represent current aspects of respondent life stories. Factor 2 has an "I like it and it's me" flavor. [8, 43, 5, 24, 26, 51].

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
8	It fits my image.	3	5	-1
30	It is easy for anyone to have; it's not very unique.	-4	5	2
43	I really like it.	4	5	1
32	I could become who I want to be without it.	0	4	4
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-4	4	-3
46	It makes me happy.	3	4	1
5	It is a statement of who I am now.	2	3	-1
21	It makes me similar to people I aspire to be like.	0	3	4
25	It doesn't have anything to do with past events in my life.	-5	3	-2
40	It is unlikely that I will keep it as a reminder of my friends or family.	-4	3	0
18	It makes me feel loved and cared for.	2	-3	1
20	It will help me carry on a tradition.	1	-3	0
35	It reminds me of someone from my past I would rather forget.	0	-3	-2
4	It ties me with memories and experiences.	5	-4	4
24	It used to be me, but not anymore.	-2	-4	2
26	It doesn't fit my image anymore.	-3	-5	1
51	I really do not like it anymore.	-5	-5	-2
52	It makes me sad.	-2	-5	-3

A Factor 2 item "makes me happy" now [46, 52]. This has little to do with *self-continuity* — neither connecting with one's past, nor carrying some aspect of the life story into the future [34, 25, 35, 4, 32, 40, 20]. The meaning associated with this special clothing is purely "me-" and "now-" oriented. In contrast with Factor 1, individuals on Factor 2 did *not* choose their most cherished clothing items because of their uniqueness. These items do not stand for present connections with others [18].

People wear certain clothing items because those items fit "me" (Solomon 1985) and help the wearer feel more secure and relaxed (Kaiser 1990). For example, several Factor 2 participants identified jeans as their special item and stated that they are "most comfortable and I feel good in them," (P17), they "fit very comfortably" (P25), and "they fit me really good" (P18). The autonomy-seeking task of privacy regulation may be reflected in this factor's appeal to "me now" and comfort (Altman 1976). Thus, Factor 2 captures a strong present-oriented aspect of "me." It captures an inner focus on self and a private process of contemplation of the self apart from others.

Factor 3: Fading Memories of Past Affiliations

Factor 3 represents past memories and experiences, "who I used to be." The autobiographical connections are from the past, *has-been* relationships [2, 33, 41, 4, 31, 14, 11, 34, 21, 10]. Yet for Factor 3 participants the past is not completely behind them. The clothing item evokes memories of certain affiliations. This is illustrated by P19's "torn up old t-shirt" that reminds him of "an old, very serious girlfriend who moved away." His sort also loaded negatively on the "me now" viewpoint of Factor 2. Each clothing item was

No.	Statement	Factor		
		1	2	3
2	It reminds me of who I used to be.	-1	-2	5
33	I probably will not care about it in the future.	-2	1	5
41	It has nothing to do with my future.	-1	0	5
4	It ties me with memories and experiences.	5	-4	4
31	I do not plan to have it in the future.	-3	1	4
14	It involves my heritage or a tradition.	0	-1	3
27	I could easily be myself without it.	2	2	3
11	It shows who I am becoming.	1	2	-3
22	It has to do with an important relationship.	1	-1	-3
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-4	4	-3
21	It makes me similar to people I aspire to be like.	0	3	-4
10	It is a statement of who I would like to be.	1	2	-5

labeled old, or has-been, yet comfortable, by the three participants who loaded positively on the factor. Unlike Factor 1, the participants on Factor 3 appear to accept that the item will one day be gone, suggesting that they anticipate eventually being finished with the old self-business that the clothing item connotes. This demonstrates the evolving nature of autobiographical memories that outline self-concept.

