We are what we share?

A phenomenological study of the practice of sharing possessions on social media in the context of consumer identity projects

Camilla Wrang

Supervisor: Diana Storm
Cand.merc.BCM, Department of Marketing
Copenhagen Business School

Number of pages (STU): 80 (182.184)

24 September 2015
Abstract

Increasingly the online space has become an integrated part of consumers’ daily life. Consumers therefore do a great part of their identity work online. What they share on social media is generally assumed to be highly self-focused displays of possessions in order to promote a favorable impression of their identity. This resembles the postmodern assumption that individual consumers have become more superficial and less concerned with the value of close relationships than in pre-digital times. However, the deeper meaning behind consumers’ practice of sharing possessions on social media remains vaguely understood within the theoretical field of consumer identity. The thesis explores the underlying meaning of this practice on an individual consumer level and contributes to literature on extended self and narrative self within the academic field of Consumer Culture Theory.

Through phenomenological, narrative inquiry of female consumers in Denmark, an interpretation of the practice of sharing on social media is developed on an idiosyncratic and a nomothetic level. On the nomothetic level, two global themes emerged which are essential for understanding why consumers engage in sharing on social media and how this practice contributes to the individual’s creation and validation of identity. The first theme, Routinized love-making, refers to the central aspect that sharing on social media it is above all a practice of reciprocal interest and care to preserve and strengthen social relationships which are intensely incorporated into the self. The second theme, Constructed narrative identity, refers to the construction of autobiographical memories which evolves into a self-reinforcing identity narrative guided by personal life themes and cultural norms.

The findings lead to a discussion of two pertinent theoretical topics, namely agency-structure and online-offline, within the domain of consumer identity projects in Consumer Culture Theory. The discussion presents to two main arguments. First, social structures should be taken into consideration instead of giving primacy to symbolic individuation. The desire to preserve social relationships and therefore adhere to social norms play a significant role in consumers’ practice of sharing on social media. Second, the concept of temporal selves is highly relevant for understanding identity dynamics on social media and its close interrelation with physical identity. Sharing on social media reinforces an authentic and coherent sense of self with strong references to desired temporal self-dimensions.
Table of contents

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 1
   1.2 Setting the scene ................................................................................................................................. 1
   1.3 Background .......................................................................................................................................... 1
   1.4 Problem statement ............................................................................................................................... 3
   1.5 Delimitations ........................................................................................................................................ 4
   1.6 Definition of key concepts .................................................................................................................. 5
   1.7 Positioning and contribution ................................................................................................................ 6
       1.7.1 Consumer Culture Theory ........................................................................................................... 6
       1.7.2 Ontological assumptions ............................................................................................................. 7
       1.7.3 Epistemological assumptions ...................................................................................................... 8
   1.8 Structure ............................................................................................................................................. 8

2. Theoretical foundation ............................................................................................................................. 11
   2.1 The extended self ............................................................................................................................... 11
       2.1.1 Categories of self and incorporation processes ........................................................................... 13
       2.1.2 Levels of self-extension ............................................................................................................. 13
       2.1.3 Person-thing-person .................................................................................................................. 14
   2.2 Self as narrative ................................................................................................................................... 17
       2.2.1 Narrative as a mode of knowing ................................................................................................. 17
       2.2.2 Narrative as a mode of communicating ...................................................................................... 19
       2.2.3 Temporal selves ......................................................................................................................... 20
   2.4 Summary of theoretical foundation .................................................................................................. 23

3. Method .................................................................................................................................................... 25
   3.1 Selecting informants ........................................................................................................................... 25
   3.2 The interview process ........................................................................................................................ 27
   3.3 Interpretation of interviews ................................................................................................................ 29
   3.4 Quality reflections .............................................................................................................................. 31
       3.4.1 Credibility .................................................................................................................................... 31
       3.5.2 Transferability ............................................................................................................................ 32
       3.5.3 Dependability ............................................................................................................................. 32
       3.5.4 Confirmability ............................................................................................................................ 33
   3.5 Summary of method ............................................................................................................................ 34
4. Findings ................................................................................................................................. 36
  4.1 Idiographic analysis ........................................................................................................... 36
    4.1.1 Audrey ............................................................................................................................ 37
    4.1.2 Brooke ........................................................................................................................... 38
    4.1.3 Chloe .............................................................................................................................. 39
    4.1.4 Diane .............................................................................................................................. 40
    4.1.5 Summary of ideographic analysis ................................................................................ 42
  4.2 Nomothetic analysis ......................................................................................................... 42
    4.2.1 Routinized love-making ............................................................................................... 43
    4.2.2 Constructed narrative identity ..................................................................................... 53
    4.2.3 Summary of nomothetic analysis ................................................................................ 62
5. Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 64
  5.1 Agency-structure .............................................................................................................. 64
  5.2 Online-offline .................................................................................................................. 68
6. Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 72
  6.1 Managerial implications ................................................................................................. 74
7. References ............................................................................................................................. 76

8. Appendices - separate cover
  8.1 Informant overview
    8.2a Interview guide - 1st interview session
    8.2b Interview guide - 2nd interview session
    8.3a Interview transcript - Audrey 1
    8.3b Interview transcript - Audrey 2
    8.3c Interview transcript - Brooke 1
    8.3d Interview transcript - Brooke 2
    8.3e Interview transcript - Chloe 1
    8.3f Interview transcript - Chloe 2
    8.3g Interview transcript - Diane 1
    8.3h Interview transcript - Diane 2
  8.4 Reflection of pre-understandings
1. Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the thesis by presenting and specifying the problem statement and the background on which it is developed. Further, the positioning of the present research and its contribution to the academic field is presented. Finally, the structure of the thesis is outlined.

1.2 Setting the scene

Increasingly the online space has become an integrated part of consumers’ daily life. It is a common saying that consumers are “always on”; they live spatially in two different places at once. In Denmark, consumers now spend 4.5 hours on online activities every day (Reklameanalysen, 2015) and this number increases as still more daily activities move to the online space (Belk, 2013). Social media is the most used online activity providing consumers with platform for sharing their own stories and taking part in others’. Through daily creations and interaction on social media, consumers give answers to a number of profound existential concerns; Who am I? How do I live my life? What are my interests? Who are my friends? (Wichmann, 2013). Consumers thereby do a large amount of identity work online. This is highly habitualised and incorporated into their daily gestures and thus, the deeper meanings derived from this online practice are not explicitly reflected upon. It is this covert yet significant aspect of contemporary consumers’ life that this thesis taps into. Specifically, the thesis explores lived meanings related to individual consumers’ experiences of sharing in the online context of identity construction.

1.3 Background

Within the research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT, Arnould & Thompson, 2005), the consumer is generally thought of as actively engaged in a symbolic identity project and in this process, the significance of possessions as symbolic artifacts is well-established. Belk’s (1988) “Possessions and the Extended Self” remains one of the most influential contributions in this research area setting the foundation for a comprehensive body of research which give primacy to identity seeking in understanding consumer behavior (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993; Schouten, 1991). In the light of today’s postmodern society in which individual consumers are freed from traditional social and institutional constraints, it is argued that individuals are still more impelled to create a personally meaningful identity by showing difference (Shankar & Fitchett, 2002; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993).
Conversely, postmodern individualization is argued to enhance the individual’s desire for communion as opposed to distinctiveness as consumers face an overwhelming number of choices and possibilities (Cova, 1997). Accordingly, a number of studies have emphasised the significance of feelings of closeness and belonging in consumer behavior with reference to the idea that human beings are fundamentally motivated to create and maintain meaningful social bonds (e.g., Miller, 1998; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Cova, 1997; Gainer 1995; Arnould & Price; 1993). From this perspective, individual consumers are looking less at symbolic, material possessions and more to links with other people as the means to create meaning in life and ultimately, social links guide consumption choices and practices. Further, communication with other people is considered a means to develop and affirm social belonging and affection rather than a means to symbolic self-expression. This stream of research therefore suggests that traditional theory on consumer identity overrely on individualization.

Today’s digitalized society offers an new and interesting starting point for studying the underlying meanings of possession-based communication in relation to consumer identity projects. Belk (2012: 88) recently contended that “digital technologies are dramatically changing our notions of self, possessions, and extended self”. The concept of self-extension through possessions is held to be “alive and well in the digital world” (Belk, 2013: 494) yet there are significant changes in the construction and presentation of identity compared to pre-digital times. In particular, social networking sites offer individual consumers a wide range of possibilities for communicating about possessions in easier, richer and more natural ways as part of their everyday (Belk, 2013).

Arguably, these possibilities enable symbolic construction and presentation of self-identity by extending the proposition of “we are what we possess” into “we are what we post” (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). From observation, consumers’ posts on social media appear highly self-focused and display possessions in a manner that promotes a favourable impression of their identity (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Accordingly, online feedback may be thought of as signs of validation of this identity. However, online contexts for social interaction have further been argued to forge and reinforce bonds to close others (Belk, 2010) suggesting that identity seeking may be secondary to social belonging and affection.
The underlying meanings of sharing possessions online are still vaguely understood within the theoretical field of consumer identity. This thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

1.4 Problem statement

As discussed above, the contemporary, digital means for sharing possessions provide an interesting outset for investigating the underlying meanings of this practice and how it relates to consumers’ identity projects. On this background, the problem statement of the thesis is:

The aim of the thesis is to understand why individual consumers engage in online sharing of possessions and further, how this practice contributes to the individual’s creation and validation of an identity in today’s digitalized society

This twofold problem statement is clarified by the following three sub-questions. The sub-questions serve as a guide for the research conducted in order to provide an answer to the problem statement. The sub-questions also provide a delimitation of the problem statement by specifying how it is explored in the present thesis.

(1) How do meanings, derived from experiences of sharing possessions online, interrelate with the context of the individual’s life narrative?

(2) Which considerations guide the practice of sharing possessions online, and hence provide meaning to the individual?

(3) In what way is an individual identity communicated online through shared possessions, and how does this interplay with personal and sociocultural circumstances?

While the answer to sub-question (1) is tied to a first-person, lifeworld perspective for understanding the underlying meanings related to sharing possessions, answers to sub-questions (2)-(3) go further and emerges from patterns of similarity in these meanings. Thus, sub-question (1) is specifically
addressed in the idiographic analysis and sub-questions (2)-(3) are answered in the nomothetic analysis. Sub-question (2) primarily addresses the question of *why* individual consumers engage in online sharing of possessions, and sub-question (3) primarily addresses *how* this practice becomes meaningful in relation to the individual’s identity.

The analysis will provide an answer to these sub-questions which leads on to a discussion of two more general theoretical topics within the academic field of CCT in which this thesis is positioned. The first topic to be discussed is the question of agency versus structure in understanding consumer behavior. The second topic is the interplay between online and offline identity work in today’s digitalized society. A discussion of these two topics in the light of the theoretical frame applied in the present research will contribute to fulfill the overall aim of the thesis within the field of CCT.

**1.5 Delimitations**

From an academic positioning within CCT, the problem statement is addressed by drawing on existing theory on the concept of identity and well-established methods for conducting research into this phenomenon. Specifically, the research conducted takes a theoretical outset in the solidified concept of the extended self developed by Belk (1988) and later developments within the literature on narrative identity. This theoretical foundation reflects a psychological focus of research in consistence with the individual consumer level expressed in the problem statement. With the aim of understanding meanings derived from subjectively lived experiences of sharing possessions, the thesis adopts the qualitative research method of phenomenological interviewing and follows a narrative research strategy.

The interpretation developed is situated within the context of the interview informants. Specifically, the context of research is four young adult females living in the Western consumer society of Denmark. Although differences in meanings and behaviors across different age groups, genders, nationalities, etc. would suggest that the knowledge produced in this research is tied to the particular context, the interpretation in this research is likely to be transferable to other contexts. The basis for determining the degree of transferability is the detailed methodological procedure including considerations for purposely selecting the informants (Chapter 3) and the informants’ personal background identified in the idiographic analysis (Chapter 4).
The specific online context in focus is social networking sites. This delimitation follows from the process of conducting the interviews in which social media manifested as the most fruitful site for focusing the research. Social media served the specific online space used by the informants for sharing possessions and following from their accounts of sharing, the analysis focus in particular on Instagram and to some extent also Snapchat and Facebook. The interpretations developed are, however, not limited to these sites but applicable to social networking sites characterized by similar features.

Notably, this online context is not thought of as isolated from other online spaces or the physical world of the individual. A main aspect of the digitalized society is that the social world in online and offline environments coalesce (Sheth & Solomon, 2014). This interconnectedness of identity makes it feasible to tap into one of these environments when considering the practice of sharing while relating this to the individuals’ identity in general in order to focus the research and make the problem statement workable.

Further, it should be emphasized that the thesis does not include a technological analysis of the social networking sites and their influence on sharing behavior but is delimited to the psychological experiences and meanings of sharing.

1.6 Definition of key concepts

In this section, I provide a clarification of how two key concepts in the problem statement is applied in this thesis. The two concepts are 1) sharing possessions and 2) identity.

The concept of sharing possessions refers to sharing as a communicative act. It is the act of communicating based on visual and verbal cues linked to a possession toward an audience. In an online context, this includes all kinds of illustrations, photos and videos posted by the individual in which a particular possession is displayed or referred to which is intended for others to see. This may be based on verbal description, symbolic cues, or a direct link. For instance, the individual may tag a specific brand, place, person in a photo posted on social media. The concept of “possessions” is not defined here as it is closely linked to Belk’s (1988) work on “Possessions and the Extended Self” which is elaborated in the theoretical foundation in Chapter 2.
The concept of *identity* is used throughout the thesis as a generic term covering the more nuanced conceptualisations of extended self, narrative self and temporal selves that together serve the theoretical foundation of the thesis. In these theories, identity refers to the individual’s self-concept from an interpretivist view on personal identity wherein “the self is seen as a multi-faceted, multi-layered, social and psychological being, reflecting, deeply and continually, on itself” (Mittal, 2006: 551). The terms identity, self, selves and sense of self are used synonymously for the currently held perception of who the individual is. A more nuanced explication of these identity concepts is provided in the theoretical foundation in Chapter 2.

1.7 Positioning and contribution

The academic positioning and the contribution to the field is specified in this section and the accompanying set of ontological and epistemological assumptions are made explicit.

### 1.7.1 Consumer Culture Theory

The thesis is positioned within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT, Arnould & Thompson, 2005) – a research tradition emphasizing the contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption. CCT advances knowledge about consumer *culture* which is defined as “a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (ibid.: 869). This consumer culture is facilitated through the construction of embodied and negotiated practices, meanings and identities. Thus, in the research area of this thesis the construction of *identity* through underlying *meanings* of the embodied *practice* of sharing possessions, in turn, contributes to reproduce consumer culture.

The present thesis is positioned within the theoretical domain of consumer identity projects concerned with “the coconstitutive, coproductive ways” in which consumers construct a “coherent sense of self” (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 871). Consumers are thus conceived of as identity seekers and makers. Nevertheless, consumers exert agency through cultural frames which constrain consumers’ horizons by conceivable action, feelings, and thought. Cultural frames therefore become conventional in a way that is neither completely personal nor universal (Zerubavel, 1999). CCT takes an intermediate view on cognition by which individuals confine themselves to “impersonal social mindscape” shaped by the particular “thought communities” to which they belong (ibid.: 8-9). The individual and
sociocultural domains of consumer culture are thus highly interrelated. While placing identity construction at the individual consumer level in the theoretical foreground makes it possible to fulfil the aim of the thesis, the socio-historic, cultural and ideological aspects are not neglected but are held in the background in this thesis.

From this positioning, the present thesis contributes to the literature on self-extension and narrative self in the light of contemporary digitalized means of communicating and interacting. The underlying meanings of the practice of sharing possessions on social media has not been studied with this specific theoretical outset in the domain of consumer identity projects. The thesis contributes uniquely to the academic field by advancing the understanding of this phenomenon through phenomenological, narrative inquiry of females in Denmark.

1.7.2 Ontological assumptions
Positioning the thesis within CCT has implications for the assumptions about the nature of reality. Research synthesised into CCT share an interpretive ontology whereby reality is mental and perceived (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). This implies that objects and actions in the world only become real to the individual once these have been interpreted and thereby acquired meaning.

The specific interpretivist approach taken in the present thesis is one of existential-phenomenology (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). This philosophy adopts a psychological focus on the experiencing individual rather than on the sociocultural setting observed from a third-person viewpoint (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). It is premised that once reality is co-constituted in the interaction between individual consciousness and the sociocultural world, the reality primarily resides in the individual’s mind (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992: 38).

Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) conceptualize existential-phenomenology by means of three interrelated metaphors – pattern, figure/ground, and seeing – which has guided the present research. The pattern metaphor highlights a contextualist worldview which calls for in-depth inquiry into the lifeworld of individuals in order to describe their experiences as it is lived in context. The figure/ground metaphor highlights that lived experience depends on the particular situational and temporal context of the individual which necessitates a “holistic research strategy” (ibid.: 137) for understanding the totality of the individuals’ life narrative in order to interpret their lived experiences.
The metaphor of seeing denotes that a great part of everyday experience and action remains grounded until deliberately reflected upon, yet these aspects are important for exploring underlying symbolic meanings. Hence, these grounded aspects has to be brought into the foreground.

1.7.3 Epistemological assumptions
The existential-phenomenological ontology guides the epistemology adopted in this thesis. Three central concepts – intentionality, emergent dialogue, and hermeneutic endeavor – constitute this epistemology (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990).

First, intentionality entails that lived experience must be understood relative to the specific life-world from which it emerges which justifies the research method of phenomenological and narrative in-depth interviews. Second, emergent dialogue entails that the method must be adapted to fit the phenomenon studied. A semi-structured approach is therefore followed and the interviews are conducted as non-judgemental conversations focused on concrete descriptions based on the informants’ own experiences. Third, hermeneutic endeavour entails an iterative back-and-forth process between different parts and the whole for interpreting the verbatim transcripts which has is adopted in the present thesis. The particular methodological procedure based on these epistemological premises is detailed in Chapter 3.

1.8 Structure
The structure of the thesis is briefly outlined in this section to provide an overview of the remaining chapters and their contribution to fulfilling the aim of the thesis. First, an illustration of the structure is provided below:
Upon laying the foundation in **Chapter 1** which serves the guiding background for the remaining parts of the thesis, **Chapter 2** presents the theoretical foundation which sets the stage for the knowledge developed in the thesis. This chapter takes its outset in Belk’s (1988) conceptualization of the extended self. Then, a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of identity is provided by presenting literature on narrative self and herein, the concept of temporal selves. The theoretical foundation provides a basis of existing interpretations on which the research is built in order to fulfill the aim of thesis.

As the problem statement is rooted in a theoretical curiosity, cf. section 1.3, the presentation of theory comes as a natural continuation to the introductory chapter. Further, explicating the theoretical concepts is necessary not only as a background for presenting the findings but also as a background
for the methodological procedure, in particular, the narrative approach to interviewing. However, though method is presented subsequent to theory in this presentation, the research is based on an iterative and highly inductive approach with problem formulation, theory reading, interviewing and interpretation conducted simultaneously as three overlapping and interrelated processes. This is indicated by the arrows in the above illustration.

The methodological choices and procedures are explicated in Chapter 3 and in natural extension to this, the findings are then presented and interpreted in Chapter 4 drawing upon existing theory to advance the understanding of the phenomenon of investigation. First, the idiosyncratic analysis provides an answer to sub-question (1) and second, the nomothetic analysis provides answers to sub-questions (2)-(3). In Chapter 5, the discussion takes an outset in these findings in order to fulfill the overall aim of the thesis within the academic frame of CCT. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and can be read as a condensed answer to the problem statement presented and provides a brief reflection on the implications for contemporary marketing management.
2. Theoretical foundation

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the thesis which served the background of the research problem and sets an outset for the interpretation of the practice of sharing possessions on social media that will be developed in the present research in order to fulfill the aim of the thesis.

In general, the theoretical foundation is based on the CCT premise that consumer choices and practices help people define a sense of identity in relation to other people. The main theoretical concept supporting this premise is found in the extended self developed by Belk (1988) by which consumers use key possessions to extend and strengthen their sense of self. In this conceptualization, self-extension is not limited to possessions in the sense of tangible objects but may be based on possessions as diverse as activities, experiences, places, and other people. A possession can be broadly defined as something that the individual feels attached to at a psychological level. The related practice of sharing possessions on social media – the focal interest of this thesis – may by Belk’s (1988: 157) terminology be considered “a process” that facilitates self-extension.

The research findings in the present thesis will be interpreted and discussed in the light of Belk (1988) and in the light of self as narrative which serves a major development in the research area of consumer identity projects (Ahuvia, 2005: 172). Theory within self as narrative premises that people make sense of who they are by thinking and communicating in narrative form. Together these theoretical concepts of identity enable an understanding of why individual consumers share their possessions on social media and how identity work is at play in this practice.

In the following, I first elaborate on the extended self concept put forward by Belk (1988). Next, I draw on theory on self as narrative and the related concept of temporal selves to encompass how this sense of self is structured, communicated and managed over time by drawing on a number of relevant researchers (Czarniawska, 2004; McAdams, 1997; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

2.1 The extended self

Belk (1988) develops the concept of extended self by arguing for an interrelatedness of the existential forms of having, doing and being. He concludes that “(…) having possessions functions to create and to maintain a sense of self-definition and that having, doing, and being are integrally related” (Belk,
A sense of self may be acquired from *having* by contributing to our capabilities for *doing* and *being*. That is, having a possession extends the self through what it allows us to do with it or alternatively through who it allows us to become in a literal or symbolic sense. With reference to Sartre, Belk argues that “the only reason we want to have something is to enlarge our sense of self and that the only way we can know who we are is by observing what we have” (Sartre, 1943 quoted in Belk, 1988: 146). In this sense, having and being merge when something becomes a possession in the sense that something once “nonself” synthesizes with the self (ibid.).

By drawing on evidence from earlier literature suggesting a strong link between possessions and the self, Belk’s (1988) conceptualization of the extended self gives *having* a central function. In the following, three constituting aspects of this conceptualization will be elaborated: categories of self and incorporation processes, levels of self-extension and person-thing-person. The figure below illustrates these constitutive aspects.

*Figure 2 - Own production, inspired by Belk (1988). Blue circles refer to chapter sections.*
2.1.1 Categories of self and incorporation processes

Belk (1988) uses the metaphors of a core self and an extended self to frame identity as a continuous variable. A possession will be categorized on a continuum from being intensely identified with the self (core self) to being marginally identified with the self (extended self) to not being identified with the self (nonself). Drawing on earlier research, Belk (1988: 141) proposes that the physical body, internal processes, abstract ideas and experiences are most likely to be part of the core self whereas persons, places and things to which one feels attached are the most clearly extended parts of the self.

Notably, it is the self structure that is conceptualized in terms of these categories whereas what constitutes the self at different categories is a subjective assessment that changes between people and over time. To cite Belk, “The possessions central to self may be visualized in concentric layers around the core self, and will differ over individuals, over time and over cultures that create shared symbolic meanings for different goods” (1988: 152).

The fact that we subjectively assess how intensely possessions are part of our self does not imply that we are always active in selecting what possessions become part of the self. Contrarily, passive receipt of objects into the extended self occurs through “personal contamination” or other unconscious and undeliberate processes (Belk, 1988: 150). This process of incorporation is contrasted with three primary ways of active and intentional incorporation. These are appropriating/controlling, creating, and knowing. Notably, the possessions that become synthesized with our self are not necessarily physical, material objects that we own. In the case of appropriation, “(…) we can appropriate intangible and nonownable objects by overcoming, conquering or mastering them. For instance, a mountain climber in reaching a peak has asserted control of the mountain and the panorama it affords” (Belk, 1988: 150). Similarly, what becomes part of our self through creating it may be in terms of mental creations to which we associate ourselves as well as it may be through buying something with monetary power. Even more so, our intimate knowledge of a person, place or thing typically only exists in mental, intangible form.

2.1.2 Levels of self-extension

Belk proposes a hierarchical arrangement of self levels with at least four concentric levels. The primary distinction is being between individual and collective conceptions of self, and collective selves then range from family to community to nation. The functions of a core and extended self at
the individual level equally function on the aggregate identity levels; “Just as individuals with different unextended core selves are likely to incorporate different objects into their extended selves, families with different core selves are likely to embrace different objects in their extended selves” (Belk, 1988: 152).

This points to an essential connection to the premise of CCT by which consumers are embedded in a particular sociocultural context sharing a particular way of seeing the world and knowing who they are. Self-definition and presentation therefore reflects both how people define themselves and how they connect to other individuals and social groups in affiliate relationships. This may create a tension between the two when the self constitutes both individual identity perceived as being distinguished from others as well as affiliate identity important for situating the self within a sociocultural world (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

The multiple possibilities for sharing and interacting online have resulted in an enhanced sense of community and aggregate extended self in digital societies (Belk, 2013). Consequently, compliance behaviours are widespread online as individuals accept tacit influence from favourable groups in the hope of approved association with these groups which conversely fosters expressions of hostility to other groups (ibid.; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). On the other hand, research has also found that online sharing is highly self-enhancing and narcissistic (Barasch & Berger, 2014; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008) due in part to a sense of anonymity which points to primacy on individual identity.

2.1.3 Person-thing-person

“Relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)” (Belk, 1988: 147). With this statement, Belk stresses the important role of other people in identity projects. Elaborating on the social nature of identity construction, Belk (1988) notes that “others first come to associate possessions and possessor and then, depending upon which is known best, either come to infer the traits of the person from the nature of the possessions or the nature of the possessions from the traits of the person” (Belk, 1978 in Belk, 1988: 146). This reflects Sartre’s proposition that others constitute an important mirror through which we see ourselves. As individuals we may have a sense of ideal self but if this is not mirrored in other people it is not part of our socially recognized identity but merely an idiosyncratic self-understanding.
Our possessions then become important cues that others use to form impressions about us. Notably, every one of our possessions are not considered in isolation but by their integration into our complete ensemble of possessions; “(...) rather than a single product or brand representing all of one’s self-concept, only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self” (Belk, 1988: 140).

In this principle it is assumed that others share an interpretive discourse with us that allows for common understanding. This premise is fundamental within CCT, cf. section 1.7.1. The shared understanding of the meanings and values associated with different possessions in a specific setting and moment in time enables the individual to anticipate others’ response to our behavior when relying on these possessions. The individual may then, in turn, modify actual behavior to achieve a rewarding response. Language plays an ubiquitous role in the thought community of others that the individual belongs to given its highly impersonal nature (Zerubavel, 1999). As sharing possessions rely on language in a more or less direct sense, this practice plays a fundamental role in conveying otherwise idiosyncratic experiences and meanings to other people.

It can be argued that the practice of sharing possessions enhances or perhaps even prerequisite the incorporation processes by which most of our possessions are synthesized into the self. By sharing our mastery, creation or knowledge of some possession, it becomes salient to our audience that we are to be associated with the nature of this possession. Contrarily, if we do not engage in some kind of sharing, we risk that a desired self-defining property will not be incorporated into our public self-concept. Sharing our possessions in this way may be self-reinforcing based on the psychic energy invested in these possessions – when directing efforts, time and attention towards a possession, it arguably becomes more strongly part of the self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988).

Conversely, sociocultural developments in theory on identity suggest that the person-thing-person aspect of identity is not primarily related to this self-focused incorporation of possessions but becomes manifest more extensively in a fundamentally social nature of consumption (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005; Auty & Elliott, 2001). Drawing on Miller’s (1998) theorization of shopping as ritualized practicing of affectionate relationships, Ahuvia (2005: 180) argues that deliberate incorporation of possessions indeed matters but that it is important because of the underlying expression and mediation of relationships to other people, that is, a belongingness to groups at the various levels of collective
identity. This suggests that consumers create a self not only by displaying and communicating about possessions but in terms of their social relationships, that is, the practice of sharing possessions may be motivated more by a desire for affection than by a search for identity (Auty & Elliott, 2001).

An increasing number of social and anthropological studies on consumer behavior suggest that the motivation to create an identity for the self may be secondary to purposes of constructing social affiliation and fostering an affirming sense of social belonging (e.g. Miller; 2011; 2007; 2002; Cova, 1997). In an early anthropological study of the use of Facebook, Miller (2011) proposed the theses that practices on Facebook above all facilitates and expands social relationships with close others in both online and offline contexts, and that these practices point to a reverse of the assumed postmodern “drift towards the isolation and anonymity of urban crowds” (Miller, 2011: 181). This view challenges the premise of Belk’s (1988) theory on self-extension and suggests that possessions are means for validating and strengthening relationships rather than symbolic artifacts in themselves.

Regardless, the wide-ranging possibilities of sharing possessions provided by contemporary digital technologies point to modifications in the practice of sharing and its interrelation with our sense of self across online and offline spaces. Belk (2013) recently pointed to a number of modifications to the extended self facilitated by digitalization. These modifications are based on the propositions that digital sharing has facilitated greater and more open self-reflection, self-memory, self-disclosure and self-confession than in a pre-digital world (2013: 484).

In today’s digitalized society the primacy of physical possessions and the dependence on physical performance and proximity are freed (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The array of technological features available allows people to construct “simultaneous and nonlimiting selves that are not required to be consistent with one another or with material reality” (ibid.: 388). Still, Schau and Gilly’s research on personal Web spaces found that people “(…) employ technology as a prosthetic device to enhance RL [real life] or as an extension of the physical self (Belk 1988).” (2003: 400). This pointed to a high digital likeness of self-extension in online spaces with face-to-face contexts which has been confirmed by subsequent studies on social networking sites (Belk, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Digital (re)presentation of the self is generally found to be relatively coterminous and consistent with real life selves. An explanation for this is provided by the narrative conceptualization of identity which is explicated next.
2.2 Self as narrative

Based on the premise that “human beings are storytellers by nature” (McAdams, 1997: 27), it has become common to view consumers’ sense of self as structured in terms of a narrative. A narrative perspective on identity is argued to enhance the understanding of how the extended self is structured and managed over time (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001). Our life experiences are narratively structured because we comprehend in sequential terms with time moving forward; “as time passes, events happen” (McAdams, 1997). Growing up we learn about who we are, our history, culture and everyday experiences through stories and by telling stories with temporal elements and hence, it is argued that we are socially and culturally conditioned into understanding the narrative form (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001). Consequently, stories serve as a critical means by which we make ourselves intelligible to others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

In reviewing the “narrative turn” in social studies, Czarniawska (2004) argues for two essential concepts of narrative as a mode of knowing and as a mode of communicating. An additional highly relevant self-concept is the temporal selves. In the next sections, these three concepts will be elaborated.

2.2.1 Narrative as a mode of knowing

The narrative mode of knowing relates to the question of how we are able to think of an identity for ourselves and others that situates us in time and place. Thinking of our self in terms of a narrative implies that “(…) in our experience of self and others we seem to encounter not a series of discrete, endlessly juxtaposed moments, but goal-directed, coherent sequences” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988: 19). By perceiving life events within a context of preceding and subsequent events, we are able to organize our thoughts and experiences as well as intentions and consequences to create a sense of meaning and direction for our life.

This premises an “intentionality of the narrating individual” (ibid.); the same set of events and experiences can be organized around different plots and it is left open to the individual to engage in the emplotment by establishing a valued end goal and selecting, ordering and causally linking the events that serve to make the goal more or less probable. In theory, “the number of potential story forms approaches infinity” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988: 28), yet the narrator is limited by the range of potentials in the culture in which he or she is embedded.
People interpret and explain experiences and actions based on their currently held identity narrative. Consequently, the narrative becomes a frame of interpretation that emerges and develops as events unfold and are organized with reference to past experiences (Czarniawska, 2004: 7). This development is characterized by a goal-directedness with the goal being continually created in the narrative as it evolves; “A life is lived with a goal but the most important aspect of life is the formulation and reformulation of this goal” (Czarniawska, 2004: 13). In this sense, individuals are engaged in a quest for meaning when narrating their identity which are then interrelated to the meaning they draw from lived experiences in their daily lives.

Mick and Buhl (1992) have developed a framework that encompass this dynamic with the two concepts of life themes and life projects. These concepts enables an understanding of how people manage the tension between consistency and change in their identity narratives. As Gergen and Gergen note, one must be able to render an account of oneself as both inherently stable and yet in a state of positive change (1988: 36).

On the one side, life themes represent the inherently stable aspect of self (Mick & Buhl, 1992). These are aspects of an individual’s nature developed over time from “the effort made in structuring goals and means to create coherence in life” (ibid.: 318) and become an interpretive frame of reference. Life themes are limited in number within the individual and relatively stable once developed. In contrast, “life projects are in constant flux, in accordance with changes in circumstances and life cycle” (Mick & Buhl, 1992: 318). Life projects concern meanings of our individual and collective selves versus the meanings associated with others. These identity aspects are open for constant refinement and alteration from a range of culturally established alternative concepts representing, for instance, symbolic resources, new ideas and better concrete versions of old ideas (ibid.). Actualized meaning drawn from everyday experiences is a function of one’s salient life projects which are ultimately conjoined by life themes, that is, life themes are implicitly addressed in the interpretation of everyday experiences and actions in relation to the life project(s) currently held salient.

