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Objects Maketh Man: Are Possessions and Identity
Inextricably Interlinked?

May 2026

Fine Art

[DOI 10.15132/30000125](https://doi.org/10.15132/30000125)



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EVE SIMPSON

Fine Art BA Hons Dissertation

Objects Maketh Man: Are Possessions and Identity Inextricably Interlinked?

Word Count: 7301

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the link between possessions and one's selfhood, examining the positives and negatives of attaching meaning to objects and where free will exists in the context of our current capitalist climate. It investigates how craft, collecting and coming-of-age experiences assist in helping us relate to our belongings and how our perception of them may change when untethered from the view of human subjectivity. Overconsumption as an economic force also impacts buyer decisions when it comes to what objects one decides to own, and this analysis highlights how one might be able to make shopping decisions based on personal needs rather than incessant advertising. Through reviewing how different artists scrutinize their own relationships with their and other's belongings, this text highlights how self-discovery is a very important process that can be furthered by assessing one's own relationship with possessions, and how to navigate dependency on the things that exist around us.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most universal experiences is the act of owning something. Regardless of wealth, we all own something, even if only the clothes on our back. One's possessions can be clear indicators of class, race, gender, sexuality, age and more, communication to those around us of who we are in the most basic of terms. They also exist as embodiments of meaning, reflecting and reminding the owner of lost memories, old friends and special places. Heirlooms passed down from generation to generation, love letters of a fleeting romance, souvenirs from that particularly memorable trip. The question of 'what object/s would you save if your home was on fire?' is a commonly asked one, a prevailing concept as it begs to reach the heart of a person and their priorities, and what items resonate so heavily that one would risk their life salvaging it. In a survey conducted by Money Helper inquiring this very question, the top three results speak to the practicalities but more importantly the sentimental values of the average person: credit cards and money at 43%, photographs at 35% and mobile phone at 33%. With photographs at over a third of the overall percentage, it is clear that, though they serve no pragmatic purpose, the object and the memories it may contain speaks to a great volume of people and is thus worth risking one's life for (Andy Webb, 2021). Photographs that tell stories of passed relatives and places of significance, and may capture one as they age, change and evolve - who would you be without these reminders? Without possessions to identify with, who are you?

I have always taken a key interest in the concept of finding comfort and character through material possession, as well as the desire to show off what one has as evidence of good taste or having lived an impressive life. As an introverted person, I find confidence through communicating my personality through fashion and beauty, as well as highlighting some of my interests via band merchandise or wearable trinkets in the hopes of finding like-minded individuals or even simply spark a conversation without the need for me to speak. I often cannot help but to curate my belongings to perfectly reflect myself, and tie select items to my persona so others can begin associating them with me, e.g. fur coats and burgundy lipstick. My studio practice sees me exploring my need for validation and overconsumption, photographing myself nude surrounded by the things I own, a blank slate for material possessions to embellish, and building one large self-portrait through a vast collection of items. My belongings remind me of people, places and moments throughout my life, and as a keen fan of vintage and secondhand shopping, I adore

collecting objects with an unknown past that I will give a new life to. However, I regularly fall into the mindset that a new purchase will make me a brand-new person, a virtually unavoidable sentiment when brands and companies constantly push this notion.

Personal belongings allow people to connect with others, express oneself and escape into a private inner world, but it can also be argued that they are used to ‘brand’ oneself and distract us from uncovering our true identities. With brands always circulating new trends and products designed to appeal to the ever-changing market, it becomes harder to separate what we want from what we are made to think we want, and it becomes easier for one’s identity to interlink with current trends. In this text, I aim to explore the benefits and drawbacks of associating one’s possessions with one’s identity, and where free will exists in this conversation, with the powerhouse that is overconsumption breathing down the neck of the everyday person.



Fig. 0.1, 0.2, 0.3: Eve Simpson, ‘How Can I Escape Escapism?’ (2023). Photographs.