Summary of Cherished Clothing Item Sorting Task

Three factors identified life narrative themes: (1) keeping memories of me, (2) establishing a present, autonomous me, and (3) negotiating memories of fading past affiliations. Each of these meanings for special clothing serves autobiographical memory in a different way. The first viewpoint represents the use of clothing to maintain memories of special events and/or relationships that define a desirable aspect of the participant's life story. Contemplation of these clothing items elicits good feelings and strengthens the associated memory. The second viewpoint captures a current focus on "me now." The focus is again upon autonomy but without the past connections of Factor 1. The third viewpoint exemplifies how people's attachments to certain clothing items fade as they let go of aspects of their life story symbolized by the clothing items. A cooling-off process occurs between person and object as self-associations and memories fade away (McCracken 1988; Myers 1985).

Least Cherished Clothing Item

Twenty-four participants, including 16 males and 8 females, completed analyzable Q sorts for this task. One might expect least cherished clothing items to fall into a single category of the "yuk, it's ugly" type (see Table 3). However, as the five factors described below demonstrate, the meanings of least cherished items were unexpectedly complex.

Factor 1: It's Not Me but It Ties Me to Others

Eleven sorts defined this factor. Participants portrayed the clothing items as disliked, out of style, and not me [51, 43, 28, 38, 32, 27, 5, 11, 10, 21, 8]. Although the participants do not seem to be attached to these objects, most of them (9 of 11) received their clothing items as gifts, and two more obtained them for special occasions associated with other people. Thus, there was an element of retained value to the items — they connoted memories and ties to others [4, 17, 25, 48]. Although the clothing item had special meaning, the participants deliberately indicated that the item did *not* make them happy; there were not good feelings associated with the memory [46].

Examples include P5's "old brown sport coat" (purchased by someone else), P6's ugly skirt from her mother, P7's dress that she never liked but which was given to her to wear on a special occasion. An ugly sweatshirt (P8), disliked t-shirt (P14), and jeans skirt (P16) were received as gifts. Although they were not received as gifts, P15 purchased his "ugly Hawaiian shirt" for a

Table 3. Least Cherished Clothing Factor Matrix

Person	Factor					Gender	Least Cherished Piece of Clothing
	1	2	3	4	5		
6	80	07	24	-19	0	F	plaid skirt, top
16	79	02	15	-18	25	F	blue jean skirt
22	74	18	08	-09	03	M	jeans, don't fit
4	73	21	05	11	-04	M	sport jacket
7	67	27	45	-09	-05	F	sundress
5	67	29	02	12	13	M	sports jacket
14	66	24	02	24	-04	M	Celtics t-shirt
8	66	35	09	01	-29	M	fishnet sweatshirt
13	64	45	31	-19	-08	M	shirt
19	63	12	30	22	20	F	pea green blouse
24	51	24	39	-32	-13	M	v-neck sweater
15	47	19	46	11	10	M	Hawaiian shirt
23	08	84	03	05	12	M	white shorts
18	37	69	26	13	-16	F	maroon vest
20	45	59	28	-15	01	M	preppie sweater
10	18	58	23	-20	11	M	t-shirt
11	50	54	26	-11	-06	M	shirt
1	-03	12	88	08	13	M	suit vest
2	39	37	68	-19	-07	M	too small gym shorts
17	25	40	47	-31	-08	F	sweater
3	11	0	01	81	19	F	high school uniform
12	-05	-10	-04	81	-23	M	suit pants
9	34	24	27	-03	74	F	prairie skirt
21	47	24	34	-03	-54	M	pink shirt
	42	8	6	5	4		% variance explained

party he attended with an old girlfriend and P19 bought her "ugly pea green blouse" for a Halloween party with friends.

Although the items were disliked, uncomfortable, and not reflective of the participants' tastes or present selves, affiliative motives explain why the clothing was kept. Factor 1 clothing items symbolize disconnecting from undesirable images represented by the clothing while at the same time remembering a connection with another person — the items reflect both "not me" and "with whom I am connected" at the same time.