Possessions play a significant role in this process of actualizing meaning. Ahuvia (2005) argues that possessions incorporated into the self help narrate one’s life story and can create a sense of self-continuity by connecting a person with a desirable past self, a present self and a future self. In this
sense, the possessions incorporated into the extended self can be conceptualized as “artifacts of life stories” (Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995: 317) through their connection to life projects and life themes.

2.2.2 Narrative as a mode of communicating

Social embeddedness is a fundamental aspect of the narrative self; “(…) in understanding the relationship among events in one’s life, one relies on discourse that is born in social exchange and inherently implies an audience” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988: 37). The presence of an audience implies that we must rely on language as a shared communicative capacity to articulate a narrative for our self. It is not enough to think and interpret in terms of narrative as the reality of any narrative depends on interaction with others. This resembles the conceptualization of others being a mirror through which we see ourselves, cf. section 2.1.3. Gergen and Gergen (1988: 37) emphasize three processes in which the social functions of narrative construction are amplified: public performance, negotiation, and reciprocation.

First, identity narratives are realized in the public arena through interaction with others. Our everyday actions are subject to social evaluation with reference to the currently held narrative of our self, that is, our actions are evaluated as either coherent or contradictory to this narrative. The validity of our self narrative is then considered and revisions are potentially made to this narrative. This implies a strong societal demand for stability in order to render others the assurance that “we are what we seem” which is highly important in retaining ongoing social relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). As Gergen and Gergen argue, “negotiating social life successfully requires that the individual is capable of making him/herself intelligible as an enduring, integral or coherent identity” (1988: 35).

Second, every narrative is open for social negotiation of meaning. Alternative narratives are always in the offering and there is no way of deciding between different narratives except by negotiation (Czarniawska, 2004). As Gergen and Gergen (1988: 38) argue, “(…) whether a given narrative can be maintained depends importantly on the individual’s ability to negotiate successfully with others concerning the meaning of events in relationship with each other”. Events and actions acquire meaning in terms of “a tentative plot” suggesting a hypothetical connection that claim openness to other plots in which better or more convincing explanations are potentially offered yet without challenging the “truth” of the current plot (Czarniawska, 2004: 9). Most of the negotiation process is anticipatory and implicit as people generally avoid direct negotiation by selecting in advance actions.
that can be justified on the basis of an intelligible or publicly acceptable narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). With possessions being artifacts of identity narratives with publicly shared meanings (Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995), the practice of sharing possessions may provide an effective means for indirectly negotiating an authentic narrative of the self.

The final dimension of social embeddedness is one of *reciprocity*. The individual narrator’s success in sustaining a given self narrative is dependent on a “supporting cast” and its willingness to play out certain parts in relation to the individual narrator (Gergen & Gergen, 1988: 38). If the cast pulls out its supporting role, the result is degeneration of the narrative. This enhances the pursuit of continuity and coherence in our identity narrative in order to ensure continuing support from others which is observable in the digital world in the sense that people’s self-presentation is found to be anchored by their real life existence (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Arguably, the constant “digital gaze” of other people from the physical world limits the scope for naïve lying in online self-presentation (Belk, 2013: 487).

In fact, the disinhibition effect resulting from online disclosure has led some people to conclude that they are able to express their “true self” better online that they ever could in face-to-face contexts (Belk, 2013: 484; Miller, 2011: ). Notably, it is argued that what people acquire is not a state of true self but a potential for communicating that such state is possessed (Gergen & Gergen, 1988); narrative theory assumes that we are able to us to construct a sense of continuity and coherence from the flow of our life experiences, however, this is often not reflected in people’s lived experiences.

2.2.3 Temporal selves

The dominant orientation within CCT is one of postmodern fragmented multiple selves (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) which enhances the understanding of how consistency and complexity are at work simultaneously in lived experiences related to consumers’ identity projects. Markus and Wurf’s (1987) work on multiple selves provides the basis for this self-concept. In this work, the self-concept is perceived as a multifaceted phenomenon reflecting “the diversity, fluidity and malleability” of an individual’s behavior and lived experience (Markus & Wurf, 1987: 301). The basic premise behind this is that the self cannot be perceived as a unitary, monolithic entity but functions in multiple ways depending on the particular self motives being served and the configuration of the immediate social situation (ibid.). In re-examining the concept of extended self, Belk (2013) contends that the original
idea of an inner core self has crumbled with the proliferation of multiple self-concepts facilitated in particular by digital technologies. The multiple selves concept comprise of a range of distinctions. As Markus and Wurf (1987: 302) note, “Some are more important and more elaborated with behavioral evidence than others. Some are positive, some negative, some refer to the individual’s here-and-now experience, while others refer to past or future experiences. Moreover, some are representations of what the self actually is, while others are of what the self would like to be, could be, ought to be, or is afraid of being”.

In relation to the narrative perspective on identity, the concept of temporal selves is the most relevant within this theoretical field, that is, a self in the past, the present, and the future. The temporal selves are argued to serve as “cognitive bridges” connecting the past to the here-and-now and the future as they specify how individuals have changed from what they were to what they will become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As time passes, these cognitive bridges may be reconstructed based on the life transitions and experiences of the individual.

Support for this conceptualization is indeed found in Belk’s primary work on extended self in which he argues that “possessions are good for thinking” (1988: 159). In relation to thinking, Belk highlights the importance of possessions for human development, including approaching desired future selves, managing identity crisis in the present and creating a sense of past for the self. In arguing for the latter, Belk states that “possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that attach our sense of past” (Belk, 1988: 148). Thus, possessions can provide an autobiographical archive allowing people to reflect on their history and how we have changed. Similarly, by disposing possessions associated with a former self, it is argued that people may “disconnect from an old self and leave it behind” (Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995: 328).

Likewise, possessions can help people manipulate their possibilities and present a self to others in a desired way that may become guiding for their future identity. In this sense, incorporating possessions into the extended self is a process of becoming by signaling that a desired identity is developing which makes the approach of this identity more likely (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Desired selves are part of a larger repertoire of possible selves (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002; Markus & Nurius, 1986) where some are desired or hoped-for ideals whereas others are feared selves that the individual is afraid of becoming. Though anchored in current selves, the content of possible selves is less tied to behavioural
We are what we share?

evidence and social reality constraints. Rather, it is the individuals’ ideas and hopes for the future manifested in an existential life theme that facilitate the construction of a number of possible selves in which the goals may be accomplished (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

These possible selves play a motivational role and a regulatory role (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002). As motivation, they are incentives for behaviour by providing images of the future self in desired or undesired states, which provides a direction and drive for action, change and development. As regulation, they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of the self. These two functions are facilitated by today’s possibilities for sharing possessions on social media as desired and undesired selves associated with these possessions become preserved and observable as a continuous reminder of these possible selves as well as specific activities and behaviors for approaching or avoiding them.

People seek to validate desired future selves in direct or indirect ways (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002). In direct ways of validation, people may take action to change their physical self, whereas by indirect validation individuals symbolize a possible self by portraying that he or she possesses a desired self (ibid.: 271). Possessions are shown to play a role in this process. For instance, when people feel incomplete with regard to a desired self, they seek alternative “symbolic routes” via consumption for this self to become established in the eyes of others (Markus & Wurf, 1987: 322; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). The process of validation is used to influence others yet it may also reinforce the individual’s association with the desired self by providing a more concrete set of expectations and evoke a sense of longing.

This is a continuous process as people’s possible selves vary over their life span (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002). In this regard, it is shown that desired selves reflect the life transition people are facing and feared selves concern the failure of these transitions (ibid.). Research has shown that during times of transitions, people may change consumption style in order to integrate a desired self-concept and conversely, consumption may be used proactively to facilitate changes in life (Schouten, 1991) which suggests a link between life transitions and symbolic power in consumption-related practices such as the practice of sharing possessions on social media.
In between past and future selves is the concept of the present self which can be conceptualised in terms of a working self. This is a self-concept comprising “a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge” (Markus & Wurf, 1987: 306). This self-knowledge depends on “what self-conceptions have been active just before, on what has been elicited or made dominant by the particular social environment, and on what has been more purposefully invoked by the individual in response to a given experience, event, or situation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 956). Research emerging from the original concept of extended self recognizes that the extended self can be combined with such situational self (Schenk & Holman, 1980 in Belk, 2005).

As in the case of past and possible future selves, possessions become artifacts of the situational self based on their symbolic and instrumental activity-enabling character and the individual’s ensemble of possessions then come to reflect the multiplicity in working selves with each possession being used to enact a particular situational self (Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993). It can hence be suspected that possessions on social media will naturally reflect this multiplicity with the posts being related to different social situations in the course of the individuals’ daily life while they may also reflect the coherence in terms of a cognitive bridge spanning past, present and future selves.

### 2.4 Summary of theoretical foundation

Drawing on Belk’s (1988) solidified concept of the extended self and major developments in the area of narrative identity, the theoretical foundation for the present thesis has been outlined. The original concept of the extended self is built on the idea of a process of self-extension by which possessions become incorporated as part of the self to an increasingly intense extent. This incorporation may stem from passive recipient as well as active and deliberate effort to associate oneself with a particular possession that being a physical object, a place, an experience or other people.

Narrative theory accounts for how individuals intentionally organize their lives in temporal terms ranging past, present and future selves where possessions come to play a significant role as cognitive bridges between these selves and as artifacts for communicating and thereby directing the public negotiation of their identity narrative. The concepts of life themes and life projects provide a framework allowing for underlying consistency despite the natural element of change in accordance with changes in life cycle and circumstances.
A fundamental premise in this theoretical foundation is that a possession cannot become incorporated as part of the self unless communicated to other people and recognized by these. The reality of the extended self is thus dependent on social interaction. Sharing and other means of communicating about one’s possessions therefore enhances the process by which these possessions become synthesized with the self which is facilitated by a shared understanding of the meanings and values of possessions within a particular thought communities. Notably, a challenging interpretation of the idea that people share possessions motivated by identity seeking has emerged. This alternative interpretation is founded in social and anthropological studies and suggests that preserving and strengthening closeness and belonging to other people is the overriding motivation for consumption-related practices such as sharing possessions on social media.

In either case digital technologies have enhanced the possibilities of sharing possessions which is now freed from the primacy of proximity with possessions and physical interaction with other people. Existing research has found that online self-presentation is highly coterminous and consistent with real life selves and thus, the new digital platforms provide a fruitful outset for exploring individuals’ experiences of sharing possessions in relation to their identity work spanning online and offline. Given that only detailed methodological description will provide the contextual detail needed for advancing our understanding of the practice of sharing possessions in relation to consumer identity projects, the next section presents the methodological procedure and reflections of the present thesis.
3. Method

This chapter outlines the methodological design, procedure and reflections of the present thesis which are the basis for the research findings that will be presented and interpreted in Chapter 4.

On the background of the ontological- and epistemological premises, the phenomenological interview was chosen as the research method in the present thesis. This method is rewarding when the research aim is to delve phenomenologically into thoughts, feelings and behaviors of individuals and to capture the social and situational context of these individuals (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989; Kvale, 1983) and thus, the method matches the aim of the present thesis. In order to undertake a holistic research strategy, a narrative approach to phenomenological interview was undertaken which is also consistent with the theoretical foundation of self as narratively. Shankar, Elliott and Goulding (2001) argue for the viable contribution of a narrative approach for understanding consumer behaviour and the interrelationship with consumer identity.

The particular approach applied in the present thesis was inspired by previous phenomenological studies on consumer identity projects (Ahuvia, 2005; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999; Fournier, 1998; Thompson, 1997; Mick & Buhl, 1992). These studies inquired a small number of purposely selected informants about their life stories and life circumstances on the one hand, and a specific domain of lived experience on the other. Specifically, the present research has adopted the concepts of life themes and life projects introduced by Mick and Buhl (1992) in order to make the life context of the individual informant comprehensible for the purpose of interpreting lived experienced in the light of this context.

In the following sections, I detail the research process of selecting informants, conducting the interviews, and interpreting these interviews. Then, I reflect on the quality issues of relevance to this particular research.

3.1 Selecting informants

In order to generate themes in qualitative research the issue in selecting informants is one of access not generalizability (McCracken, 1988). As aforementioned, the aim of the present research is not to discover how many or what kinds of people engage in certain sharing behavior but to gain access to
subjective experiences of sharing. The informants were therefore purposively selected. From a network of casual acquaintances, four Danish females in the age range between 23 and 35 years old were recruited for the interviews. The acquaintances acted as intermediaries in making contact to the informants which significantly eased the recruitment process. Restricting the number to four informants ensured depth in life stories and sharing experiences which is necessary for making thick descriptions (Fournier, 1998; Mick & Buhl, 1992). The choice these particular informants was based on four main considerations.

First, the transition from adolescence into adulthood is argued to be necessary for studying how identity narratives are at play in individuals’ lived experiences because “the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is an especially significant phase in development of human identity” (McAdams, 1997: 36). In adolescence, individuals begin to explore their place in the world and consequently, they come to establish an ideological setting which for most people remains relatively intact and constant throughout life. In terms of Mick and Buhl’s (1992) terminology, life themes are established during adolescence. This justifies an age range starting from young adulthood.

Second, females have been shown, to a greater extent than males, to rely on possessions in the form of products and services rather than their own activities in achieving goals related to their selves (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002) which makes females a particularly interesting research context in studying practices based on possessions. In general, the differences found across genders suggests that an in-depth understanding should delimit its focus of research to one of the two context.

As a third criteria for selection, the informants all underwent a more or less radical change in their life within the past six months by the time of recruitment which leaves them in a transitional phase. Research has shown that identity issues are highly salient in periods of transition and further that the meanings of possessions to which we are attached in terms of defining our past, present and future selves are especially salient to those in identity transitions (e.g. Schouten, 1991; Metha & Belk, 1991). Accordingly, Shankar, Elliott and Goulding (2001: 445) suggest that researchers should concentrate on “turning point moments in consumers’ lives” or alternatively, conduct a longitudinal study in order to facilitate the production of suitable life narrative. The informants hence provided a potent context for studying how identity are at play in the practice of sharing possessions on social media.
The informants were selected for undergoing four distinct types of life transition. Audrey (23) had gone from being single to in a serious relationship. Brooke (26) had started in her first fulltime job six months ago. Chloe (28) had moved from Aarhus to Copenhagen. Finally, Diane (35) gave birth to her first child six months ago. As it turned out, the informants were highly affected by other radical events that had happened to them in recent years some of which were more transitional than the abovementioned events. For instance, Brooke experienced the loss of her stepfather a year ago and Chloe got diagnosed with type 1 diabetes four years ago which had been markedly changing for their lives.

A fourth and final criteria concerned the chances of building rapport to facilitate free and sincere speech in order to generate detailed descriptions. The fact that the informants were recruited through acquaintances assisted in establishing a certain level of rapport. In addition, contact was made in advance of the interview process and the informants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in terms of a pseudonym name in the final paper. Before making final agreements with each of the informants, they had contended to be available for two interview sessions and interested in providing a member check. They expressed a curious interest in the research topic and an inclination to speak about themselves and their experiences of sharing on social media. In addition, they allowed full access to their profiles on social media.

Together, these considerations guided the selection of the four informants. Although being relatively similar in terms of gender, age range and living area, they live in very different life circumstances cultivated by the different types of life transition and personal backgrounds. The informants are therefore considered to encompass an appropriate balance of similarities and differences. An overview with background information of each informant is provided in appendix 8.1.

3.2 The interview process
Two interview sessions were held with each informant with approximately two months in between. The interviews were designed to yield two complementary types of information. In the first interview, a first-person description of the informants’ experiences of sharing possessions was sought. The second interview was a “life story interview” (Mick & Buhl, 1992: 320; McAdams, 1997) focusing

---

1 The informants’ names are fictional arranged alphabetically starting with the youngest.
on the informants’ life story in order to uncover life themes and life projects. In total each informant was interviewed for 3-4 hours. Both interviews were semi-structured and followed the structure of a “long interview” (McCracken, 1988) with an opening phase followed by a series of grand tour questions for which probes were prepared to stimulate further details. The interview guides for the two interview sessions are provided in appendices 8.2a-b. The transcribed interviews follows in appendices 8.3a-h.

