

From tourist souvenirs to Tomorrowland festival – The role of material possessions in identity construction

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Hello, I'm Julie Masset, a Lecturer in Marketing and Service Management at the Faculty EMCP (Economics Management Communication Politics) at the University of Namur. I will present you one of my research areas, that is, possessions and identity.

From birth on throughout life course, material **possessions** play a crucial role for people. Objects allow people to understand themselves and their lives, others and culture more broadly; they convey information about their owners as well as about the social relationships they induce (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Researchers emphasize the importance of objects and their symbolic meanings in **identity** construction (e.g., Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1992; McCracken, 1986). These possessions help people to construct and manage individual or social identities. They allow consumers to differentiate themselves from others or to integrate with others. They can serve as tools for improving self-confidence and defining, maintaining, and expressing one's self-concept to others.

In a recent paper on **Tomorrowland festival** (Masset and Decrop, 2024), we investigated festivalgoers' identity construction and expression through the material possessions that are used there. Tomorrowland is a unique electronic music festival organized each year in Belgium and where most festivalgoers are showing up with flags, accessories, and costumes. But why do they do that? Which meanings do they associate with these material possessions? Which functions do they fulfil? These are some of the research questions we explored.

The analysis and interpretation of collected data led us to a typology of seven profiles of festivalgoers (e.g., patriots, creative devotees, bohemian girls, rebels) and seven functions fulfilled by their material possessions (e.g., socialization, communion, regression, transgression). We also produced a videography entitled "Tomorrowland Festival: A heterotopia of Deviation" providing an immersion into this festival and our findings.



Some possessions are also considered as 'special' because they hold deep meanings in people's life. Think about some of your family photographs or heirlooms. Deep meanings may stem from event or place attachment, the person's self, a sacred status, or because they are part of a collection. But do deep meanings last forever? Do consumers have stable and enduring relationships with their special possessions notably because of their role in identity construction? Not always. Meanings and relationships are dynamic rather than static.

In my thesis, I explored **tourist souvenirs**, a typical example of special possessions, and specifically, the processes through which meanings are given to them and how these meanings evolve through time and space.

I focused on material tourist souvenirs, that is, all the tourist objects that have been purchased, received, intentionally collected or picked up at the vacation destination, to be souvenirs or markers of experience. My findings brought a holistic and dynamic perspective to the relationships between consumers and their special possessions. Using Hodder's concepts of entanglement (dependence) and entrapment (dependency), I notably emphasized that consumers may not only develop enduring relationships with their tourist possessions but also liquid ones (that is, temporary, more detached, and less special) depending on whether they are in entangled or entrapped situations (Masset and Decrop, 2016). This challenged the assertion that consumers keep their special possessions forever, never (re)selling, replacing or discarding them, particularly because of the latter's role in identity construction.



Thanks for reading!

If you want to watch the trailer of our videography on Tomorrowland, it is here: <https://vimeo.com/231854605>

If you want to receive the access to the full videography, feel free to contact me : julie.masset@unamur.be