No.	Statement	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
28	It has nothing to do with who I am now.	5	-5	1	-5	0
38	It makes me feel out of style.	5	-4	1	-2	-5
4	It ties me with memories and experiences.	4	-1	-1	5	3
32	I could become who I want to be without it.	4	1	3	2	2
17	It reminds me of my parent(s) or other family members.	3	1	-4	5	-2
27	I could easily be myself without it.	3	2	4	3	1
51	I really do not like it anymore.	3	5	1	1	1
5	It is a statement of who I am now.	-3	-2	-2	2	0
11	It shows who I am becoming.	-3	0	-2	4	-3
25	It doesn't have anything to do with past events in my life.	-3	4	-2	-5	2
10	It is a statement of who I would like to be.	-4	-3	0	1	-1
21	It makes me similar to people I aspire to be like.	-4	1	0	2	-1
48	It has no special meaning to me – it's just something I have.	-4	5	5	-2	0
8	It fits my image.	-5	3	-2	-3	0
43	I really like it.	-5	1	-3	-1	1
46	It makes me happy.	-5	1	-1	-1	3

Factor 2: It's Someone Else's Style, Not Mine

Factor 2 also has a "not me" meaning, but without the lingering past, affiliative motives of Factor 1. Of the five definers on this factor, participants 11 and 20 loaded highly on both Factor 1 and Factor 2 (see Table 3).

Generally, Factor 2 participants went out of their way to indicate what their clothing item was *not*. It either was not meaningful or had only utilitarian value; it served no *autonomy-seeking* or *becoming-self* purposes. [41, 48, 51, 47, 28, 33, 30, 26, 8, 5, 7].

Factor 2 represents temporal and interpersonal disconnection. There is a hint that the items were labeled "least cherished" because of a desire to disconnect from something. An old t-shirt "appears to represent an image and a period in life which I prefer not to be associated with" (P10). Or the item may help differentiate and disconnect from certain tastes and preferences (or the people who hold them) such as P18's maroon vest from her mother-in-law which is "not my style, more hers," and P20's preppie sweater bought by his

No.	Statement	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
41	It has nothing to do with my future.	1	5	-1	0	3
48	It has no special meaning to me – it's just something I have.	-4	5	5	-2	0
51	I really do not like it anymore.	3	5	1	1	1
47	I have no feelings for it.	-1	4	3	2	-5
28	It doesn't have anything to do with who I am now.	-3	4	-2	5	2
33	I probably will not care about it in the future.	3	4	0	-1	1
50	It is basically a functional, utilitarian object to me.	-1	3	2	1	0
30	It is easy for anyone to have; it's not very unique.	-2	3	5	3	1
26	It doesn't fit my image anymore.	2	3	0	-2	5
8	It fits my image.	-5	-3	-2	-3	0
5	It is a statement of who I am now.	-4	-3	0	1	-1
3	It has always related well to my needs.	-1	-4	1	0	-2
7	It makes me feel unique; not just like everyone else.	0	-5	0	-3	0
24	It used to be me, but not anymore.	1	-5	2	0	4

mother “with her money, of course.” Finally, P23's white shorts “are not the type of clothing I prefer.”

Factor 2 suggests that the items were never quite right [3, 24]. Yet participants kept the items anyway. Three of the five participants received their item as a gift; this affiliative connection may reflect the part of the life story that the item represents.

Factor 3: I Just Don't Like It

This viewpoint reflects what one might expect from least cherished clothing items — pure and simple dislike. Participants revealed no emotional attachment to F3 clothing items and appeared to be ready to discard them [49]. There appears to be little interpersonal connectedness reflected in this viewpoint — no past, present, or future affiliations [37, 42, 34, 36, 16, 35, 17, 18, 13, 12, 15]. Several statements claim a “not me” meaning, as well [30, 27, 32].

The Factor 3 clothing items are just plain “out of style” and undesirable [48, 49, 47, 43]. For example, P17 describes her sweater as “the pattern is awful, the colors don't coordinate, and it's made out of my least favorite fabric, polyester.” The clothing item reflects nothing autobiographical.