In the first interview, grand tour questions concerned informants’ specific experiences of sharing possessions and the underlying meaning to the individual informant. A few days in advance, they were asked to be conscious of incidences in which they shared something with others in both physical and digital contexts. In the interview, they were then asked to recall a possession they had shared within the past few days and “tell me the story” of the recent incident. The informants could easily recall such possession and the subsequent conversation was set by the informants’ description. They primarily recalled incidences of sharing possessions on social media and often accounted for this through comparison with face-to-face interaction. Possessions shared on social media included experiences, places, other people, and concrete objects and were mostly expressed through photographs with only little text.

The informants’ Instagram profiles were brought to the table when it came natural in order to concretize descriptions or stimulate other examples of sharing. This was sometimes initiated by the informant herself. The approach is similar to the technique of “autodriving” based on “photoelicitation” which is beneficial by having informants “see familiar data in unfamiliar ways” (McCracken, 1988: 24). In this sense, it lets the informants become interpreters of their own actions which may facilitate deeper reflection of their own behaviors (Heisley & Levy, 1991).

In the second interview, I was interested in learning about the influences the informants considered important when looking back through her life. The informants were once again informed about the purpose ahead of this interview and in addition, as some of these “important influences” were expected to require relatively comprehensive reflection in order to provide a thorough account, the informants were instructed to begin considering these aspects of their lives in advance. They were instructed to begin reflecting upon their life in terms of a book with key chapters, events and significant people. This prepared the informants for the first grand tour questions which got them
talking and eased their ability to talk throughout the interview. The following grand tour questions concerned the current state in their life including their most recent life transition, the primary values and beliefs they live by, and their current plans and dreams for the future. This structure facilitated “a miniature but detailed life history” of each informant (Mick & Buhl, 1992: 322).

In both interview sessions, I was explicitly concerned with generating information appropriate within existential-phenomenology guided by the principles outlined by Thompson, Locander & Pollio (1989), cf. section 1.7. Hence, the desire to attain a phenomenological dialogue by being a non-directive listener and not assuming an overly intrusive role fundamentally guided the interview procedure. In terms of physical setting, the interviews took place in quiet locations where the informants felt comfortable describing their personal experiences in detail. Whenever possible, the interviews were conducted in their own homes. The interviews flowed from the course of dialogue with probes aimed at bringing about concrete descriptions. It often came more natural for the informants to speak in general terms and thus, I inquired for concrete experiences to enable more detailed descriptions which helped bring forth unreflected aspects of their experiences.

Instead of asking why, I asked the informants to reflect on feelings and thoughts associated with their experiences in order to understand underlying meanings of their behaviour. I also strived to engage in “active listening” (McCracken, 1988: 21) and tried to balance probes for bringing about elaboration and letting the informants talk freely. Finally, I was being curious and open to what was being said which entails bracketing of my own presuppositions during the interview (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). For this purpose, I reflected explicitly on my pre-understandings ahead of the interview process which is summarized in appendix 8.4.

3.3 Interpretation of interviews

Once the interviews were transcribed, the interpretation phase began. I complemented my interpretation of the transcripts with content on the informants’ Instagram profiles since this content served as an important reference point in the descriptions given in the interviews. The goal of existential-phenomenological research is to give a thematic description of experience and identify recurring experiential patterns (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 139). For achieving this purpose, the process of interpretation followed hermeneutical principles (Thompson, 1997; Arnold &
We are what we share?

Fischer, 1994) which is considered relevant with the subject matter being “human lifeworlds transformed into written texts” (Kvale, 1983: 184).

The interpretation was guided by three hermeneutical principles: a holistic understanding, the hermeneutic circle, and fusion of horizons between interpreter and text (Thompson, 1997: 441). A holistic understanding was achieved by relating the specific sharing experiences to the informants’ life narrative. The hermeneutic circle was attained by an iterative part-to-whole interpretation process on two levels, an idiographic and a nomothetic level.

At the idiographic level, the transcripts of each informant were thought of as a whole consisting of separate passages that were related to the overall content. Following the first interview round, a tentative interpretation of sharing experiences and recurrent behavioural and psychological tendencies was made. The idiographic interpretation process was repeated following the second interview session where a holistic interpretation could be developed. Subsequently followed a nomothetic level of interpretation in which the informants were related to each other and interpretations were “compared, challenged and synthesized into global themes” across sharing experiences and individuals (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1989: 141).

Global themes were sought in order to improve and structure this nomothetic interpretation of patterns. In this process, I referred back to individual transcripts on a continuous basis to ensure that the themes were not rendered in abstract terms removed from the informants’ experiences. The themes emerged from a cross-person understanding of the types of possessions shared, the meanings of these possessions and the concerns and criteria for sharing possessions including the significant role of approving feedback from close others. At this stage of interpretation, preconceived theoretical concepts in relation to the extended self and related identity issues were brought into consideration as was knowledge about the cultural world that I share in common with the informants (Kvale, 1983). This allowed a fusion of horizons as my interpretive frame of reference attuned me to specific characteristics and patterns while simultaneously, continuous reading of the transcripts had evoked new questions and ongoing revision in the initial interpretation.

This hermeneutic process ends when “sensible meaning” is reached (Kvale, 1983: 185). I hence ended this process once robust meaning had developed into two global themes – Routinized love-making
We are what we share?

and *Constructed narrative self* – with robust findings evidencing these themes across the four informants.

### 3.4 Quality reflections

When conducting research within existential-phenomenology, the methodological criteria of this interpretive paradigm must be considered in order to assess the quality of the research. Still, Thompson, Locander and Pollio hold that using a non-positivist research method does not preclude existential-phenomenology from addressing some epistemological concerns of logical positivism as both paradigms share a commitment to conducting “rigorous empirical research open to careful scrutiny” (1989: 142). The phenomenological and hermeneutical procedures followed in the present research are designed to fulfil these broad evaluative criteria, especially by relying on informant descriptions as evidence and maintaining fidelity to interview transcripts with no interpretations exceeding the evidence provided by these transcripts (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the major distinction between existential-phenomenology and positivism implies that further verification of this research cannot rely on positivism’s external criteria (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 143). In order to systematically evaluate the quality of this research, the following assessment draws on the evaluative criteria of humanistic inquiry outlined by Hirschman (1986): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria are considered adequate for studies of lived experience.

#### 3.4.1 Credibility

Rejecting the assumption of an objective reality implies that the research must adequately represent the multiple constructed realities of the informants (Hirschman, 1986). Several techniques have been used to strengthen the credibility of the present research. First of all, triangulation of multiple stories from the same informant and the visual content from Instagram supplementing their own accounts lent confidence to the credibility of interpretation. In addition, member checks assessed the authenticity of interpretive claims against the views of the informants. This is considered an appropriate technique within humanist inquiry into life-worlds as it is held that “the persons most capable of evaluating the competence and completeness with which that world view has been interpreted are those who originated it” (Hirschman, 1986: 244). For privacy concerns, each informant saw only the data and analysis relevant to her life story and sharing experiences.
The informants all recognized themselves in the idiographic interpretation which consisted of drafts for the idiographic analysis as well as an elaborated text of 8-9 pages which served as a draft for both the idiographic and nomothetic analyses. They had no corrections to the interpretation. Contrarily, they were quite impressed with the resemblance to their own self-understanding and some even pointed to the fact that the interpretation made them understand themselves more clearly than they had before. This endorsement of my representation of the informants life themes, life projects and experiences of sharing on social media strengthens the credibility of this research.

3.5.2 Transferability

As Hirschman (1986: 245) argues, “within the humanistic inquiry method one is concerned not with the generalizability of a particular finding (across populations, time, or conditions), but rather with the transferability of one manifestation of a phenomenon to a second manifestation of the phenomenon, recognizing implicitly that no two social contexts are ever identical”. In order to assess the extent of transferability, one must consider the specifics of the context in which the interpretation was generated as well as the specific context to which the interpretation is to be applied. Such assessment is not possible until without knowledge of the particular comparative context. Therefore, the detailed explication of positioning, theoretical framing and the empirical context provide detailed information about the context in which the present interpretation has been generated. This allows researchers investigating the phenomenon of sharing possessions in other spaces, populations, times and under other conditions to be sensitive to differences resulting from variations in the surrounding contexts and to acknowledge these in assessing the transferability.

The purposive selection of informants in distinctly different life circumstances was in part conducted to ensure some degree of transferability. Nevertheless, the findings are expected to be sensitive to the context of an urban Western culture, young adults and female consumers. In the case of the latter, the findings may be sensitive to females regarding the relational and love-practicing nature of sharing possessions as females have been shown to be more relationship-oriented compared to males (e.g. Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability concerns the internal consistency and temporal stability of the interpretation based on methodological “instruments” used in the research (Hirschman, 1986). With these “instruments”
being the researchers themselves, it is acknowledged that perfect correspondence among multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon can never be expected (ibid.). Accordingly, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1990: 347) argue that “interpretive patterns should be visible and comprehensible to other readers, but there is no requirement that the proposed themes be the only possible interpretation of the transcripts”. The relevant issue then becomes whether a particular interpretation is consistent with the aims motivating the study and to what extent it provides insight into the phenomenon being investigated.

Addressing this issue, I continually referred back to the research aim while interpreting and discussing the findings. A possible weakness here lies in the potentially limited depth in details given by the informants as it turned out to be challenging for them to bring out deep layers of meaning associated with their experiences of sharing possessions – something that they usually did not reflect deeply upon. Even on social media where the activity of sharing was highly governed by tacit rules and criteria for sharing, these conditions and their underlying meanings were highly unconscious to the informants. Conducting two sessions of interviewing with some time in between, however, facilitated unreflected meaning to surface in the second interviews as I inquired again about some of these aspects.

Hirschman (1986) argues that the use of multiple human investigators can enhance dependability of humanistic inquiry. Similarly, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) argue that an interpretive group of researchers benefits from multiple perspectives on the same transcript, which facilitates discovery of details and patterns that may not be noticed by a single researcher. As the present research was conducted by a solitary researcher, this present another potential weakness though I strived to remain open to alternative theoretical interpretations that could be applicable to my findings in the process.

3.5.4 Confirmability

In humanistic inquiry, the researcher is assumed to be involved intimately with the topic of research and to be immersed personally in interpreting its meaning. Rather than the positivist criteria of objectification, confirmability therefore concerns the extent to which the interpretation is expected to be “supportable from the data as gathered by the inquirer, to represent a logical set of conclusions given the reasoning he or she employed during the interaction, and to be a non-prejudiced, nonjudgmental rendering of the observed reality” (Hirschman, 1986: 246). In order to demonstrate
confirmability, empirical support in terms of interview excerpts and vocabulary in the transcripts is included in the presentation of the findings in Chapter 4. Throughout the interpretation process, I repeatedly referred back to the original transcripts to ensure that emerging themes were not rendered in abstract terms removed from informants’ experiences and the particular situational context of these (Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989: 143).

In addition, I reflected explicitly on my personal assumptions and preconceived knowledge about the phenomenon of sharing possessions, cf. appendix 8.4, especially shaped by recent readings on the topic of consumer identity projects and the role of possessions and bracketed these preconceptions during the interview process and initial readings of the transcripts. Setting aside these personal pre-understandings is neither considered possible nor desirable within CCT research and hence, it should not be the ideal. Nevertheless, by making them salient it becomes possible to be open to understanding experiences of the informants from a first-person perspective. This was especially important in the case of being a single researcher without the benefit of a research group to facilitate bracketing.

3.5 Summary of method

With the purpose of delving phenomenologically into the lifeworld of individuals, the phenomenological interview was chosen as the research method. In order to follow a holistic research strategy and encompass the temporal structuring of identity, a narrative approach was taken. The narrative approach was applied by conducting a life story interview with each informant subsequent of an initial interview focusing on their subjective thoughts and feelings in relation to sharing possessions.

Both interview sessions were semi-structured, long interviews focused on facilitating a free and detailed description of the informants’ personal experiences based on the methodological principles of existential-phenomenology. As the interviewer, I strived to make the informants comfortable talking about personal thoughts and feelings, engaged in active listening and used probes and follow-up questions in a non-intrusive way to bring forth further or more concrete detail. This procedure was endeavored in order to achieve first-person lived experiences. With the purpose of gaining access to this type of information, four informants were purposely selected for this research. The particular informants were selected based on the criteria of being females in young adulthood who recently
underwent a life transition. In addition, chances of building rapport, ensuring free and sincere speech, and participation throughout the research process was considered.

For the practice of sharing possessions online, social media – and Instagram in particular – became the natural focus of these interviews as the informants recalled incidences of sharing in this context most readily. Still, the underlying feelings and associated meanings of this practice turned out to be highly unreflected upon and hence, having a second interview session provided the benefits of strengthened rapport and time for the informants to reflect more consciously on unreflected aspects.

Another significant strength in terms of the quality of this research lies in the informants’ endorsement of the interpretations developed which was ensured from the reliance on the informants’ own detailed descriptions of their thoughts and feelings. The quality is further strengthened by following the hermeneutic principles of interpretation. From this research process, what is offered is an interpretation sensitive to the context of research and the extent of transferability to other social contexts must be assessed with consideration of the comparability between the specific contexts.
4. Findings

With the theoretical foundation and the particular methodological approach specified, the findings from the present research can now be presented and interpreted with the purpose of fulfilling the aim of the thesis. The findings from the two interview sessions are brought together and structured into an idiographic analysis in section 4.1 followed by a nomothetic analysis in section 4.2.

In the idiographic analysis, two life themes are identified for each informant. Links are then drawn from the informants’ life narrative to subjective experiences of sharing possessions. This provides an answer to sub-question (1) in the problem formulation. The nomothetic analysis is structured by two global themes emerging from the interpretation process: Routinized love-making and Constructed narrative identity. These global themes are explicated by drawing upon existing theory on self-extension, narrative self and temporal selves to interpret the underlying elements of these themes. The interpretation of Routinized love-making answers sub-question (2) while the interpretation of Constructed narrative identity answers sub-question (3).

4.1 Idiographic analysis

For the identification of life themes, I have adopted the dialectical framing of Mick and Buhl (1992). I thus introduce this section with a brief remark about dialectical framing, or paradox (Mick and Fournier, 1998), before presenting the analysis of each informant.

The basic idea behind the concept of paradox is that “polar opposite conditions can simultaneously exist, or at least can be potentiated, in the same thing” (Mick & Fournier, 1998: 124). A paradox thus denotes an oppositional existential concept where the one cannot exist without the other. Further, a paradox maintains that “something is both X and not-X at the same time” (ibid.: 125). For instance, if an individual is free at a given moment in time, he or she is not simultaneously constrained yet this oppositional state is required for the individual to experience freedom.

In the phrasing of life themes applied in this analysis, the informants’ approach-for state of being is placed first in the opposition. Notably, the two themes identified for each informant are inherently intertwined and often, one of them is evinced in terms of the other. Further, these life themes are not exhaustive as the underlying existential values of all the informants’ experiences and behaviors,
however, they are the ones that became most evident in the course of the interviews. Given the characteristics of life themes being relatively limited in number and enduring, these life themes are indeed significant in framing the informants’ lifeworld which is confirmed by the member checks.

4.1.1 Audrey

Audrey is 23 years old and currently studying a bachelor degree at Copenhagen Business School. Six months ahead of the first interview session Audrey got into a serious relationship. As a result of being madly in love and therefore naturally spending a lot of time with her boyfriend, Audrey has “missed out on” spending time with her girlfriends and studying, however, she considers this a necessary sacrifice in order to “invest in” growing a happy, lasting relationship. Audrey’s view on partnership and life in general is highly influenced her own parents as role models and by being a child of divorced parents. Audrey’s two life themes are 1) Stability versus Uncertainty, and 2) Deliberateness versus Carelessness.

1) Stability versus Uncertainty reflects Audrey’s existential desire of holding on contrary to going for the unknown. Throughout the life story interview, Audrey expresses a predilection for holding on to known and reliable aspects in life. Contrarily, she is uncomfortable with changing and unknown circumstances as these cause uncertainty about her future. The earliest experience of this is her parents’ divorce which was a “radical change” that made her feel like “everything just collapsed”. In the appreciation of holding on lies a strong belief in the importance of making an effort to make work what is known and only let go as the very last resort which is manifest in her approach to being in a relationship which she is “willing to fight” for.