CHAPTER I - The Importance of Object in Self-Discovery

Craft, the activity of making things by hand, is common practice, and with specific intention of the artist, these items can contain worlds of meaning and value: the gift made with a particular friend in mind or an item designed to align with one's lifestyle. I value my possessions a great deal when I can recall certain details of the experience attached to it; remembering a film I watched when I made a painting; the family ring gifted to me at a funeral; the pen generously lent to me by a stranger who let me keep it. I would potentially feel lost if these items left my possession, items that tell a story only I know, and that is a sentiment at the heart of the statement that objects inform identity. This statement also speaks to the Arts and Crafts movement in the British art world of the late 19th Century. The normalisation of industrialization and machine-manufactured goods eventually struck a chord within artists to fight to create objects made with care and integrity, and thus the movement originated to correct this very issue. They were keen to develop products that were crafted with intention and careful thought, contrary to the thoughtless process of manufactured goods at the time, quality simply a second thought. The recognised figurehead of the movement was designer William Morris, who helped to spread the message far and wide and carefully considered how to go about developing crafts, reflecting on the past (and especially the



Fig. 1.1: Wall hanging designed by William Morris and made by Ada Phoebe Godman (1877). Copyright © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Medieval period) for cleaner and less complicated methods of manufacturing. In 'Arts and Crafts: an introduction' (V&A, 2018), a concise guide to the movement, the art institution's article is quoted as saying, 'Morris believed passionately in the importance of creating beautiful, well-made objects that could be used in everyday life, and that were produced in a way that allowed their makers to remain connected both with their product and with other people.'

This sentiment highlights the very core of the movement in the first place: the desire to get more out of what one owns through ensuring its quality, visual appeal and emotional connection. Morris, and other spearheads of the movement like English writer John Ruskin, sought to free workers from the confines of repetitive making, and instead embrace

deliberate and thoughtful processes instead, methods that might provide more pleasure and familiarity as one must engage with crafting the product every individual step of the way. The movement also pushed forth the idea of a more accessible creative practice, with people free to move out from the city (home to machine-heavy production) to the country, and with the core attitude that one's crafts could range in intricacy, 'lend itself to either simplicity or to splendour' (Petts, 2008). Morris felt that ordinary people deserve the best, that the wealthy should not be the only ones who could acquire quality items - that ultimately, the maker of the product could design it to fit their own specific needs and wants. The movement also flourished internationally, with the USA embracing the design philosophy with the popularity of Shaker furniture, which prioritised minimalism and quality, and even trickling over to Japan decades later with the Mingei movement, which orbited around Morris's intention of everyday objects produced by the average person (Kubodera, 2025), revealing the long-lasting impact of the original movement. This 'everyman' view of product creation and the accessibility to practically any group of people highlights precisely why the movement spread like wildfire around the globe. The Morrisian method and the onrush of folks who fell in love with it shows that people can identify with objects very strongly, especially with a process that invites them to appreciate each stage of making. The repetitive isolation of machine-dominated construction offered nothing to its participants, while the Arts and Crafts movement opened a new world of appreciating the everyday object and finding community in craft-making. This movement shows how belongings and identity can be linked in a very binding way, with the attention paid to creating beautiful objects and finding pleasure in using them daily as part of one's lifestyle key to understanding how much one can connect with the objects around them. This notion is pushed by Soetsu Yanagi (2017), his essay collection an emphasis on appreciating your surroundings, especially through the view of one's objects. 'Even the common articles made for daily use become endowed with beauty when they are loved.' Yanagi argues that as a society, we are quick to ignore items designed for a purely practical purpose, a mistake as we tend to foster a stronger attachment to them than any other through consistent daily use. They inform our every day, an easy thing to forget when we are committed to them through habit, but how would we get by without their repeated usage? Without realising it, these objects can act as conduits for identity, an insight into one's practicalities, quirks and priorities, and it is up to us to appreciate this particular beauty. One can resonate strongly with an inanimate object assuming there is some deeper connotation, be it the time one made it or the people who one was surrounded

with. Although the Art and Crafts movement eventually declined amid the rapid onslaught of World War I, which saw a stronger desire for commercialism and Modernism answering this request, today's philosophers, like Soetsu Yanagi, prove there is still a yearning for one's belongings to mean something, and to seek appreciation in the seemingly simple.



Fig. 1.2: Gustav Stickley, Library Table (1906). 139.7x76.2cm, oak and leather. Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 1.3: Horse-eye motif plate (early 1800s). Stoneware and glaze. Copyright © SFO Museum.