No.	Statement	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
30	It is easy for anyone to have; it's not unique.	-2	3	5	3	1
37	It does not help me feel loved or cared for.	-1	-3	5	0	2
48	It has no special meaning for me — it's just something I have.	-4	5	5	-2	0
27	I could easily be myself without it.	3	2	4	3	1
42	It does nothing to help me feel connected to others.	1	-2	4	-4	5
49	I would not be upset if it were lost or stolen.	4	2	4	1	-5
32	I could become who I want to be without it.	4	1	3	2	2
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-2	-1	3	-3	-3
47	I have no feelings for it.	-1	4	3	2	-5
36	It has nothing to do with my heritage.	-2	0	3	1	-2
16	It reminds me of a person who is important to me now.	2	2	-3	4	-3
43	I really like it.	-5	1	-3	-1	1
35	It reminds me of someone of my past I would rather forget.	1	0	-4	-4	-1
17	It reminds me of my parent(s) or other family members.	3	1	-4	5	-2
18	It makes me feel loved and cared for.	0	2	-4	0	-4
13	It reminds me of an important family member.	0	2	-5	-5	-4
12	It reminds me of an important friend from my past.	1	0	-5	2	4
15	It reminds me of good times with family or friends.	2	0	-5	4	4

Factor 4: It's Uncomfortable, but It Reminds Me of Someone

This affiliative viewpoint, although associated with uncomfortable and non-differentiating clothing, seems to capture lingering memories. Two participants defined Factor 4. P3 described her uncomfortable high school uniform as something that "... everyone wore and you could not show much individuality." A similar sentiment is reflected in a number of the statements for this factor [27, 30, 7, 8].

A pair of suit pants were P12's least cherished because "they are nice pants, but I hate wearing them; they are uncomfortable to wear." These were received as gifts and therefore connect the participant with affiliations and past experiences [1, 17, 4, 15, 16, 34, 42, 25]. The items also have implications for

anticipatory selves – being part of an emerging self [11, 9, 28], and connoting pride. [45] This viewpoint reflects the life story theme of self-continuity.

No.	Statement	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	It reminds me of past accomplishments or other important events in my life.	0	-3	1	5	-3
17	It reminds me of my parent(s) or other family members.	3	1	-4	5	-2
4	It reminds me of memories and experiences.	4	-1	-1	5	3
11	It shows who I am becoming.	-3	0	-2	4	-3
15	It reminds me of good times with family or friends.	2	0	-5	4	4
16	It reminds me of a person who is important to me now.	2	2	-3	4	-3
9	It has to do with my goals for the future.	-3	-2	-1	3	-1
27	I could easily be myself without it.	3	2	4	3	1
30	It is easy for anyone to have; it's not very unique.	-2	3	5	3	1
45	It reminds me of something I am proud of.	-2	-2	2	3	2
7	It makes me feel unique; not just like everyone else.	0	-5	0	-3	0
8	It fits my image.	-5	-3	-2	-3	0
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-2	-1	3	-3	-3
42	It does nothing to help me feel connected with others.	1	-2	4	-4	5
25	It doesn't have anything to do with past events in my life.	-3	4	-2	-5	2
28	It has nothing to do with who I am now.	5	-5	1	-5	0

Factor 5: It Used to Be Me, but Not Anymore

This viewpoint reflects "has been, used to be me" associations [2, 24, 12, 15, 4, 44, 1, 34] and lingering emotional attachment [47, 46, 49]. P9's prairie-type skirt was "outdated and ugly, but for some reason it's still in my closet." Factor 5 items do not serve current affiliation needs [42, 16, 18, 22] or future, aspiration needs [41, 11]. In contrast, P21 (whose sort loaded negatively on Factor 5), revealed that his disliked pink dress shirt stood for a current affiliation. The shirt reminded him of his wife, from whom he received the shirt. P21's wife gave him a shirt that he describes as not fitting his image. It has more of a present orientation, consistent with his sort's negative loading on this factor. Yet the shirt connects him to his wife. Despite the apparent

ambivalence about the Factor 5 clothing items, they retain some self-definitional value.