2) Deliberateness versus Carelessness reflects Audrey’s concern with making considered, certain decisions. Audrey fears making careless and hasty decisions as these may cause unnecessary instability and uncertainty. This is highly manifest in her experience of her parents’ relationship as well as her attitude toward her own relationship. Audrey wants to be certain before settling down and creating a family together and she considers it “a good test” that they are soon going to live together. The more time they spend together, the more certain they will become. Ideally, they have to understand each other 100% because that enables them to “be there for each other” and “go through things together”. This thoughtfulness runs through all bigger decisions in her life.
In what Audrey shares on social media her pertinent life projects are apparent. This is mostly in terms of her experiences together with the significant persons in her life who constitute her life projects, that is, being in a relationship, a friend, sister, daughter and a student. For instance, her most recent Instagram post is a photo taken in the happy moment of going out for dinner accompanied by her parents and sister. In her thoughts and feelings related to sharing, her life themes covertly manifest. First of all, Audrey’s posts always has a reference to the people she feels attached to illustrating her inclination to hold on to these people, including her boyfriend. As an indication of her second life theme, Audrey is the informant who takes her personal style the most serious by giving very deliberate thought to what she shares. She does not make use of humor but is set on maintaining an aesthetic style to show that she truly “cares about it”. Also, she never shares something in the moment but gives herself time for deliberate consideration before posting it.

4.1.2 Brooke

Brooke is 26 years old and graduated from CBS last year. After being a student most of her life, she has started a new life chapter with a dream job in Maersk Line. Since she started studying at CBS, she has been ambitious about her future and she is very committed to her career. However, Brooke has come to reexamine her values in life upon experiencing the death of her stepfather last year. She has become less concerned with her personal achievements and more concerned with the happiness of herself and, in particular, her mother and sister. Being happy about herself is something that Brooke has struggled with through adolescence. Her two life themes are 1) Self-confidence versus Self-insecurity, and 2) Respect versus Disrespect.

1) Self-confidence versus Self-insecurity reflects the opposing states of being confident versus being unconfident about herself. Brooke has experienced a lot of struggling to find an identity for herself which she could feel confident and happy about. In her teenage years, she struggled with balancing food and exercise and was very unconfident about herself. She contrasts this with her stepfather who was consistently self-confident and would always calm her down and make her feel “perfect as she was”. As part of this, Brooke has mixed feelings about being free to define a personal identity versus being pre-defined in terms of a social category. She found comfort in becoming “predefined as a CBS student”, however, being confident about herself requires Brooke to have the freedom to define an identity with or without foundation in social categories.
2) *Respect versus Disrespect* reflects Brooke’s great concern with being respectful to others. From her own experience, she knows how much trouble it can cause when people try to set up an ideal for what is right. Hence, this life theme has emerged from Brooke’s reluctance to be judging of others’ opinions and choices in life. It is of vast importance to be able to put oneself in another’s place and be understanding and supportive of their particular situation. The unconditional support and freedom in her upbringing is exactly what gave Brooke “the backbone she needed” to seek out opportunities and get through her nadirs in life. In her daily life she is thus conscious about bringing “good karma” to people around her.

In what Brooke shares on social media, her current life projects are apparent. Her posts of visiting harbors around the world clearly reflects her new life project of being a career woman in the shipping industry. Her life themes manifest more subtly in her thoughts and feeling associated with sharing. Brooke repeatedly refers to the things she shares as “little messages to greet or bring out a smile in other people’s everyday” which makes it important for her to share humorous or exceptional things. She usually shares her possessions spontaneously in the moment as it is then “the right thing to do” in terms of contributing positively. She refers to posts flashing appearance, wealth or success as “potentially sensitive topics” and avoids sharing such things. Reflecting here concern with self-confidence, Brooke highlights the importance of always “liking” a friend’s post if this person is going through a personal crisis and is thus “really in need” of a like to gain self-confidence.

### 4.1.3 Chloe

Chloe is 28 years old and moved to Copenhagen last year upon her graduation in Aarhus. She had been looking tremendously forward to this during her last years of studying. She got diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was about to take her master degree which unexpectedly turned out to be an overwhelming personal challenge. At times she has secretly quit her insulin in order to be in control of her weight but at the expense of her wellbeing and performance in her daily tasks. During her master degree, the diabetes made Chloe so sick that she was close to giving up for the first time in her life and completing was therefore a greatest victory to her. Chloe’s life themes are 1) Self-development versus Self-idleness, and 2) Freedom versus Enslavement.

1) *Self-development versus Self-idleness* reflects Chloe’s concern with constantly developing herself as opposed to standing still. Throughout life, Chloe has sought out challenges in order to develop
personally and intellectually. Her educational path is highly characterized by this where she has continually taken the more challenging. To not be developing personally entails a feeling of wasting her competences and not living out her potential. She recently quit her job in marketing as it “drained her from energy” to not be developing and able to keep herself occupied. She is determined to be doing things only if they make her happy and to always keep herself as busy. Her mother and grandmother are very inspirational to her – they are fighters who keep themselves busy and have lived challenging yet exciting lives which is what Chloe aims for.

2) Freedom versus Enslavement reflects Chloe’s concern with being free versus being constrained in going her own way. Chloe has never been afraid of taking choices independently and going her own way. She has learned the importance of taking responsibility of her own happiness – a responsibility that she gladly takes on. Feeling enslaved – by other people, a place, her diabetes, or other things – is something that she seeks to avoid as it makes her highly uncomfortable. Hence, she is satisfied by having followed her own path despite the struggle she has experienced along the way, especially with the diabetes. She believes that it is “her own business” to take care of and is optimistic that she will not remain enslaved by it.

Chloe’s pertinent life projects of being single, occupied with different jobs, living in Copenhagen, and her familial and friend relations appear evident in what she shares on social media. Her life themes become manifest more subtly in her thoughts and feelings of sharing. It is an ideal for Chloe to not care about what other people think of her posts and likes to believe that this is the case although she contends that other people’s opinion does have an impact. She deliberately tries to make an impression of herself as “an optimistic person”, that is, one who seeks her own happiness and always keeps her head high. She applies a very feminine, romantic style which she believes reflects this. Her second life theme is manifested in the emphasis on traveling and experiencing new things. The underlying meaning of many of her posts is characterized by (re)discovery of different cultures, cities and landscapes in the world.

4.1.4 Diane

Diane is 35 years and became a first-time mother six months ahead of the first interview. This is part of a larger life chapter starting from the time she got into a relationship with her current boyfriend at the age of 29. Coming from a long, dramatized relationship that caused great turbulence and
discomfort in her life, she was “knocked off her feet” by the “calmness, balance and extreme solitude” that characterizes her boyfriend. She is very affected by the terrible event that her stepmother died from cancer two-and-a-half years ago; it made the entire family miserable yet Diane points to the amazing fact that “something happened” that brought them extremely close together. Diane’s two life themes are 1) Self-commitment versus Self-sacrifice, and 2) Assimilation versus Isolation.

1) Self-commitment versus Self-sacrifice. This life theme reflects an existential concern with being true to herself versus sacrificing herself. After a turbulent relationship in her twenties which left her in discomfort, she has become highly conscious about doing things that truly make her happy and not keeping up a façade “pretending that things are great if they are not”. Staying true to herself is something that she has brought into her motherhood. It has been very important to her to not change completely but to “hold on to who she is” and not let her daughter “dictate her life”. Staying committed to herself further implies that Diane endeavors not to take herself too seriously. She is not afraid to make mistakes and show that her life is not “perfect”.

2) Assimilation versus Isolation reflects Diane’s desire for staying closely connected with the people she cares about versus going it alone. To Diane, sticking together and supporting each other through good and bad times is of vast importance. She would never go her own way or deal with a crisis alone and accordingly, she would not let any of her family members or closest friends do so. She describes herself as “the glue that gathers everyone” and since her stepmother passed away, she has gladly taken on an increased responsibility for the family. The event of losing a family member has put life into perspective for Diane. When thinking about a happy future, her greatest fear is to not living a long life together with her boyfriend and their daughter.

In Diane’s ensemble of shared possessions on social media, photos of her daughter and everyday as a mother are very prominent reflecting this pertinent life project. Also, her life projects constituted by familial relations and friendships are evident. Reading from her thoughts and feelings of sharing these possessions, her life themes covertly manifest. The context (and content) of her posts of loved family members and friends reflects her life theme of assimilation, and her way of describing these posts as “happy moments” also reflects how she is now committed to herself. She deliberately adds humorous elements in order to signal that she does not take herself too seriously. Further, she gets a satisfaction from sharing “smart things” that are helpful to others which adds to her self-
understanding of being “good at what she does” and thereby committed to herself. Her great emphasis on advice within her network of close family and friends further reflects her second life theme.

4.1.5 Summary of ideographic analysis

The life themes of the informants and the covert manifestations of these in their personal experiences of sharing possessions on social media is summarized in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Theme 1</th>
<th>Audrey</th>
<th>Brooke</th>
<th>Chloe</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of sharing reflecting LT1</td>
<td>Stability versus Uncertainty</td>
<td>Self-confidence versus Self-insecurity</td>
<td>Self-development versus Self-idleness</td>
<td>Self-commitment versus Self-sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What she shares always have a reference to the people she feels attached to</td>
<td>Emphasis on the “power” of a like which makes her like things when her friends need it</td>
<td>Sharing mostly when traveling and experiencing new things (cultures, cities, landscapes)</td>
<td>Adding humor to what she shares and not displaying her life as being 100% perfect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Theme 2</th>
<th>Audrey</th>
<th>Brooke</th>
<th>Chloe</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of sharing reflecting LT2</td>
<td>Deliberateness versus Carelessness</td>
<td>Respect versus Disrespect</td>
<td>Freedom versus Enslavement</td>
<td>Assimilation versus Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending a vast amount of time and consideration before deciding what to share and how</td>
<td>Bringing out a smile in people’s everyday as the primary means for sharing things</td>
<td>Sharing things that show that she is an optimistic person who seeks her own happiness</td>
<td>Sharing smart things to help her close relations and relying heavily on their advice herself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 - Life themes and sharing experiences

4.2 Nomothetic analysis

Though the sharing behavior of each informant is uniquely intertwined with their personal identity narrative, reading across the four informants’ revealed strong similarities. These are fundamental aspects of the meanings that the informants attach to first, the intention behind sharing possessions and second, the result of this activity in relation to their identity. Two global themes has thus emerged from this analysis: Routinized love-making and Constructed narrative identity. These illustration below provides an overview of these global themes and the underlying findings.
4.2.1 Routinized love-making

A central nomothetic finding is that the practice sharing of possessions is not focused on the self but on affectionate social relationships anchored in the physical world. This points to a social dimension of sharing which extends beyond the role of the other as proposed in existing theory on the self; mirroring self-aspects in others is required for incorporating these into the self (Belk, 1988), the self as narrative is open for ongoing negotiation in a public arena (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and possible selves become validated through communicating these to others in more or less direct ways (Patrick, McInnis & Folkes, 2002).

As may be anticipated from the “raison d’être” of social networking sites, the informants share possessions associated with their everyday life due to the opportunity to connect with people that matters in their lives. In the present research findings, however, the social nature of this practice...
extends beyond a connectedness for expressing and validating identity. What legitimates this practice is above all the everyday practicing of reciprocal love. From reading across the interviews, sharing on social media is found to be part of an active practice which validates, intervenes with and refers back to affectionate real life relationships. As a result of this routinized practice a process of self-extension evolves which is thus less deliberate and purposeful than would be suspected from the idea of consumers as symbolic agents on a quest for identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the terminology of Belk (1988), the extended self created through the practice of sharing is a self in terms of other people – or rather in terms of the relationships with these people – and these other people are clearly more intensely incorporated into the self than things, experiences or places which come to play a secondary role in what is shared. This is supported by Miller’s (2011: 167) recent thesis from an early study of Facebook that social media is more about facilitating social relationships than self-focused interaction based on materialism which is generally assumed.

The interpretation has emerged from the informants’ all-dominant concern about important others in their audience which is manifested in four specific findings: delimited audience, criteria of relevance, criteria of positive meanings, and the vital role of approving feedback. These findings support the interpretation of routinized love-making as the primary intention behind sharing possessions on social media which contributes to the understanding of the “why” behind this practice. The four underlying findings will now be explicated in turn.

**Delimited audience**

The message of a given shared possession on social media – that being an experience, a place or an object – is always directed to a perceived delimited and distinct audience consisting of people who the informants are closely attached to. As Brooke explains when talking about the appeal of using Instagram over Facebook,

**Interviewer:** So it is very much directed at particular persons, or…?

**Brooke:** Yes, I think so. I don’t think that I have that many friends on Instagram. So the persons I have on Instagram are someone that I have relations with all of them. It is not somebody that I don’t know, if you understand what I’m saying? On Facebook you have like a thousand friends and I don’t speak with half of them today! But I think that it’s very in-group many of the things I share. The message is probably very directed to
a few of my Instagram friends – but it is also them I follow myself actually. We’re this small group that uploads things to each other…

In contrast to this sense of intimacy, the informants have 169-364 people following their Instagram profile and the three of them have publicly accessible profiles. Yet when sharing something, it is not a statement to this seemingly broad audience but an intimate gesture to particular persons of affection. This finding contradicts with Belk’s (2013: 485) recent claim that social media presentations are “self displays for all the world to see”. The lived experience of a delimited audience transforms the practice into a relatively other-focused conduct as the informants are very considerate of tuning their message to this audience despite the more deliberate time, effort and motivation which is required for doing so (Barasch & Berger, 2014).

The informants refer to the meaning of their posts as highly in-group within the delimited audience and point to the requisite of intimately knowing their real life personality and circumstances in order to decode the meaning of their posts. A major concern across the informants is that the intended audience does in fact decode this meaning and further agree about the meaning of the particular shared possession. The informants would never consider sharing something if being the slightest uncertain about this. It is also of vast importance that a positive response is evoked in the audience which is closely linked to a fear of annoying, tiring or burdening the audience.

This can be interpreted as an anxiety of being rejected and losing this important means of acting out their affectionate relationships. In extension to theory on social negotiation of narrative identity (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), studies of social compliance show that people engage in behaviors of which others approve in the conviction that others will then approve of who they are (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The desire to develop and preserve meaningful social relationships through social media thus leads the informants to strive for a positive response to what they post. This enables the informants to keep their currently held identity narrative going in terms of their social relationships as this requires the consent from a “supporting cast” of these others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

The informants strive for continued consent by keeping shared possessions relevant to the audience and by contributing with something positive. These two concerns serve as tacitly held criteria for the practice of sharing. Taken together, they prevent the informants from engaging in disinhibition and
We are what we share?

self-confession of bad, embarrassing and sinful things which have been argued to dominate online sharing (Belk, 2013: 484). Such approach to sharing would not evoke a positive response in the audience but bring to life the anxiety of disapproval and hampered relationships.

Criteria of relevance
It is not considered an option to share whatever or whenever the informants themselves want. What makes a possession “relevant” for sharing on social media lies highly implicit in the practice. In the course of the interviews, it becomes manifest that the relevance of a possession implies “not being ordinary” by being uninteresting or already known to the audience. A possession must be extraordinary, new, interesting, smart or alternatively, express intimacy between the informant and her relations in a direct way to potentially be shared. The possession has thereby had some kind of impact on the informant and by then, it becomes interesting to close others as it lets them keep up with significant experiences and things in her life.

These impactful things naturally reflect the informants’ working self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Sharing a part of their life communicates to the audience that this is “working” at the moment. For example, Audrey recently shared a photo of three burger sliders elicited by the particular social context of dining out with her parents which reflects a working self of being food-passionate. As in this case, it generally seems that the working self is unintentionally reflected in what the informants share by being a natural part of their daily experiences. It is simply what constitutes “the context of accessible self-knowledge which come to influence information-processing and behaviours” (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Nevertheless, by sharing these moments on social media, the informants guide the public negotiation to encompass a particular self-concept as this becomes mirrored in the audience.

The role of possessions as symbolic artifacts (Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993) has some justice here as they facilitate the decoding of the intended message. Most of the informants’ posts rely on a thing or a place with a symbolic and instrumental character. In Audrey’s example, the food and in particular the place of dining (Ravage) have an important symbolic value in communicating her passion for food as a signal that she visits the new places in town which a true food-passionate knows of.
The relevance criteria implies that the span of the audience in a given social media space determines the nature and intimacy of possessions shared. The smaller the delimited audience, the more specifically focused toward others the message is. The following interview excerpts illustrate this:

**Diane:** (...) I feel that if I upload something [on Facebook] - which I rarely don’t on Facebook anymore, that was more several years ago – I feel that *the space has gotten too big.* I don’t want some kind of colleague who I worked with 10 years back to take part in my life. That’s where I like this universe [Instagram] better because I know who *follow me* more or less. Of course, there’s always someone who tracks the hashtags and then you get a like from somebody you don’t have a clue about who is. Never mind about that! This is a lot more personal to me…

**Interviewer:** So you can make it relevant for some selected persons [on Snapchat]?

**Brooke:** Yes, in a short time without uploading something that stays forever. And I came to think about that it appeals more to me because I can choose directly who I’m thinking of. You know, when I am sitting at Maersk and just been down to buy a coffee from “Kafferiet” that I know my girlfriend always buys her coffee from then I just take a photo and text “Good morning” because I know she’s having the same [coffee]. It is probably to a higher extent in that way that I share my experiences than it is on Instagram.