Identity can also shine through when it comes to the collecting of objects, and what one carries on their person from day to day. In 'Within the Lining: Visual Narratives of Self and Safety' (Morra, 2024), the author substantiates that the handbag, regardless of who it belongs to, and the objects it holds are an important peek into who the owner is, with certain items bearing practical purposes, daily use reflecting one's habits, as echoed by Yanagi. Others offer no real need, and are perhaps offerings of fortune or amenity, showcasing the emotional connections that we harbour towards our possessions, that we feel the need to carry them on our person despite them not having an obvious purpose. They retain 'layers of significance', mirroring daily habits, acting as tools for self-expression and recalling fond memories. A handbag presents a space to contain all kinds of objects, thus constructing a collective self-portrait: attunely customised to the wearer's lifestyle. Morra approaches this topic further by inspecting and comparing curated and uncurated looks at purses in media. A very popular form of delving into the handbag is the videos showing celebrities and influencers sharing what everyday items they keep on them, aimed to connect to audiences by telling relatable stories about each possession, when it is clear that these videos are just vessels for

product promotion. In presenting advertising in this down-to-earth manner, they disguise its true intentions, each lip gloss and perfume pulled out of the bag a carefully picked out decision. The decision to present marketing in this tone and the popularity of these videos underlines that viewers seek to relate to their favourite celebrities in a familiar and wholly accessible way, confirming that these A-listers are ‘just like them’. On the other hand, an example on an unbiased attempt to yield authentic results is Sergei Stroitelev’s ‘Russian Women’s Bags from the Inside’ (2016), which had the artist approaching female strangers to capture the assemblage within their bags, keen to showcase the non-performative habits and qualities of each woman through their items. Stroitelev stated in ‘Vice’ (Stroitelev, 2016) that all of his life, he has been baffled by the seemingly endless, random and magical items women seem to pull out of their bags and thus sought to photograph bags belonging to women of differing ages and professions, and through looking at these images, we get a sense of their priorities, quirks and hobbies. The objects range from essentials most would carry to ones incredibly specific to their profession, or found items to clearly treasured keepsakes. Ultimately, the artist captured the breath and importance of each one of these items, offering insight into the disparate identities of the women featured. Morra punctuates her text by evaluating the time she had her own purse stolen, and the immediate subsequent loss she felt deep within her, as if a part of her being had been unrightfully stripped away. Everyday items she did not consider how much she would miss, and tokens of memories now long gone. All and all, this text highlights how often belongings are inherently tied to your being, a way to relate to other people and a beacon of comfort, and the handbag as a means of holding these things is an image that should be celebrated as a mirror unapologetically reflecting the owner.



Fig. 1.4: Sergei Stroitelev, ‘Masha, 56 years old, jeweller and the contents of her bag’ (2016). Photograph. Copyright © Sergei Stroitelev.

This matter is similarly explored by contemporary artist Sabrina Montella, best-known for her ‘objects series’, paintings of finely-detailed flat lays displaying numerous objects aesthetically placed together, aiming to thoroughly represent a specific person. In an interview with Behind The

confusing realms they inhabit. In her debut feature (*The Virgin Suicides* [Feature film], 1999), the Lisbon sisters, both judged or idolised by those around them and stifled within a strict household, reclaim their sense of girlhood through the bedroom they share, which they have turned into a safe and personal haven for their collective treasures. The room thus acts as an evident ‘verbalisation of quiet rebellion and desire for lives that feel like their own’ (Simpson, 2025). This is further evaluated in a video named ‘Sofia Coppola’s “bedroom aesthetic” explained’ (Little White Lies, 2024), the director’s settings interpreted as ‘bedrooms utilised as an outward expression of an emotionally turbulent psyche’. This statement speaks to how clearly her characters can be recognised through their personal spaces, indicators of mental state, interests and artistic verbalisation. The creator reflects on the 1999 feature film and how it purposely centers the neighbouring boys to the Lisbon girls, who assemble pieces of evidence of the girls’ existence, fascinated with the enigmatic, abstracted idea of who they were before their shocking collective passing, desperate to figure out the root cause of their untimely deaths. Ultimately the boys ignorantly underwrite the sisters in their limited viewpoint, blissfully unaware of their true struggles, using the girls’ left-behind items to further their glamorised fantasy. Despite the Lisbon’s belongings personally representing who they are, they are still misinterpreted by others, identity as seen through possession only truly known to the owners themselves. It is a highly intimate practice.