No.	Statement	Factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
2	It reminds me of who I used to be.	1	-1	-1	0	5
42	It does nothing to help me feel connected to others.	1	-2	4	-4	5
47	I have no feelings for it.	-1	4	3	2	5
24	It used to be me, but not anymore.	1	-5	2	0	4
12	It reminds me of an important friend from my past.	1	0	-5	2	4
15	It reminds me of good times with family or friends.	2	0	-5	4	4
4	It ties me with memories and experiences.	4	-1	-1	5	3
41	It has nothing to do with my future.	1	5	-1	0	3
44	It makes me feel sentimental or nostalgic.	2	-2	-2	1	3
46	It makes me happy.	-5	1	-1	-1	3
1	It reminds me of past accomplishments or other important events in my life.	0	-3	1	5	-3
11	It shows who I am becoming.	-3	0	-2	4	-3
16	It reminds me of a person who is important to me now.	2	2	-3	4	-3
34	It does not remind me of anyone from my past.	-2	-1	3	-3	-3
13	It reminds me of an important family member who is gone now.	0	2	-5	-5	-4
18	It makes me feel loved and cared for.	0	2	-4	0	-4
22	It has to do with an important relationship.	0	-2	-1	-2	-4
49	I would not be upset if it were lost or stolen.	4	2	4	1	-5

Summary of Least Cherished Clothing Item Sorting Task

Surprisingly, least cherished items function in a variety of self-definitional modes. Only one of the five factors (Factor 3) portrays simple dislike of the clothing object. The other viewpoints are more complex. Four factors (1, 2, 4, 5) capture the autonomy-seeking theme of the life story by defining "who I am not" as a unique individual. Participants use clothing items to symbolically define the outer "not me" boundaries of themselves. The Factor 1, 2, and 4 viewpoints reflect *affiliations*; those affiliations tell "who I am" as defined by "with whom I am (or was) connected". The Factor 5 viewpoint reveals that we may hold on to certain clothing items because they remind us of who we *were*

and reinforce a sense of self-continuity. Least cherished items tend to be associated with mixed feelings, waning aspects of self, or has-been associations. Despite disliking the clothing item, the owner keeps it, because it represents a significant autobiographical aspect.

Discussion

As the results described here demonstrate, people use clothing possessions symbolically to help remember and tell their life stories. Study participants contemplated their most and least cherished clothing possessions. These items evoked autobiographical memories the participants described through Q sorting. Participants portrayed how their clothing-cued memories reflected the same autobiographical themes that are found in life narratives (McAdams 1985, 1993).

A variety of autobiographical meanings emerged in this study. Participants portrayed most cherished clothing items as reflecting the life narrative themes of autonomy seeking (desirable aspects of "me") or affiliation seeking (connections with others in one's past or present life). Most cherished clothing items triggered autobiographical meanings related to past, present, or emerging aspects of life stories.

Interestingly, least cherished clothing items also held significance for the participants' life stories. Only one of the five least cherished factors captured pure dislike of the clothing item that did not involve autobiographical meaning. The remaining least cherished items tended to be disliked, yet retained, because they connoted something about "not me," "who I was connected with," or "who I was." Of the least cherished items that were disliked, many also were received as gifts. Some items held autobiographical value because they symbolized past or present affiliations. Thus, *both* most and least cherished clothing items elicited autobiographical memories.

Participants used clothing items symbolically in ways that are consistent with the functions of autobiographical memory. The clothing items elicited thoughts and feelings of including desirable, pleasant, or reassuring aspects of one's life or working through unresolved conflicts and issues (Singer and Salovey 1993).

Do the results apply to types of people and clothing items other than those included in this study? According to the material possession attachment literature, virtually everyone uses material objects for self-identification. The practice spans cultures and age groups. Contrary to gender stereotyping, males and females exhibit both autonomy- and affiliation-seeking self-associations via their possessions. Additionally, the self-related meanings symbolized by material objects are personal and not inherent in the objects themselves. Thus, *any* sort of material possession can be an autobiographical symbol for part of a

life story. As far as can be discerned without further empirical study, the same things should apply to clothing items.