The informants share a particular possession through the most suitable platform given the degree of intimacy, mutual understanding and relevance of the underlying message to the delimited audiences on each platform. Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat are used for increasingly personalised, private messages with their increasingly narrow audience. Facebook is used less often due to the overwhelming audience which provides a feeling of lost control and Snapchat is used more often due to the possibility of sharing a possession with one or a few selected others. Instagram have great appeal given the relatively delimited audience, the possibility of gathering interaction with people in the same place and the creative dimension to better capture and preserve a particular mood or feeling.
We are what we share?

Interestingly, sharing through these various platforms are appealing to the informants by enabling different means of practicing relationships. That is, the initial appeal does not lie in the opportunities for a rich combination of visual and verbal features for creating a favourable impression of the self as was the case in Schau and Gilly’s (2003) research of self-presentation in personal Web spaces and would generally be anticipated from research highlighting the symbolic significance of possessions in consumers’ identity projects.

Criteria of positive meanings

The criteria of positive meanings implies that the informants are determined to evoke a smile or a pleasant emotion in the audience. In addition, they want to create an impression of themselves as being optimistic persons who are experiencing happy moments. The following interview excerpts illustrate this.

**Interviewer:** Is it mostly the positive sides of you and your experiences that you share, or do you also share more negative aspects?

**Diane:** No, it is definitely mostly positive. It is. At times, I’ve considered indeed also to show the reverse of the medal that also exist – “Oh no, now there’s stuff all over the place!” or “Now I’m standing here with the laundry again!”. I considered that a while ago because there’s especially one blogger on the internet who has extremely many followers – 25,000 followers – and every time she uploads a photo, it is just this clean perfect home! Everything is clean, everything is perfect, everything is designer furniture, and it is just a little disgusting because it simply cannot be true! You know, there’s no home that looks like that. So in protest I considered uploading a picture of how it also looks with a little child. But I didn’t do that yet – these negative-likened pictures – I actually haven’t… So it is definitely mostly twee pictures where you get that recognition in some sense…

**Interviewer:** What does it give you sharing these good moments rather than bad moments?

**Chloe:** Well again it is something about the fact that I think it spreads a good atmosphere and a good mood. And yeah, that it gives an impression of me being a positive person. Yeah, I think that’s what it gives me.
These messages are assumed to evoke the desired positive response in the audience. Hence, the informants adhere to this criteria to heighten chances that their audience will approve of them and ultimately, that they will keep this means of practicing the relationships. Notably, the informants are all very conscious about not “showing off”, that is, sending out negative signals by displaying their appearance, happiness or success in a manner that would set other people in an unfavourable light, make themselves look superior or set up an ideal for what is right or wrong. An important aspect of this is the reluctance to focus on brands and other commercial references. The informants are certain that these kinds of symbols can easily be misunderstood as signals of showing off and evoke a negative response. In instances where the informants share a brand, it is a natural grounded part of experiencing a happy, fun or pretty moment which lets them interact with family and friends. This is evident in the way Diane stresses how she “holds back” with commercial messages:

**Interviewer:** Okay. But then it is more in order for you to feel better than to show others [the fact that she buys organic products and shares it with others]?

**Diane:** I’m definitely not doing it to show off outwardly – that’s for sure! I’m *not* doing it to show outwardly that I’m a good mother with energy who buys the expensive baby food. Not at all. That has never been the reason. Because there are many things that I don’t share – you know, I also hold back a little with… Yeah, for example, I have this girlfriend who shares a lot of like… She gets very spoiled by her husband and she shares a lot that now she’s gotten spoiled by her husband and has gotten expensive gifts and designer clothes and jewellery and this and that. And I think that can get a little disgusting. And although I in fact have a boyfriend who also spoils me very much with nice things and dinners and flowers and this and that, you know, I don’t share these kind of things because I can feel that I think it becomes too commercial in some way. I don’t have a need for taking a photo of some expensive bag and put it on the internet and say “Oh, my husband is so amazing!” So I actually hold back with many things that I don’t want to share.

This negative perception of conspicuous commercial symbols in terms of branded products and services is evident across the informants and strongly support the interpretation that sharing on social media is not motivated by identity seeking through marketer-generated materials as would be
suspected from Belk’s (1988) conceptualisation of the extended self by which sharing of possessions would be a practice of active, symbolic individuation. Indeed, Schau and Gilly (2003) found that consumers deliberately called upon products and brands driven by a need to construct and manage a favorable self-impression in personal Web spaces; “the brands’ symbolic values are explicitly and consciously considered before consumers communicate with the online world” (ibid.: 399). This was enhanced by developments in technology enabling consumers to rely on desired brands and products independent of ownership or proximity.

The context of personal Web spaces are arguably different from social media with implications for the underlying meanings of using these. However, similar findings have emerged in research on identity construction on Facebook (e.g. Mehdizadeh, 2010; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Contrary to Schau and Gilly (2003) as well as research in other digital contexts, my findings suggest that when sharing a possession on social media – whether commercial or not – it is not about a “thing” but about the social link to important others.

This points to a juxtaposition to the principle of postmodern tribalism by which the functional and symbolic use value of a possession is subsumed by its “linking value” in terms of permitting and supporting social interaction between the individual and a community or “tribe” (Cova, 1997). In the present research, indeed, the likelihood of whether a particular possession will be shared on social media is determined by its relevance to the social link between the informant and important others in her audience. As the “community” in this case consists of affectionate, lasting relationships, an even more compelling analogy can be drawn to Miller’s (1998) theory of shopping in which focus is on the context of households and similarly close relationships. Miller argues for the role of objects being “the means for creating the relationships of love between subjects rather than some kind of materialistic dead end which takes devotion away from its proper subject – other persons” (Miller, 1998: 128).

**Approving feedback**

When a shared possession is commonly known to the audience, relevant and associated with positive meanings, ultimately, the informants are assured approving feedback from the intended audience. The approving feedback is an innate, highly indispensable part of sharing possessions on social media. It transforms the act into a sign of reciprocal care and interest. In this sense, my findings echo Belk’s
We are what we share?

(2013) view on feedback on social media being “phatic communication that can be translated as “Hi, I am still your friend and I care about you.” It’s like reciprocal smiling, which reassures us from infancy” (Belk, 2013: 487).

This supports the interpretation of sharing as a practice that is neither about possessions *per se* nor about identity *per se* but is “related to a state in an ongoing relationship, an underlying constancy complemented by a mood, a compromise, a smile, a punishment, a gesture, a comfort, all the minutiae that make up the constantly changing nuances of a social relationship” as Miller (1998: 141) argues in the case of shopping.

The reluctance of sharing something irrelevant or negative is a result of the informants’ anxiety about not eliciting approving feedback in the form of tangible liking cues. The vital role of this is illustrated in the following interview excerpts.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me some more about that [how sharing things makes her feel better by getting approving feedback from others]?  
**Brooke:** Well, I think that fundamentally as a human being you need recognition from other people. Everybody gets happy from hearing how good you’re looking or how well you’ve done getting 12 or 10 [high grades]. You need to hear that. To me at least, it is relationships that drives my primary existence. So if there’s no people who gives me confirmation for what I do, it would be very tough. So for me, it is very important that my girlfriends think that I’m a good person to be with and that my mother is proud of me and so forth – you know, these things.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any concerns when sharing something?  
**Chloe:** No, not like that… But you always think that it would be sad if nobody liked it or if you didn’t get any likes. But it’s not like I think that I must get 30 likes. But I do think that – in fact, I’ve never experienced not getting any likes – but then I think that I would think about it and then I would probably be likely to delete it. So you can say that along the way I check if “Okay, do I get any likes on this?” and then, “Yes, I do”, and then I get a satisfaction from it.
The informants contend that a simple “like” from someone is a sign that this person have seen their post, is able to understand the message of it and recognizes the same meaning of it as they do themselves. Hence, it is a strong sign of acknowledgement and confirmation which is an essential part of the informants’ wellbeing. In the imagined scenario of not getting any likes or negative feedback – though this is highly unlikely – the informants would feel very sad. They would become so anxious about the “appropriateness” of what they had shared that they would regret sharing it and even delete it as there would be no reason of preserving it as part of their profile. In that case, it would not contribute to validate and strengthen their affectionate relationships. On the contrary, when the informants experience something extraordinary that renders reciprocal smiling likely, it is something that they look forward to be sharing and in fact “cannot keep to themselves”.

It is of vast importance that the approving feedback comes from particular close others in the informants’ audience. These persons matters to them in terms of being “the mirror through which they see themselves” (Belk, 1988). Likewise, it is these persons who the informants follow themselves and give feedback to. The informants contend that they tend to like each other’s posts consistently. In this sense, they obviously abide by a “norm of reciprocity” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) which also lies inherent in the phrase “reciprocal smiling” (Belk, 2013). This norm is held to be “one of the strongest and most pervasive social forces in all human cultures” (Cialdini & Goldstein: 599) implying that it is essential in social interaction.

The interviews further suggest that this innate, unconditioned liking can play a powerful role on a psychological level, for instance, when going through personal crises. During this phase, a “happy façade” can be signaled in a shared post and the accompanying likes then bolster confidence and help the individual to move in that desired direction. Brooke accounts in detail for her own use of social media in this way,

**Interviewer:** Do you think it helped you to get better, or was it more in order to signal others that you were actually doing okay?

**Brooke:** It was to signal to others, or to my friends, that I was getting better. But it fell through of course because if they talked with me, they would know that it wasn’t true. But okay, maybe the outer group of friends that I am still friends with on Instagram and
We are what we share?

talk to and go out with but that I’m not 100% confidential with – it was more for that group. Because they know – everyone knows. Some people texts and some don’t but everybody knows. So I think in some way that I needed to curb it and show that I was still alive and I had become a candidate and it wasn’t as if I had just buried myself in a dark hole and didn’t exist anymore. (…) You know, I used it to get through a time in my life where everything was so huge and I needed people to believe that I was feeling fine so that they would treat me as usual.

This suggests that theory on the motivational role of desired selves (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002) and symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) can effectively be practiced through sharing on social media. Notably, an important intention for Brooke in displaying this happy façade was for others to treat her as usual, that is, she used this practice to keep her relationships going. In the light of the prominence of social relationships in defining the self, it can be inferred that by preserving her established relationships, Brooke becomes assured of her established identity in terms of these relationships. In other words, she maintained a sense of normality through this routinized practice which helped her cope with a highly complex and uncertain situation.

4.2.2 Constructed narrative identity

The practicing of reciprocal love by means of sharing possessions on social media evolves into the second global theme of Constructed narrative identity. Referring here to Instagram in particular which is used regularly by all four informants, their personal profile is experienced as a personal archive of constructed memories which inherently reflects a narratively structured identity. This interpretation contributes to understanding the “how” of sharing possessions on social media in relation to consumer identity projects. The interpretation has emerged from the underlying findings of: memories constituted by sociality, autobiographical memory as guide, adherence to cultural norms, and beautified but real self. These findings will now be explicated in detail.

Memories constituted by sociality

The informants refer to their personal collection of posts on Instagram as a personal archive of cherished memories associated with happy moments and loved people. In most cases, the shared pictures are not only directed toward social relationships but captured in or referring back to a particular social context.
The memories thus become “happy” moments in terms of their innate linkage with belonging and love for particular others. In extension to the prominence of a social linking value (Cova, 1997), recent studies on self-extension show that the “sociality” of a possession affects the extent to which feelings of happiness is derived from it (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). If a possession fosters connectedness and involvement of others, it is thus more likely to result in a happy moment. In the case of sharing possessions, this “sociality” may be created in the moment but is regardless created by sharing it afterwards. The prominence of happiness underpinned by sociality in having a personal archive of memories manifest in the importance of preserving moods and feelings and typically, the feelings tied to the informants’ Instagram posts include connectedness and affection toward others. This is illustrated in Brooke’s account below:

**Brooke:** (…) So it was very much about that “Now everything is just as it’s supposed to be – it is perfect! I just need to remember this picture or this feeling.”

**Interviewer:** So it was to be able to remember it?

**Brooke:** Yes, both to preserve it. But then again also when I’ve shared it with girlfriends and they ask me that I can recall the feeling I had when I took the photo. (…) You know, I also think that if I get the apartment then I think that I would definitely upload a picture where I say that “Now I lived in Copenhagen for 7 years and I lived in 12 different places – I guess it is time for me to find something permanent!”. And I would upload it to my girlfriends. And they would probably already know about it but it would also be a feeling that I have standing with the keys in my hands – that feeling, I would probably like to be able to remember that!

With the memories constituting impactful experiences and loved people, the informants’ personal archive has become a reflection of who they are and how they have developed over time through changing life circumstances. Despite being concrete markers of their past and present, the self-defining memories are not “veridical” (Belk, 2013: 478). As a result of the emotions tied to these moments rather than pure facts as well as the predominant concern with others’ approving feedback, the memories become highly “self-enhancing and nostalgic” (ibid.). As Belk (2013) suggests, digital means of recording and archiving autobiographical memory cues enables “a more complete self narrative with an idealized view of how we would like to remember ourselves” (2013: 484). This links to the “intentionality” of the individual in organizing a narrative plot for the self (Gergen &
Gergen, 1988). The informants carefully chose only a few of their experiences and consequently come to narrate a particular story of their life.

With reference to Belk (1988), it may be argued that since these memorable moments and significant people are experienced as desirable parts of the self, sharing them with others through Instagram is a means of incorporating them more *intensely* into the self. That is, it is a means of *active* incorporation – by creating the memories using their own skill, time and energy – although the practice of sharing is highly unreflected upon. Mirroring these particular selves in others enables the informants to unconsciously guide the public negotiation of their identity narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) which makes this incorporation highly desirable.

It may further be argued that their Instagram profile – as a “digital possession” (Belk, 2013) – in turn gets *passively* incorporated into the informants’ extended self. The Instagram profile can be considered part of the self in the form of a “memory marker object” in consistence with Belk’s (1998) proposition that “possessions are good for thinking”. While the specific memories add to the informants’ sense of self in terms of who they *become* through their experiences and relationships, the Instagram profile adds to their sense of self by what it allows them to *do*. The Instagram archive enables the informants to prompt recollections of their prior experiences and social linkages and by that visualize a desirable and coherent identity narrative. This supports the idea that people employ technology as “a prosthetic device” enhancing real life identity (Schau & Gilly, 2003: 400).

Each post of the individual informant reflects a salient life project and the social relations constituting this life project. When considering their Instagram profile as a whole, every piece *complements* each other in revealing different aspects of their identity and equally, recurring types of possessions *supplements* each other by adding to confirm a particular aspect of their identity. For instance, Diane points to a picture of herself wearing a pair of naff slippers as an indicator of her humorous self and equally, Audrey points to her most recent post of some neatly arranged burgers as “yet another one” confirming her food-passionate self. It is the ensemble of posts provides the informants with an understanding of who they are. This reflects Belk’s (1988) claim that only the complete ensemble is “able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self” (1988: 140).
Notably, each post gets deeper meaning from whom the informant has interacted with upon sharing it. In this sense, comments and likes from important others may be referred to as “digital patina” as the posts “accrue different and richer meanings in the same way that the provenance of a painting or an antique can add to its value” (Belk, 2013: 487). This highlights the fact that not only do shared possessions reflect self-defining moments and relationships – they also add to the individual’s identity by facilitating an ongoing practicing of affectionate relationships (Miller, 1998).

**Autobiographical memory as guide**

The informants enjoy scrolling through their Instagram posts in order to recall the associated feelings and to observe how their identity becomes manifest in these memories. They enjoy observing their own development through life based on the places they have been, the things they have experienced and the persons that have been part of their life. This links to the central aspect of narrative theory whereby people interpret and explain experiences and actions in terms of their currently held identity narrative (Czarniawska, 2004); scrolling through their posts provides the informants with a concrete frame of interpretation that guides the organization of new events and experiences.