In her latest feature (*Priscilla* [Feature film], 2023), Priscilla Presley feels lost in Graceland, living with walls too white and nothing she can call her own, juxtaposing her childhood bedroom, the space plastered in newspaper clippings and countertops of assorted trinkets and collectibles, ‘symbolising a youth stripped away, coming-of-age disrupted’ (Simpson, 2025). Moreover, her wardrobe changes drastically to fit her partner’s ideal vision, the colours and silhouettes decided for her, speaking to how important one’s garments can be for one’s identity and how you can lose yourself in clothes that do not resonate with you. She wanders around Graceland in discontent, unrecognisable as she passes her reflection. Speaking on the criticism calling her films trivial, insubstantial and ‘style over substance’, Coppola stated, ‘You’re considered superficial and silly if you are interested in fashion, but I think you can be substantial and still be interested in frivolity.’ This point clarifies her passion for creating personal stories that speak to women and their interests, and a girl’s belongings and style being an important part of one’s inner world, especially through coming-of-age. Collecting objects one relates to is a key part of self-discovery, and engaging in

these ‘frivolous’ practices can have practical and personal benefits. As emphasised in Gardiner’s text, the lived-in quality of Coppola’s expanses speaks to the bedrooms of teenage girls in real life, with beauty products sprawled across desktops and clothes haphazardly dumped on the floor. Coppola understands that the bedroom acts as an outlet for one to decorate and dishevel as they please, a true reflection of one’s identity. A living, breathing thing. A home.



Fig. 1.6: Film Still from *The Virgin Suicides* (1999). [Film] FILMGRAB. Public Domain.



Fig. 1.7: Film Still from *Priscilla* (2023). [Film] FILMGRAB. Public Domain.

CHAPTER II - Object Untethered from Selfhood

It seemed fitting to start this section with two excerpts from ‘Just Kids’ by Patti Smith (2010), the musician’s memoir documenting her relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe and their several artistic collaborations. “At first he [Mapplethorpe] had to rein me in. I would try to get him to take pictures like the album cover for ‘Bringing It All Back Home’, where Bob Dylan surrounds himself with his favourite things...“Too cluttered with crap,” he said. “Just let me take your picture.””; “There were none of my things to clutter the picture, for me to identify with, or hide behind.” These quotes strikingly highlight that a compelling portrait cannot always be made through the assistance of random items meant to signify something when the complexity of the face and the skill of the photographer should be able to capture the essence of the subject. And thus, it can be argued that seeking identity through the objects is an unnecessary venture, when true identity can only be found hidden in oneself. The practice of showcasing only the main figure of a photograph had been done for many years before Mapplethorpe’s work of course, iconically by Nadar through the 19th Century, who ‘understood [his photography] to be a private theater of personality, a stage for intimate, extemporaneous, collaborative performances between himself and his trusted companions’ (Daniel, 2004). Nadar’s photographs have clear and crisp backgrounds with a focus on the bodily presentation through staging without props and concentrated lighting, desiring for his subjects to shine in a synergetic process, personality on full display. Nadar’s method reiterates that portraits arguably tell the most about its figure without conflicting set pieces and simply attention on the face and body, connoting that belongings are a distraction from truly uncovering oneself.



Fig. 2.1: Robert Mapplethorpe, ‘Patti Smith’ (1975). Photograph. Copyright © Tate.



Fig. 2.2: Nadar, ‘Gioacchino Rossini’ (1856). Photograph. Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Perhaps to truly uncover identity, one should instead chase experiences, explore nature and seek out community. A fulfilling lifestyle can be found outside of the realm of owning stuff.

Although it may be difficult for the majority of the population to imagine life without certain objects in their possession, for others it is the only conceivable way. It is the way of the nomad. As discussed in the article 'Liquid Relationship to Possessions' (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould, 2012), it is first addressed that belongings act as connective tissue to the material world and are gauges of one's culture, past, principles and relationships, a visual and substantial testament to an existence. That goes for the typical person, however for nomads, keeping a steady array of possessions becomes problematic because of its ultimate combined weight, both physically and culturally: carrying too many items on one's person will weigh them down as they journey, and certain objects could tie to one particular place which conflicts with a nomad's values and ever-evolving definition of 'home'. It is made clear then that nomads are flexible beings and emancipated from the common lens that possessions guide identity. Instead, they tend to esteem items that allow for constant mobility and seek identity through building strong personal relationships and engaging with economic action. 'Liquid phenomena', as the authors highlight, is the value that nothing lasts forever and thus a consumer must be prepared to give up an item once it prohibits future opportunities, a shared insight among nomads as they tend to look and move forward. The value of everything, specifically objects, becomes useless as soon as the consumer must move on and it no longer serves their evolving purpose. This speaks to how possessions provide a 'temporary and situational' function and, by those who subscribe to the 'liquid phenomena' mindset, are appreciated only as instruments for a closed period of time. Mobility is favoured over all else. The authors highlight a world that exists separate to the mainstream, one where objects do not provide identity or belonging, leaving more room for self-realisation and forgoing ego. A world that finds true meaning in the environment and community and not what is contained in one's pocket.