Clothing is a material possession that supports autobiographical memory in a unique way. As McCracken (1988) asserts, clothing provides a communication tool that is different from language. It conveys meanings that verbal language cannot. In addition, clothing is relatively enduring and palpable. Using external, lasting reminders helps stimulate recall and contemplation of portions of the life story. Autobiographical memories may be more fleeting or difficult to recall without these external cues (Belk 1988). Thus, clothing is an important symbolic anchor in supporting the functions of autobiographical memory and the telling of a life story.

Future Research

These results lead to interesting questions to be explored in future research. How do autobiographical memories elicited via possession symbols differ from memories that are not cued by possessions? What types of clothing items (e.g., blue jeans versus wedding dresses) are most conducive to life narrative accounting? Why do certain items (e.g., underclothing) rarely appear on lists of most cherished clothing items? How might those who market clothing encourage autobiographical meanings to form around their brands of clothing? How does involuntary loss of certain clothing items through theft or disaster affect the life story? How do people negotiate difficult life transitions via their clothing possessions? Do people use newly acquired clothing items to deliberately change the life story? Can one person try to change another by giving them certain types of clothing items?

Study Designs based on Q Methodology

Q methodology is well suited for investigating self-signifying material possessions, such as most or least cherished clothing. Because a portion of autobiographical memory processing may take place at a deeply subjective level (Singer and Salovey 1993), the projective nature of Q sorting aids the participants' articulation of autobiographical meanings. Theory-guided tests built into the Q sample may aid the investigator's systematic consideration of distinctions among different types or categories of objects. Freitas et al. (1997) used open-ended interviews; their results suggested that least cherished items simply belong to an overall "not me" category. In contrast, in this study Q methodology uncovered a variety of meanings linked to least cherished items. More finely grained results from this study provide additional insight into the role of clothing items to cue autobiographical memories.

References

- Altman, I. 1976. Privacy: A conceptual analysis. *Environment and Behavior* 8: 7-29.
- Belk, R. W. 1988. Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research* 15: 139-68.
- Blumer, H. 1969. Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection. *Sociology Quarterly* 10: 275-91.
- Brown, S.R. 1980. *Political subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bruner, J. 1987. Life as narrative. *Social Research* 54: 11-32.
- Conway, M.A. 1991. In defense of everyday memory. *American Psychologist* 46: 19-26.
- _____ and Rubin, D.C. 1993. The structure of autobiographical memory. In *Theories of memory*. A.F. Collins et al. (Eds.). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Rochberg-Halton, E. 1981. *The meaning of things*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, F. 1992. *Fashion, culture, and identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feinberg, R. A., Mataro, L., & Burroughs, W. J. (1992). Clothing and social identity. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 11(1), 18-23.
- Freitas, A., Kaiser, S. B., Chandler, J., Hall, C., Kim, J., and Hammidi, T. 1997. Appearance management as border construction: Least favorite clothing, group distancing, and identity ... not!" *Sociological Inquiry* 67: 323-35.
- Gergen, K. and Gergen, M. 1988. Narrative and the self as relationship. In *Advances in experimental social psychology: Vol. 21*. L. Berkowitz (Ed.). New York: Academic Press.
- Kaiser, S.B. 1990. *The social psychology of clothing: Symbolic appearances in context* (2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Kaiser, S.B., Freeman, C.M., and Chandler, J.L. 1993. Favorite clothes and gendered subjectivities: Multiple readings. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 15: 27-50.
- Kegan, R. 1982. *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kleine, S.S., Kleine, III, R.E., and Allen, C.T. (1995). How is a possession "me" or "not me"? Characterizing types and an antecedent of material possession attachment. *Journal of Consumer Research*: 22, 327-43.
- McAdams, D.P. 1985. *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey.
- _____ 1993. *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: William Morrow & Company.
- McCracken, G. 1988. *Culture and consumption*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- McKeown, B. and Thomas, D. 1988. *Q methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