As demonstrated in the idiosyncratic analysis, the informants’ experiences of sharing are underpinned by their life themes and thus, these guide the organization of the evolving narrative identity. In turn, the life themes become still reinforced. In the example of Brooke, the great empathy for others running through her posts reminds her of the life theme *Respect versus Disrespect* when looking through her Instagram profile. This concretization of her life theme makes it guide her future posts. Though this impact is unconscious, it supports the claim that when people look at themselves from the outside on social media, it is “a much more effective mirror and reinforcement than simply relying on others’ feedback” (Belk, 2013: 482).

The enduring nature of life themes and the narratively structure running through the shared possessions imply that past posts for the most part remain relevant over time in terms of supporting the informants’ identity. Nevertheless, the informants are not reluctant to delete posts from their ensemble if they at some point lack consistency with their currently held identity narrative. This is evident in the following interview excerpt.
Interviewer: Do you sometimes look back through your photos on Instagram?

Brooke: Yes, I do. Both to check what it is exactly that I’ve posted – if I’ve had some kind of stroke at some point where I uploaded something that I am thinking wasn’t that smart.

Interviewer: Okay. Would you consider deleting something that you’ve posted earlier?

Brooke: Yes, I would easily consider deleting something that I posted earlier. Either because I don’t think it’s relevant anymore. Yeah, it would probably be for that reason…

Interviewer: Relevant how?

Brooke: Yeah, I don’t know actually. That’s a good question… No, I think maybe I would delete something if it was something I thought was funny but which I don’t think is quite so funny anymore or which I’m not interested in having people who don’t know me to see. (…) On Facebook I’ve deleted many photos but that has been over a longer period of time. You know, I’ve been on Instagram for relatively less time after all. So the pictures here are more symbolic to who I am now where Facebook goes much longer back. It was an entirely different time back then when you started using Facebook – you used it in a completely different way.

As time passes, the informants may sort in their ensemble of post to ensure a “cognitive bridge” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to their currently held identity narrative, yet most post from previous life stages remain relevant in the present. This illustrates the dynamic nature of narrative identity enabling change over time while preserving a sense of coherence (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Gergen & Gergen, 1988). As with the distinction between life themes and life projects, the informants strive to make consistency run all through while embracing the prominence of personal development which is reflected in the changing content of the photos uploaded to their Instagram profiles as their life projects change. In Brooke’s example, the change in life projects from being a student to being fulltime employed is apparent, yet, her life theme of Respect versus Disrespect is running all through her current ensemble of shared possessions from both then and now.

The sense of coherence is particularly important for the purpose of credibly communicating an authentic identity narrative to others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988: 35). Hence, the informants’ desire for
a sense of consistency is highly linked to their fear of losing consent from their “supporting cast” in keeping an identity narrative going. The ability to keep one’s already negotiated identity narrative going ensures a positive self-concept because this entails that “people behave consistently with their previous actions, statements, commitments, beliefs, and self-ascribed traits” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004: 602).

Therefore, the fear of not communicating a coherent and thus authentic identity narrative implies that the informants do not preserve cues of past selves that contradict with their currently held identity narrative. A previously shared possession can indeed relate to a past life project yet it cannot be inconsistent with the overall life narrative of the individual as it is perceived in the present. A high degree of stability can consequently be observed over time; despite undergoing a life transition, the informants cannot point out significant changes in terms of who they are when looking back through their ensemble of posts but emphasize the consistency that runs all through.

Adherence to cultural norms
The informants experience great satisfaction from playing around with the look of their posts and they enjoy to observe how their skills and style have improved since they first started using Instagram. When looking through their past posts, the informants stress the style that runs through which they are set to continue in their future posts. They may even delete previously shared possessions if they are not consistent with the overriding style that they wish to be characteristic for their profile as a whole. Their particular style manifests in terms of the kind of possessions shared but also through creatively applying different angles, colors, lighting and text.

The informants are not unrestricted in their creativity. In addition to being regulated by their past selves, they are regulated by the cultural norms for using Instagram. Their personal style is linked to their personality and personal taste yet it is also highly influenced by the cultural norms that have emerged on Instagram. They apply the possible features in a way that is very similar to what they recognize as stylish and inspirational in profiles of other people and are hence guided by a particular style belonging to a thought community which they associate themselves with. Equally, the desire to evoke positive responses by posting relevant things and by applying an optimistic approach is part of the cultural norms for sharing on Instagram. The following interview excerpts illustrate this cultural influence.
Audrey: It is about figuring out how you’d like your own profile to be and how you would like to appear in your profile. Where I – back then when I first got it [Instagram profile] – maybe I just took a photo of… I didn’t think that much about what I posted as I do today. So that is something that has changed since I started to post photos.

Interviewer: So do you think you just had to get to know Instagram and how to use it?

Audrey: Yes, both how to use it but also how you’d like your profile to appear, where I think that some photos are more suitable than others. And I will be honest to admit that I have deleted some of the photos I posted back then because I thought “Why the hell did I post that!”.

Interviewer: But didn’t you think about it then?

Audrey: Yes, I thought about it but not at all to the extent I do now… The longer I had it, I have found out that, okay, people [those she follows herself] actually think about the aesthetic here and doesn’t just take photos of anything and post it.

Interviewer: You know, if I have to describe some of the things that I see [looking at Chloe’s Instagram profile together], there is some nature… flowers, blue sky, nature elements…

Chloe: Yes! And then it is probably also quite… You know, I come to realize that it is very much chocolate box covers [glansbilleder] and I think about that sometimes. That it is only the good things or [pictures] from good moments that I upload. (…) Sometimes I think that it’s quite fun with something breaking the norm and uploading something that you wouldn’t expect – when it’s Sunday and you’re having “morning hair”. But then again, I think that in some way it’s just what Instagram is so you might as well… At least it is to me – it is good moments and beautiful moments.

Referring to Belk (1988), this mode of thinking demonstrates that identity can be conceptualized in terms of concentric layers as the informants identify themselves with a particular community in which certain styles and features have been incorporated into the core of this collective identity. As the above excerpts indicate, the informants agree to comply with the cultural norms for sharing at this collective level. This is consistent with previously observed compliance behaviours on social media.
We are what we share?

whereby individuals accept tacit influence from favourable groups in the hope of approved association with these groups (Belk, 2013; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

The fundamental premise of sociocultural embeddedness within CCT, cf. section 1.7, is thus clearly reflected here. By this premise, individuals are socialised into a particular sociocultural context and come to interpret the world in terms of the different thought communities to which they belong (Zerubavel, 1999). As is evident in the present research findings, individuals exert agency and pursue identity goals through cultural frames imposed by “dominant ideologies” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In contemporary Western societies, these dominant ideologies are characterised by postmodern forces spurring individuals to engage in active creation of an identity for themselves (ibid.; Ahuvia, 2005). In this regard, it can be argued that the Instagram profile of the informants have come to confirm to themselves and others that they are indeed actively creating an identity for themselves. This postmodern ideology may also add justice to the apparently self-focused content of the possessions shared although the motivation for sharing is primarily other-focused.

A beautified but real self

The informants concede that the identity reflected in their Instagram profile becomes an edited and polished representation of their real life identity. This identity is by no means fake or unreal but rather a “beautified version” of reality. The beautified yet real self can be understood by means of conceptualizing identity as a multi-faceted aspect (Markus & Nurius, 1986) whereby it is not viable to speak of one unified self but rather a range of multiple selves with the digital, social media self being one of them (Belk, 2013; Ahuvia, 2005). It is not contradictory with real life yet the identity on Instagram is not held to be fully consistent with the informants’ real life identity. By acknowledging that it is only part of their complete identity, the informants demonstrate that identity as lived experience is a multifaceted phenomenon rather than a coherent entity as it appears in the narrative structuring though this structuring premises the way they think of and communicate about their identity as a narrative evolving over time.

The eventual narrative structuring implies that the fragmentation between the digital and physical selves is relatively limited. Echoing the findings of Schau and Gilly (2003), there is a high degree of “digital likeness” on the informants’ Instagram profiles as what they communicate here are “aspects of their real life identities anchored by their real life existence” (Schau & Gilly, 2003: 400). It is a
natural consequence of using the medium to share real life moments as a means of interacting with and expressing love for real life relations.

With these real life relations being the “supportive cast” of the informants’ currently held identity narrative, a certain degree of consistency with their physical identity is warranted. Yet, the informants are certain that nobody in their audiences would expect their social media posts to fully correspond with reality which is closely linked to the cultural norms of sharing positive things and beautifying them. The premise that the intended audience knows the informants in real life further allows for some deviance compared to face-to-face.

Though the informants photograph and edit their preserved memories to make them “look their best” within the narrative and cultural frames, it is crucial to the informants that their collection of memories are still highly personal in terms of representing authentic aspects of their identity. In order to ensure this personal dimension, the informants are very conscious about not appearing as if they are 100% perfect or living a perfect life when looking through their ensemble of posts. This cannot be real and thus, if beautification leads to such impression it is considered a “fake representation”. Hence, it is of vast importance to balance the creative construction of memories versus fake manipulation of memories. Diane reflects more deeply upon this in the end of the second interview session.

**Interviewer:** You talked about, again, the thing about these bloggers but also other people who may take photos where everything appears perfect and no matter what they upload, it is all very polished and perfect – the right brands and so on – but how you also like posting positive, happy, good moments and that these are polished in some way but then again it is not really perfect. So how do you create that balance so that it doesn’t get completely perfect?

**Diane:** No that’s right. In fact I think a lot about it sometimes – what gets uploaded – exactly because I become a little “off” myself when you see these completely polished homes because reality is not like that! And many times, I’ve been thinking whether I should upload something where “Well, this is also my everyday!” with baby food all over the place. I think it’s a combination. It is not everything that I upload – they’re not always like 100% perfect. They can be a little edgy too and you should be seeing a little bit of mess in the background too and a clothes-dryer. But yes, I think that I think about
We are what we share?

it quite a lot actually – exactly what it is that I’m actually uploading. But I don’t think it appears 100% perfect at all. Far from it…

In order to keep an identity narrative going in the ongoing process of public negotiation, authenticity in the communication of the self is found to be essential (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Therefore, the great effort made to ensure a “non-fake” representation of the self can be interpreted as a necessity in order to warrant authenticity in the mirror of others. By giving confirmation to others that the informant is “really who she is”, this authenticity is key in enabling the sense of narrative coherence across digital and physical selves despite the lack of full consistency. As long as the self-aspects communicated in the physical and digital spaces authentically refer back to the same individual, both contexts support the identity narrative of this person. Without this authenticity, the informants would not be able to successfully maintain an identity narrative on social media approved by their audience.

4.2.3 Summary of nomothetic analysis

The nomothetic analysis contributes to an understanding of first, why individual consumers engage in sharing on social media through the theme of Routinized love-making and second, how this practice contributes to the individuals’ creation and validation of identity through the theme of Constructed narrative identity.

The first theme, Routinized love-making, is linked to the meanings ascribed to the initial intention for sharing possessions on social media. It is argued that the social nature of sharing possessions extends far beyond the social connectedness necessary for mirroring, negotiating and validating aspects of the self. What legitimates sharing of possessions is the practicing of reciprocal love within social relationships. The practice it is above all a means of bringing more abstract feelings of love into daily practice whereby the possessions shared and related social interaction become objectified as caring and interest which facilitates the preservation and development of relationships. This reflects an underlying desire for affiliation and affection rather than identity seeking through creating and showing difference.

Accordingly, it is an extended self in terms of other people – or more apposite in terms of the relationships with these people – that become defined and strengthened through this practice. The relevance of possessions shared are determined by their social linking value rather than a functional
or symbolic use value. They become means for practicing affectionate relationships and their use is hence guided by the daily dynamics in these relationships. This interpretation builds on the informants’ all-dominant concern for other people which is manifested in terms of a perceived delimited audience, the criteria of relevance and positive meanings, and the paramount role of approving feedback from significant others as a signal that these relationships are preserved and strengthened which validates the individuals’ identity in terms of the relations with close others.

Social media have enhanced real life means of practicing social relationships and in turn, sharing possessions on social media – in this case on Instagram – results the second global theme, *Constructed narrative identity*. The ensemble of posts on Instagram come to *represent* the individuals’ identity in the form of a personal archive of memorable experiences constituted by sociality. From these concretized memories, a coherent autobiography of who the individual is and has developed over time evolves.

This reflects a number of different life projects in the content and context of the memories while life themes manifest more subtly from the thoughts and feelings that guide the practice of sharing. Whereas the possessions shared can be argued to become actively incorporated into the self, the Instagram profile in itself becomes more passively incorporated into the self as a memory object. As a narrative identity, the Instagram posts regulates the individuals’ frame of interpretation and is itself regulated by the cultural norms within a particular thought community on Instagram. As a consequence of the narrative and cultural constraints as well as the predominant concern of others, identity on Instagram is characterized as a beautified yet real self.

In continuation of the two global themes developed in this nomothetic analysis, a discussion follows in the next chapter of two related and more general topics of interest within CCT. The discussion takes the analyses a step further in order to fulfill the overall aim of the thesis.
5. Discussion

This chapter builds on the analysis in Chapter 4 to fulfill the overall aim of the thesis by discussing two theoretical topics with relevance to the academic field of CCT. Following the understanding of why as routinized love-making, the question of agency-structure is first discussed. Then, based on the understanding of how as constructed narrative identity, the online-offline interplay is discussed in relation to consumer identity. The discussion reflects back on the theoretical foundation of the thesis and suggests how the frameworks of extended self (Belk, 2013; 1988) and narrative self (e.g. Gergen & Gergen, 1988) may be updated to contribute to an understanding of consumers’ practice of sharing possessions on social media.

5.1 Agency-structure

The first topic arising from the analysis is related to the debate about agency-structure in consumer behavior. Given that agency-structure is a dialectic with the one presupposing the other (Shanahan, 2009), in essence, it is a question of how much agency we can attribute to the individual consumers in making an identity? From an agency perspective, primacy is given to autonomy and independence of the individual agent in constructing an identity for the self, while a structure point of view gives primacy to social and institutional requirements, norms and expectations (ibid.). On the subject of the present thesis, agency-structure reflects the question of individuality versus conformity in the practice of sharing possessions on social media.

Theory on the extended- and narrative self acknowledge the role of sociocultural dynamics in identity construction, yet the conceptualization of the individual as an identity seeker and maker resembles a highly agentic perspective. The individual is assumed to navigate reflexively, purposively and deliberately in the process of creating an identity for the self and is thereby characterized by attributes of agency. Specifically, in Belk’s (1988) view actions of the individual are thought of as agentic means for incorporating possessions into the self (Borgerson, 2005: 441). Likewise, narrative theory on identity (Czarniawska, 2004; McAdams, 1997; Gergen & Gegen, 1988) relies on agency – “intentionality” of the narrating individual” – in constructing and communicating a desired and coherent narrative identity.
The interpretation developed in this thesis suggests that the individual is not well understood as a self-constructing agent but must be interpreted with consideration of the social structures that he or she navigates within. The social nature of sharing on social media goes beyond the principles of others as a mirror (Belk, 1988), public negotiation (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) or symbolic communication (Patrick, MacInnis & Folkes, 2002; Schouten, 1991). This practice is not about seeking individual identity per se. The social nature plays a significant role as this practice is part of an everyday practicing of affectionate social relationships. This is analogous to Miller’s (1998) work on shopping in the form of everyday provisioning. Although being a seemingly individual and isolated activity, the meanings related to shopping makes it “a highly routinized and unreflected practice that often vicariously relates to relationships” (Miller, 1998: 120).

Miller (2011) made a resembling thesis in an early anthropological study of the use of Facebook by proposing that it is mostly about facilitating and expanding social networking. This stands in contrast to the general postmodern assumption of a drift towards isolation with individuals being more superficial and less concerned with the value of close relationships than in pre-digital times (Miller, 2011: 167). The present research supports Miller’s thesis of a reversal of this assumption. In the practice of sharing on social media, the concern for preserving and strengthening social relationships is predominant, and these relationships play a primary role to the individuals’ sense of self. This is facilitated and reinforced by the visibility on social media. When reciprocal care and interest between two parts are objectified and made visible “it brings to the fore knowledge that could have remained in the back of our mind” (ibid.: 179) and when it is carried out publically, other people become witnesses of the relationship.