It is human nature to judge the people around us by what they wear or carry with them, for how they choose to present themselves to the world. However, what can an outside perspective really learn about a person from their belongings? This very question was asked by writer and installation artist Sophie Calle in 1981 with her work 'The Hotel', which was analysed in 'Checking Out: The Investigation of the Everyday in Sophie Calle's L'Hôtel' (Sheringham, 2006). Calle, over the

course of three weeks, worked as a chambermaid at the Hotel C. in Venice, Italy, stashing her camera and tape recorder in her mop bucket, and the author lays out her initial intention: to sort through and document the evidence of the hotel guests' lives whose rooms she was charged with cleaning. Calle dug through bedding, suitcases, drawers, bins, wardrobes and more to acquire items, keen to investigate how her guests appropriated the same spaces in succession and personal aspects of their characters. The guests did not know they were being analysed and so the objects they packed with them are uncurated and end up revealing very little insight into their character. Sheringham states, 'if people's lives are under scrutiny the extreme attention to detail does not make them familiar: they remain "étrangers."' This remark suggests that access to another's territory and an insider look at their belongings will reveal little beyond how they navigate the space, and nothing of their history or identity. Even through this extreme invasion of privacy and peek behind the curtain, Calle's subjects remain a mystery, even as she attempts to work in dialogue with them through use of their discarded remains (adorning their makeup, tasting half-finished food and conserving binned items), which the author feels only furthers the distance between her and her guests, her involvement in their way of life taking place only in their absence. Despite Calle making her best effort to dissect and scrounge through the physical extensions of her subjects, she learns little of who they are, what they value or of their personalities, her photographs instead capturing the ghostly remnants of someone who simply came and went. This underlines the argument that you can never truly know someone only through gazing at what they possess, a conversation with the guest ultimately likely to reveal more.



Fig. 2.3: Sophie Calle, 'The Hotel, Room 47' (1981). 214×142cm, photographs and ink on paper. Copyright © Tate.

It can also be said that the objects we have do not mean anything real to us at all but are simply projections of what we want the world to see. I myself have previously been caught up in extreme curation of my possessions, ensuring the keyrings garnishing my keys represent all of my primary interests and decorating my bedroom with the right balance of film and music paraphernalia,

practical equipment and sentimental trinkets so my guests can hopefully tell who I am right away and not want to dig further into my character. It must also be said that, although craft can be a true way of connecting with an object, one made by oneself, most of the things around us have been built by others, often by unethical means. Slaved over by workers in sweatshops, created to appeal to the most amount of people possible. Designer logos slapped across items to incite desire in buyers for supposed ‘quality’. Objects simply exist and are made, and value is imbued upon them: human subjectivity is a powerful thing. They can carry meaning from person to person, a new story taking over the item, whether intentional or not. David J. Ekerdt analyses this common practice in ‘Ageing in Everyday Life Materialities and Embodiments’ (Stephen Katz, 2018), and how individual perspective changes as one ages. The majority of objects we own have been made by another’s hands, and yet we often ingrain them with strong sentiment that they feel a part of us and we treasure them even through degradation. It is natural then that one might begin to associate certain objects with their being or identity, the significance of the item growing alongside the owner, although it should be said that sometimes things are bought for little reason other than a general liking, something that would fit naturally into one’s life. It is comforting to have things around you, things that reflect your character. Ekerdt finalises that belongings decorate our lives and become notable tokens that others may correlate with us, but they absolutely do not define us. Objects exist and will continue to exist without human input. Moreover, they may have been crafted via the labour of another individual, and this practice must be respected. The object was not made for you, it was simply made. Or as the philosophical school of thought ‘Object-Oriented Ontology’ (OOO) suggests, the object is of equal value to all other objects in the world, including living beings. OOO is an approach which permits that humans (or other living things) should not be valued over inanimate objects, and all objects should be defined only as what they are and not in relation to human beings. In ‘Object-Oriented Ontology and the Other of We in Anthropocentric Posthumanism’ (Hendlin, 2023) the author elaborates on the core of the belief system, stating, ‘Overcoming the idea that objects only sprout into existence or importance when humans are examining them is certainly a welcome step from certain previous canonical philosophies’, inferring that attaching ourselves to the items around us is something to be considered and dealt with, skeptical of the notion that objects play this grand part of our lives, encompassing a Postmodernist mindset. Attempting to fully understand or relate to the things around us is a futile perspective, as we can never truly know why things are the way they are, and they should simply