- Miles, S. 1996. The cultural capital of consumption: Understanding "postmodern" identities in a cultural context. *Culture & Psychology* 2 : 139-58.
- Myers, E. 1985. Phenomenological analysis of the importance of special possessions: An exploratory study. In *Advances in Consumer Research: Vol. 12*. E.C. Hirschman and H.B. Holbrook (Eds.). Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- Neiser, U. 1982. *Memory observed*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Schank, R.C. 1990. *Tell me a story*. New York: Scribners.
- _____ and Abelson, R.P. 1977. *Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schultz, S.E., Kleine III, R.E. and Kernan, J.B. 1989. These are a few of my favorite things: Toward an explication of attachment as a consumer behavior construct. In *Advances in Consumer Research: Vol. 16*. T. Srull (Ed.). Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- Singer, J.A. and Salovey, P. 1993. *The remembered self: emotion and memory in personality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Solomon, M.R. 1985. *The psychology of fashion*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- Stephenson, W. 1953. *The study of behavior: Q-technique and its methodology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stone, G.P. 1965. Appearance and the self. In *Dress, adornment, and the social order* M. E. Roach and J. B. Eicher (Eds.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Wallendorf, M. and Arnold, E.J. 1988. "My favorite things": a cross-cultural inquiry into object attachment, possessiveness, and social linkage. *Journal of Consumer Research* 14: 531-47.

Appendix

Q sample statements

Strong Attachment

Autonomy Seeking/Past Oriented:

1. It reminds me of past accomplishments or other important events in my life.
2. It reminds me of who I used to be.
3. It has always related well to my needs.
4. It ties me with memories and experiences.

Autonomy Seeking/Present Oriented:

5. It is a statement of who I am now.
6. It makes me feel independent and self-sufficient.
7. It makes me feel unique, not just like everyone else.
8. It fits my image.

Autonomy Seeking/Future Oriented:

9. It has to do with my goals for the future.
10. It is a statement of who I would like to be.
11. It shows who I am becoming.

Affiliation Seeking/Past Oriented:

12. It reminds me of an important friend in my past.
13. It reminds me of an important family member who is gone now.
14. It involves my heritage or a tradition.
15. It reminds me of good times with family or friends.

Affiliation Seeking/Present Oriented:

16. It reminds me of a person who is important to me now.
17. It reminds me of my parent(s) or other family members.
18. It makes me feel loved and cared for.
19. It helps me feel in touch with something.

Affiliation Seeking/Future Oriented:

20. It will help me carry on a tradition.
21. It makes me similar to people I aspire to be like.
22. It has to do with an important relationship.

Weak Attachment

Autonomy Seeking/Past Oriented:

23. It has nothing to do with who I was in the past.
24. It used to be me, but not anymore.
25. It doesn't have anything to do with past events in my life.
26. It doesn't fit my image anymore.

Autonomy Seeking/Present Oriented:

- 27. I could easily be myself without it.
- 28. It has nothing to do with who I am now.
- 29. It is strictly utilitarian.
- 30. It is easy for anyone to have; it's not very unique.

Autonomy Seeking/Future Oriented:

- 31. I do not plan to have it in the future.
- 32. I could become who I want to be without it.
- 33. I probably will not care about it in the future.

Affiliation Seeking/Past Oriented:

- 34. It does not remind me of anyone from my past.
- 35. It reminds me of someone from my past I would rather forget.
- 36. It has nothing to do with my heritage.

Affiliation Seeking/Present Oriented:

- 37. It does nothing to help me feel loved and cared for.
- 38. It makes me feel out of style.
- 39. It makes me feel different from people I aspire to be like.

Affiliation Seeking/Future Oriented:

- 40. It is unlikely that I will keep it as a reminder of my friends and family.
- 41. It has nothing to do with my future.
- 42. It does nothing to help me feel connected with others.

Affect Statements**Positive:**

- 43. I really like it.
- 44. It makes me feel sentimental or nostalgic.
- 45. It reminds me of something I am proud of.
- 46. It makes me happy.

Neutral:

- 47. I have no feelings for it.
- 48. It has no special meaning to me — it's just something I have.
- 49. I would not be upset if it were lost or stolen.
- 50. It is basically a functional, utilitarian object.

Negative:

- 51. I really do not like it anymore.
- 52. It makes me sad.
- 53. It reminds me of something I feel bad about.
- 54. It reminds me of frustration or stress.