In accordance with Miller (2011; 2010; 2002; 1998) and the present research, it is argued that most types of consumer behavior can be characterized as “conservative” or “ordinary” practices which does not fit into the paradigm of agency assumed in most studies of identity construction (Ilmonen, 2013: 10). The explanation lies in the nature of these practices being highly routinized conducts which are used to navigate social life as it is lived everyday (ibid.). The practice of sharing possessions on social media may be conceptualised as such practice as it is conducted on a daily basis and relies on a particular script which is highly unreflected upon.
This resembles Miller’s (2011: 186) finding of Facebook being a site of “normativity” and “netiquette” and illustrates how habitualised face-to-face encounters now appear in new spaces enabled by new technology (Belk, 2013). On social media, a script for social interaction has emerged as a necessary “social mechanism” for reducing anxiety in uncertain situations which arises in social contexts (Ilmonen, 2013: 13). In part this script is created by the features on social media; only images or videos can be posted on Instagram and possible feedback features are likes and comments. But a large part of the script is consensual norms created by the participants. This include the criteria of relevance and positive meanings, the norms for beautifying posts and ensuring authenticity, the appropriate frequency of sharing, and the reciprocal liking.

This has become habitualised by those using the social media, and the practice has thus become normative by narrowing down the individuals’ alternatives for action (Ilmonen, 2013). In this case, the practice is normative in a sense of “ordinariness” (Miller, 2010; Ilmonen, 2013) rather than rule-like structural norms. Deviating from ordinary means of sharing on social media does not entail explicit formal sanctions that impose pressure on the individual to conform. Posting a commercial message or “showing off” through a shared possession does not rely on articulated rules that others cannot “like” it or must stop following the individual. Instead, deviating is a matter of feeling “socially uncomfortable” (Miller, 2010) in such situation and anxious about hampering one’s close relationships or losing social media as a space for practicing them.

The endeavor to feel socially comfortable in routinized conducts is not reflected upon until something “goes wrong” (Ilmonen, 2013). Specifically, “wrong” in the conduct of sharing possessions is related to lack of or negative feedback which can be inferred from the innate aspect of approving feedback. In the present research, the informants began to reflect consciously about how uncomfortable they would feel only when asked to imagine a situation of not getting likes. This indicates that an anxiety lies innate in their sharing practice which makes them conform to the consensual norms without anyone having to explicitly enforce them (Miller, 2007).

This anxiety is also demonstrated by the fact that the informants would never consider sharing something unless being certain that it evokes a positive response in their audience. By adhering to the normal in terms of what to share and how to share it, the informants manage this anxiety by creating a “safe, habitable world” (Ilmonen, 2013: 17). The informants willingly adhere to the norms with
phrases such as “you might as well” because it is just “feels right” as Chloe expresses her devotion to the norms on Instagram.

Interestingly, the informants highlight the peculiar narrative representation of “who they are” and the personal style that runs all through their posts. This points to an oppositional search away from the ordinary towards individuality and suggests that “ordinariness” on social media is not equal to “impersonality”. There is still some room for personal identity. In line with theory on “ordinary consumption” (Miller, 2002; Ilmonen, 2013), it is held that “once ordinariness has been established, or while it is being constructed, the individuals may feel the need to differentiate themselves from the rest of the ordinary community” (Longhurst, Bagnall & Savage, 2013: 140). This differentiation is accomplished through personal narratives with the material for identity construction being the individuals’ own biography (ibid.). The possessions shared in the present research and their underlying meanings are indeed closely linked to the informants’ life narrative. With their Instagram profile being an autobiography of memorable experiences and affectionate relationships, it is possible for the informants to create a feeling of individuality while being ordinary at the same time.

The signs of individuality in shared possessions are easier to observe and verbalize than the ordinariness guiding the practice of sharing on social media. Nevertheless, the practice is not legitimized by identity seeking but by the desire to build, preserve and develop affectionate relationships which only becomes likely by adhering to the consensual social norms. In the context of identity creation and validation, the practice thus transcend individual agency and operate within the frame of routinized conducts rather than more abstract structures.

Returning to Belk (1988), the concept of the extended self may be advanced by encompassing the social embeddedness of the self-extension processes by which individuals develop a sense of self. In the case of sharing possessions on social media, indeed “we are what we post” (Schau & Gilly, 2003) following the idea that “we are what we possess” (Belk, 2013; 1988), but this is in terms of the social relationships at play in this practice. It therefore becomes necessary to consider the individuals’ frame of ordinary routines for social interaction. Similarly, narrative theory can be advanced by encompassing the narrative of relationships which interrelate with the narrative of individual. This narrative is not just negotiated socially but more accurately narrated socially as the relationships are practiced, developed and strengthened through daily interactions.
Accordingly, the relationship between the individual and possessions is socially mediated in a more extensive sense than noted by Belk (1988) and theoretical developments with a similarly agentic view on consumers. In consistence with the present thesis, Miller (1998) argues against the idea of possessions as “a symbolic system for communication about social identity” because the role of material culture is situated within “complex temporal structures of change, stability and the daily developments in any given relationship” (1998: 140-41). Material culture still plays an important role by enabling consumers to participate in contemporary social life (Arnould, 2007: 150). From the perspective of postmodern communities, consumers are still “constantly on the look-out for anything that could facilitate and support the communion: a site, an emblem, the support of a ritual of integration, or of recognition, etc.” (Cova, 1997: 307). This gives legitimacy to material culture yet the value of possessions lies in their social link and facilitation of feelings of closeness and affection. Of course, all instances of sharing on social media may not be ordinary and relationship-oriented more than peculiar and self-focused. However, this does not weaken the significance of the finding that the thoughts and feelings underlying a great part of this sharing makes it a routinized practice of love which implies ordinariness. Earlier studies have shown that women are more relationship-oriented than men (e.g. Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1988) which suggests that the significance of sharing possessions as a means of practicing relationships may be mostly pronounced among women. Nevertheless, as both men and women take part in social media as an extension to their physical social worlds, research on identity construction in today’s digitalized society in general would benefit from relying less on agency and taking more consideration of socially created structures.

5.2 Online-offline
The second theoretical topic to be discussed is the question of how individuals’ identity online interrelate with their identity offline. Specifically, what does the emergence of a constructed narrative on social media mean to the individuals’ sense of self spanning online and offline spaces?

As a starting point it should be stressed that practicing one’s relationships on social media is not a substitute for practicing relationships in the physical world. From an agency perspective, this would be suspected if thinking of the audience merely as a mirror for social validation of individual identity which can be expressed in richer and freer forms online (Belk, 2013). What has become clear from
the present research is that sharing on social media is a means for reaching out for close others, referring back to memorable social experiences, or facilitating future social interaction in the physical space. It is a means for supplementing, intensifying and enriching physical social interaction rather than replacing it. Consequently, the identity reflected in and created through this practice has not taken over the physical identity work of the individual but adds an extra dimension to it. The informants in the present research do not distinguish between who they are in the two spaces but coordinate their identity work online with their offline behaviors. In this case, it is hence incorrect to speak of a “second self” online as the first discussions of digital identities suspected (Turkle, 1984 in Miller, 2011). Online-offline are closely intertwined in making up the individuals’ sense of self and we cannot speak of a truer or less true self – both are “performative” within a particular social structure (ibid.).

As a strong indication of this, high “digital likeness” (Schau & Gilly, 2003) to the physical self is found in the informants’ identity on social media as this is considered an authentic representation of their real life experiences and relationships. This is the case although it is beautified and polished as the natural result of adhering to the “ordinariness” of sharing on Instagram. As with the physical photographs people keep of their memories, posts on social media are considered highly personal and authentic representations of real life while they are not veridical or accurate accounts of the past (Belk, 1991). On social media, the individual can be thought of as a narrator who is continuously engaged in an emplotment based on the material of his own biography and interaction with close others. Importantly, the narrating individual is the story being told which warrants an anchor in the physical world and imposes stability over time. This is necessary to keep a credible identity narrative going (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) and in that sense, it helps ensure the continued practicing of social relationships and keep the individual’s identity in terms of these relationships intact.

With the significance of a narratively structured self on social media, the related concept of temporal selves (Markus & Wurf, 1987) becomes highly useful for understanding how this narrative identity is continually recreated and reinforced through online sharing of possessions. Possessions shared by the individual aid a desirable sense of past, allow for variations in the present, and provide a more concrete idealized view of desired future selves. Without the narrative structuring and a cognitive bridge between these aspects of the individual’s identity, the concretization and visualization of these self-aspects on social media would lead to great confusion and contradiction in the individual’s self-
understanding and expression. The individual’s life themes (Mick & Buhl, 1922) play an important role as they are common denominators for the temporal selves. This is evident in the present research where the identified life themes run all through the informants’ practice of sharing and their shared possessions.

In the daily practice of sharing where we see “the extended self as comprised of whatever seems apropos to the situation” (Belk, 2013: 489) as long as it has the potential to facilitate interaction with close others, this temporal structuring is not deliberately sought nor reflected upon. Everyday interaction on social media resembles the way the individual may speak of him- or herself in face-to-face encounters based on a shifting array of working selves. However, the visual and verbal cues available online give richer form to this interaction allowing for more intangible aspects of an experience, such as an emotion or an atmosphere, to be more authentically communicated. In addition, social media enables individuals to share a working self with distant others as it is lived in the moment while the individuals can take part in the lived working self of close others. Thus, people live synchronous social lives in the sense that they live “ spatially in different places while setting a shared pace or rhythm with others” (Mäenpää, 2013: 130) which leads to an intensified feeling of “togetherness” and may contribute to an intensified incorporation of close others into the self. In terms of Belk (1988), social media thus enhance incorporation of pleasant everyday moments and close others into the self.

Over time the ensemble of social media posts reflects a range of selves comprising the development in the individual’s narrative identity. With an objectified archive of beautified, memorable experiences, the individual gets an enhanced sense of past (Belk, 2013). This is not only essential for the individual to think of him- or herself as developing over time. Further, the archive of objectified and readily available past experiences facilitates social interaction in the physical world. In the present research, face-to-face conversation often started from or referred back to something that the informants had shared on social media. Research on autobiographical memory points to the social function of memory as being highly important because “it helps us bond with others through sharing stories, fosters empathy with others, and makes conversations seem more truthful and believable” (Belk, 2013: 488; Bluck, 2003). Hence also in the case of past selves, social media sharing blends into the physical world and enriches social interaction.
In the case of future selves, the present research demonstrate that social media play a powerful role in creating and approaching these. In terms of being beautified and positive aspects of the informants’ selves, the shared possessions indirectly reveal what the informants find worth approaching in the future and thus, they can be argued to reflect desired or hoped-for selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, Diane’s posts on Instagram are mostly taken in peaceful moments being together with her daughter, boyfriend and other close family members which represent her life theme of Assimilation versus Isolation. Similarly, the pictures from traveling and dreamy photos of flowers and sunsets that dominate Chloe’s Instagram profile reflect her life theme of Self-development versus Self-idleness. By being expressed in relatively concrete ways – being together with particular persons, in a particular place or doing particular things – the desired self becomes strengthened and more readily memorable. In Markus and Nurius’ (1986) terms, the shared possessions provide “self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction” for desired states of being. Consequently, social media can make the individual long more strongly and persistently for this state of being. In addition, social media may let the individual believe that he or she is close to achieve a desired self, that is, play a role in the process of self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981).

Altogether, while the material for constructing a narrative identity on social media is the real life identity of the individual, this narrative representation come to impact the sense of self in the physical world. There may be more self-dimensions to consider in the interplay between online and offline as well as more conflicting or negative implications. A number of CCT researchers have indeed focused on the psychological tensions that postmodern fragmentation of identity imposes on the individual (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Nevertheless, the temporal selves and their enrichment of physical identity work was the most significant in the present research.

The temporal dimensions of self clearly become more manifest as part of the individuals’ sense of self as a result of social media sharing and may thus, in Belk’s (1988) terms, become more intensely incorporated as part of the self. Notably, this narrative conceptualization of identity enables a sense of coherence to run all through the individual’s identity and the importance of this aspect supports the idea that a multi-faceted yet coherent identity is thriving in today’s digitalized society (Belk, 2013; Ahuvia, 2005).
6. Conclusion

The overall aim of the thesis was twofold. The aim was to understand first, *why* individual consumers engage in online sharing of possessions and second, *how* this practice contributes to the individuals’ creation and validation of an identity in today’s digitalized society. This objective was initiated by a theoretical interest in consumer identity projects in the light of contemporary possibilities for communicating about the self online.

The research was positioned within the academic field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) in which a large body of literature has investigated consumer behaviour as guided by consumers’ quest for creating a personally meaningful identity by showing difference. In contrast, research has also shown how a desire for closeness with others plays a significant role in guiding consumers’ choices and practices. The online context of social networking sites thrive on social interaction, yet sharing on these sites are argued to be highly self-focused with possessions used as symbolic markers to create and validate a favourable identity in the eyes of others. The underlying meanings of sharing possessions on social media remained vaguely understood and was therefore explored in this thesis. Specifically, the thesis contributes to literature on extended self and self as narrative with an interpretation based on phenomenological, narrative inquiry of females in Denmark.

From a process of iterative back-and-forth interpretation an idiosyncratic- and nomothetic analysis emerged which together provided an answer to the specific problem formulation of the thesis. On the idiosyncratic level, it was shown how both life projects and life themes interrelate with the personal meanings derived from experiences of sharing on social media. On the nomothetic level, two global themes emerged from reading across the informants for patterns of similarity in the underlying meanings of this practice.

The first theme, *Routinized love-making*, and its underlying elements provide an answer to the question of *why* individual’s share possessions on social media. The main conclusion here is that sharing is above all a practice of reciprocal interest and care to preserve and strengthen social relationships which are intensely incorporated into the self. The second theme, *Constructed narrative identity*, and its constitutive elements provide an answer to the question of *how* this practice contributes to the individual’s creation and validation of an identity. In essence, the construction of
autobiographical memories on social media evolve into a self-reinforcing identity narrative which is guided by personal life themes and cultural norms.

Two general theoretical topics within CCT – agency-structure and online-offline – was then discussed. It was argued that an understanding of ordinary consumer practices should consider norms set by social structures to a higher extent than the literature on identity projects which gives primacy to symbolic individuation. It was further argued that temporal selves enables an understanding of social media identity, and that this identity reinforces a coherent and desired sense of self across contexts and facilitates a reliance on social relationships.
6.1 Managerial implications

The contemporary digital landscape does not only offer consumers extensive possibilities for sharing possessions and interacting with each other through social networking sites. It also enables companies to connect with consumers in new ways with dialogue and involvement replacing traditional one-way marketing. An increasing number of companies in Denmark have profiles on social media and have started to move branding- and communication activities to this online space (www.business.dk). Given that contemporary consumers have incorporated social media into their everyday life, this is a natural development. However, in order to build successful marketing strategies that rely on social media, it is crucial to understand the underlying motivations and meanings of consumers’ practices in this online space.

Following from the idea that postmodernity is a time of individualization (Cova, 1996), relational and one-to-one marketing approaches are common today. These approaches focus on the relationship between company and consumer based on the idea that consumers are compelled to seek out market-mediated images and symbols to reassure them of their personal identity and create meaning in life (ibid.: 496).

The findings of this thesis demonstrate a need to shift focus to the relationships among consumers yet not as members of a postmodern tribe (Cova, 1997; 1996) but on a more intimate, relational level. In a critique of the dominant marketing logic, Shankar and Fitchett (2002) stress that contemporary consumers search for sustainable satisfying states of being as opposed to shorter gratifications of having since the latter “does not resolve many of the anxieties which human beings experience in their daily lives” (ibid: 502). The present research of sharing on social media shows that a significant anxiety in consumers’ daily life is related to the preservation of social relationships and further, this anxiety is managed by adhering to a socially structured ordinariness which ensures reciprocation of care and interest.

In general, marketers need to recognize this and accordingly ensure a relational linking value in the products, services and experiences they offer consumers. For a company to be part of consumers’ practice of sharing on social media, it must play a role in the daily practicing of consumers’ affectionate social relationships and let these relationships be the primary focus rather than its functional or symbolic qualities. This requires consideration of the social norms for sharing within a
particular group of consumers. In the case of young adult females, the criteria of relevance and positive meanings for ensuring approving feedback must be considered – the extent to which this applies across markets and consumers will require further investigation.

In addition, attention should be given to the desire for narrative coherence over time and the functions of temporal self-dimensions on social media. A great opportunity for the company lies in facilitating a desirable self-biography by creating a link to a particular temporal self and the social relationships constituting this. This helps the consumers with the important task of keeping a credible identity narrative going and helps them feel sufficiently personalized while being ordinary at the same time.
7. References


We are what we share?


We are what we share?


We are what we share?


We are what we share?


www.business.dk. (2014). Danske virksomheder boomer på sociale medier, af Søren Ploug Lilmoes, Berlingske Nyhedsbureau:
http://www.business.dk/ledelse/danskevirksomhederboomerpaasocialemedier