earn the same autonomy as people do. If we consider this theory, it could be argued that the objects one happens to own should not at all be correlated to identity, but instead merely viewed as co-existence. If objects hold the same value as us and are not to be looked down upon as simply prevailing in relationship to us, then how would they inform one's character at all? Moreover, can we really discover the nuances of a person from what they possess alone? A short film that explores truth gained from a look into a handbag, similarly to Sabrina Montello and Sergei Stroitelev, is Yvon Marciano's short film (*Emilie Muller* [Short film], 1993), which portrays the titular Emilie attending an audition and being asked by the casting director to discuss the contents of her handbag. She shares the sketchbook she owns that consists of stories, dreams and quotes that titillate her, the memoir she is currently reading, cigarettes she carries on her for friends' use and a Polaroid of her mother in her youth holding a man that is not her father. Emilie orchestrates the audition effortlessly, divulging intimate details of her every-day life and desires, before her time is up and she leaves. It is then revealed, however, that the handbag actually belonged to a member of the casting team. Despite supposedly dispelling so much about her life, via what she owned, it was all a facade, each object simply a prop prompting inspired fables from Emilie. However, what Emilie tells about herself is delineated with no particular nuance and easily relates to the viewer's own mundane qualities and life experiences. Even if the stories were true, Emilie largely remains a mystery, known to us only through a generic diary, everyday essentials and a plane ticket from Paris to Nice. The audience is endeared to the woman through her performance, perfectly charming and open and willing to empty her handbag, and when she leaves, we want to know more about her than ever. The handbag in this case only acts as a spur for conversation and, like with Sophie Calle's coming-and-going guests, Emilie remains a passerby, impacting the space for a period of time before disappearing again, nothing learned of who she really is besides a fantastic actress. Arguably, our possessions may connect us with other people, relatable and familiar tools across generations of individuals, but they will not speak greatly to our own nuances, philosophies or values: this can only be learned when one braves human interaction.



Fig. 2.4: Film Still from *Emilie Muller* (1993). [Film] Kinorium. Public Domain.

CHAPTER III - The Influence of Overconsumption in what we own

It becomes clear from this text thus far that there are in fact both positive and negative repercussions of attaching meaning to our possessions and reasons for and against associating them with one's identity, but what if the consumer themselves has no say in this conversation? Overconsumption exists primarily as an economic force, as stated in Naomi Klein's book 'No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies' (Klein, 2000), and so it is vital then for companies to do everything it takes to connect to the consumer, manufacturing desire, inventing solutions to made-up problems and providing quick fixes to bigger issues. These marketing ploys can come in many forms, from convincing people, typically women, of new insecurities that must be overhauled - seen with anti-ageing products that claim they will smooth all lines and weight-loss methods that will help one achieve the currently trending body type - to insisting consumers purchase the newest craze in order to keep up with the times. In the journal article 'Combating Consumerism and Capitalism: A Decade of "No Logo"' (Schor, 2010), the author highlights Klein's point that (at the time the book was published) fashion brands and fast food chains expanded their marketing to feature in more and more public spaces to catch the attention of buyers essentially whenever they left the house, no space safe from the gaze of Nike and Starbucks. However, in the years since Klein's book was published, we have seen this phenomenon advance exponentially, with brands now capable of capturing audience attention via social media, meaning they can sell you anything, any time, no matter where you are, as long as you have an electronic device on hand. Situationism, the theory that external factors decide human behavior rather than personality, would say that people have little control over what they choose to own as it is all forced on us by corporations, sending us targeted advertisements and dictating what goes in and out of style. Furthermore, with social media constantly pushing for new trends, it is often difficult to resist certain popular items or practices, especially when they are declared as signifiers of strong personal identity and authenticity. A recent trend that exemplifies this is the action of 'Jane-Birkin-ifying' one's bag, named after the actress of the same name who iconically always carried around her same handbag, which was worn in and adorned with several attached keychains and charms, reflecting her personality. As discussed in a video by the name of 'THE POLITICS OF DECORATING YOUR BAG: Jane Birkin, Anik-Anik, Overconsumption and Authenticity' (NichePeach, 2024), Birkin's lifestyle has become a viral trend with people desperate to show off their character as she did and

