



Possessions and the Transition from Working to Retired Self

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This study is a qualitative exploration of the meaning of appearance-related possessions among males in Colombia, South America. Within a framework of symbolic interactionism, this research examines their perspectives on the role of these possessions in the critical life transition to retirement. Very few studies exist that explore what retirement means to male consumers and how they use products to navigate this life transition. Further, the South American consumer has been almost completely ignored in research on consumption. As life expectancies are increasing worldwide, examination of retirement as a life phase provides opportunities for contributing to theory as well as managerial practice.

The purpose of this study is to understand how males perceive the transition from working to retired life and the role of favorite appearance-related possessions in this process. To address this purpose, symbolic interactionism was used as a framework for understanding how possessions are used to mark retirement as a rite of passage (Turner, 1982). An individual's self is a social product that allows the actor to interact with and create meanings for things outside of it (Blumer, 1969), such as favorite possessions. Thus, material objects or possessions are important in the creation and communication of the self. Belk's (1998) seminal work on possessions and the extended self specifically explored the relationship between material and non-material possessions and the sense of self. Belk (1988) used the terms "self" and "identity" indistinctively. Regarding non-material possessions, Stone (as cited in Brissett & Edgley, 1990) defines identity as intrinsically associated with all the joinings and departures of social life, where titles—such as occupational titles—are used to announce the identities communicated by clothing. This implies that old identities are dissolved and new ones created when occupational titles are changed. The occupational change brought on by retirement can be seen as a rite of passage and an individual ritual accompanying a change in social status (Turner, 1982). This rite has three main phases (Turner, 1982): (1) *separation*, which involves detachment from previous social statuses and physical separation from the rest of society; (2) *transition*, is a threshold where the individuals experience dissolution and ambiguity, a sort of social limbo between phases; and (3) *incorporation* that represents the person's new, relatively stable, and well-defined position in society that usually represents an enhanced status.

Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, data collection utilized in-depth interviews with 15 males living in Medellin, Colombia born between 1946 and 1964 and selected through snowball sampling. Participants were asked to provide pictures of their favorite appearance-related possessions for discussion during the interviews. Questions focused on retirement and favorite possessions and recordings were transcribed and then translated to English. Next, data were

analyzed by categorization, where themes were classified as patterns for defining and explaining the meaning of retirement. Three themes emerged that mirror the three phases of a transition rite, thereby positioning retirement as a transition rite (Turner, 1982): *The Beginning of a New Life* (separation), *The Threshold* (transition) and *What Working Life?* (incorporation).

For participants, separation begins when they officially announce their retirement. This phase is experienced with relief, excitement, and a mix of anxiety and expectation. For some, this phase offers the potential to create a new identity, a non-working self, particularly through dress. For example, Roberto explains how he discarded most of his wardrobe, "...when I retired, I gave away all long sleeve shirts, all ties, just left two suits to go to funerals which is the only thing you use it for... all friends are dying... I gave away almost all. I gave away everything." The second theme revealed the extent to which participants felt a sense of strangeness, largely due to the major identity shift involved at this point. That is, two identities coexist simultaneously, as the working self fades and is replaced by the growing retired self. For example, Gustavo described how he started using shirts to communicate the new retired self, which he expresses in the sense of freedom from responsibility: "The shirt changed to be untucked. I would not go back to tucking the shirt into [my pants]! It's a way of dressing... I changed my dress style, from work to retirement, is no longer [tucked in] the pants, but the shirt [is] outside!" In the incorporation phase, most participants used appearance to indicate their retired social status, such as Jesus who purchased a Rolex watch as a symbol to celebrate his retirement: "The watch... a Rolex, is worth a lot of money here for the Colombian standard; you cannot buy it here but in the US. In the US it costs almost 9,000 dollars... It had something to do with my retirement... It is something like a retirement award... I'll give myself this luxury." For Jesus, the watch symbolizes the new role.

Based on the interpretation of the interview data, three themes—separation, transition, and incorporation—relate to the distinct phases identified when retirement is explained as a rite of passage. During these phases, possessions attain multi-layered meanings, and some even become symbols of the overall rite of passage. Findings suggest that some favorite possessions remain so throughout the passage from working to retired life, while others change their meanings, and still others are discarded along with the old self. New possessions may also be acquired to complement and reaffirm the new self. This study extends our understanding of the role of possessions in defining the self and communicating identity and sheds light on an overlooked consumer group, yet one that is important for marketers and retailers to address.

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