influencers promoting that their followers bulk-buy keyrings and other appendages to achieve this effect. This ultimately ignores Birkin's ideal of collecting her trinkets organically, adding to her bag piece by piece, instead encouraging buyers to seek their ornaments through fast fashion sellers, who took note of the growing trend and updated their websites accordingly. The obsession with Birkin's process started because it showed the world a peek at her authentic self, and self-expression through fashion is a widely-appealing concept. As stated by the video's creator, 'If you do not look interesting, then are you?', highlighting the fear many have that one will be perceived as boring or unstylish and thus the need to achieve a compelling look, even if it is through inorganic means bad for the environment. This tells us that even 'personal style' can be sold to us, and that it is important that buyers try to reflect on their desires and how they want to portray themselves outside of the marketing that follows them. Unlike Nicolina Morra's devastation at losing her handbag, customised to fit her personality and needs, it could be predicted that consumers inspired by this trend would hardly flinch at experiencing the same loss as they could simply repurchase their charms from Shein for pennies.



Fig. 3.1: Image of Jane Birkin at her mother's house in London with the original Birkin bag (1996). Copyright © Sotheby's.

Companies want us to think that shopping is the only way to gain a personality, to become our dream selves, to *live*. 'I think, therefore I am' is the famous philosophical principle by René Descartes, which asserts that the act of thinking proves that the 'thinking' self exists, and even if the rest of the world is an illusion, us thinking beings do in fact exist. What would happen then if this notion were to be twisted, if 'think' were to be replaced with 'shop'? In a chapter of 'American Anthropologist' titled 'I Shop, Therefore I am' (Belk et al., 1999), the authors analyse the artwork

of the same name by Barbara Kruger, conceptual artist known for her graphic and politically-charged word art. The artwork itself is her trademark black and white photograph and eye-catching red block of text, shuddering the audience in an unflinching critique of materialism in today's society. The primary text itself implies that, in conflict with Descartes's original proclamation that we exist because we think, we instead exist because we buy and are thus defined by what we buy. Kruger exposes the common, often unconscious need to construct one's life and identity through material goods, a culture enforced on everyday people through excessive advertising, with her artwork ironically going on to be branded across t-shirts, shopping bags and more. This occurrence shows how easily a phrase like Kruger's can be misconstrued and misunderstood, an advertisement devoid of the awareness that the artist initially aimed to critique this capitalistic mindset. The initial statement poses to the viewer that we are simply a collection of what we purchase, an ever-growing cacophony of trends, of plastic, of things companies force us to believe will radically improve our lives. As stated previously, designer goods are heavily sought after due to their apparent high quality and the sense that they are rare or unattainable, however investigation into luxury labels (like Dior and Giorgio Armani) suggests that they employ similar cheap and immoral labour practices to fast fashion brands (Donnell, 2025), and thus the fuss is only about the namesake. There is a certain 'clout' that comes with owning designer products, and buyers tend to align themselves with the brand's high status and reputation. The authors themselves point out that shopping is often thought of as 'fantasy', the buyer in a dreamlike state where they can become anyone they want to through one simple financial transaction, but this mindset is fruitless. Once the initial excitement wears off, all one is left with is another *thing*. The 1987 artwork and this book chapter urge the audience to contemplate their own existential view of self and their place in modern society, and if one should like to be remembered by what they thought or what they bought. True fulfillment cannot be discovered in the perpetual acquisition of new belongings and leads only to the inevitable feeling of discontent, whereas working to constantly learn and expand one's brain will lead to true stimulation, gratification and pleasure, and not the fake, fleeting pleasure companies dangle in front of our faces.



Fig. 3.2: Barbara Kruger, 'Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)' (1987). 283x280cm, serigraph on vinyl in artist's frame. Copyright © The Broad.

It becomes clear then that if we live in an economy that thrives on consistent customer engagement and customers consistently fall into the trap of unnecessary shopping, one must learn to *resist*. Resist unflappable advertising and instead focus on what would actually better one's life. The New York Times covers this phenomenon in an article titled 'How to quit shopping? Mute, delete and unsubscribe.' (Holman and Ortiz, 2025), wherein Cassandra Orakpo, the primary narrative of the text, explains that she recently tired of her shopping (bordering on hoarding) addiction, suddenly taking in all of the unused products around her and the wishes they never granted, the excessive number of clothes that have piled up with Orakpo still certain she has 'nothing to wear'. This led her to limit her spending, unsubscribe from brand emails and clear all applications that continually push for her to acquire the next big thing, and her spreading the word online for others to do the same, which struck a chord with many like-minded consumers. Advertisements leak into burgeoning amounts of media, with posters draped across buildings and buses, commercials present on majority streaming services and influencers always bulldozing massive sales and promoting a carousel of new products: it is an unavoidable, manipulative ecosystem. Every other video on TikTok, for example, is selling a ridiculous array of gratuitous goods, from makeup, clothes and skincare products to 'phone stands, wigs and kitchen sink strainers': ultimately superfluous products that audiences are convinced they need. Items arrive in the post and the dopamine rush hits upon receiving an exciting new thing, but shortly after, indifference creeps in and the product collects dust in its box. On Orakpo spreading her message, the authors express, 'The zeal that is driving this trend is as much a pushback against the forces of a consumerist culture as it is about saving money, with scorn for corporate manipulation mixed in with tips for changing personal habits'. This proposes that collectively buyers are fighting against capitalist mantras and working to better one another through sharing advice and finding community through this shared experience, and community is something real to hold on to, especially with frequent terms like 'selling fast!' and 'only one left in stock!', forcing shoppers into a state of competitiveness, ready to fight their fellow shopper for their win. In this case, the buyer's reasoning for purchasing is tainted, focused only on acquiring something rare or limited edition instead of seeking something that improves daily life. More than anything, the article underscores that aiming to resist the endless promotion of products is ultimately supremely beneficial, allowing one to take more pride in what one already owns rather than relying on a steady stream of new belongings. Believing a

new object is going to provide a sense of identity is a flaw in the first place, and when it comes to adverts presenting the 'next best thing', scrolling past is the best route.

CONCLUSION

In 2001, British artist Michael Landy performed 'Break Down', over fourteen days systematically destroying all his amassed possessions: everything he owned. This encompassed 'the mundane to the priceless' (Archive of Destruction, no date): his passport, receipts, records, childhood memorabilia and money are equally reduced to nothing. The installation was massively controversial, and responding to backlash years later, Landy expressed that he felt his performance was in fact a celebration of his life, a self-portrait embodied through his belongings that aimed to have audiences consider their own relationship with material goods and how the sense of self is formulated. The artwork exemplifies the complexities of this topic and the inherent link between object and selfhood, with Landy himself excerpting that the objects involved in the process collectively represent himself, with the destruction thus 'erasing' him from the world, but also that he no longer feels the need to rely on what he has garnered over the years. It is a slap in the face of overconsumption, Landy impervious to the money spent and hours of labour taken to create his now-demolished belongings.

The act of owning something is a collective human experience, which is perhaps why Landy's installation struck such a chord with viewers, who could not imagine their lives without their favourite book, photo albums, travel souvenirs, heirlooms or everyday mug. Belongings mirror our individualities, our stories and our memories, and make daily life manageable, reliable and ritualistic, either through serving a practical purpose or reminding us of a special time in our lives. Owning a variety of things allows us to discover what we value, like and dislike as we age, and to connect with others through these shared interests, community developed through collective passion for owning or crafting objects of personal meaning. On the other hand, it seems it is important to regularly take a step back from the objects surrounding one's vision and consider what identity looks like beneath it all and find appreciation instead in nature and in loved ones, and to be at ease with the thought that you might one day lose something, an unfortunately unavoidable reality. One can get to know others through conversation, through asking questions and sharing stories in return, rather than trying to read a person through their handbag contents.

Overconsumption and extreme advertising are not going to slow down at any point soon, with fashion trends circulating faster than ever and more and more streaming services adopting adverts to play before and during their media even for paying customers. Brands will continue to try their hardest to sell *anything* to us, including new and evolving insecurities and how they can be cured, at a cost, of course. If this is an inescapability, the best thing one can do is *resist*. Make purchases with agency, awareness and intention, putting consideration into what might really benefit one's life and what is likely to collect dust in its box. Participate in trends because they ring true to you and not due to them simply being the popular thing. Follow Orakpo's advice and audit subscriptions, budget and let go of anything that does not provide joy, seeking appreciation instead from what one already owns. Possessions and identity are undoubtedly interlinked, although the connection will vary from person to person. Existing in this capitalist society is a very conflicting and intimate experience, and it is therefore important to be mindful of why you own the things you do. In this age of overconsumption, be grateful for what you already have and hold your loved ones near and dear.

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