WHAT OUR POSSESSIONS SAY ABOUT US
with Professor Russell Belk


What do our possessions say about us? Award-winning marketing professor Russell Belk talks about how our possessions (including our clothing, cars, people, collections, gifts, social media pages,…) become part of our identity – or our extended self. Professor Belk highlights the significance of the sharing economy and de-materialization, cultural differences, and our evolving identities in relation to our possessions.

SHOWNOTES

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3 Key Learnings

1. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES -  
   We need to be culturally sensitive in terms of our possessions. Cultural differences account for many of the “mistakes” that people may make when they are trying to implicitly communicate things, particularly thorough their possessions. In fact, how we describe ourselves varies by culture.
   - In the western world, we might describe ourselves in terms of our careers, whereas in India, people would begin with who their parents and their grandparents were and where they've lived and maybe eventually get around to them themselves.
   - In Chinese culture, you have a debt to your parents for the gift of your birth, and you pay back that debt over a lifetime.
   - Cultures vary significantly in terms of their gift-giving traditions.

2. EVOLVING IDENTITY -  
   Our identity, our self, is not static. It evolves over time.
   - This is empowering. We can change or improve our reputations, our identities.
   - Our possessions and ourselves/identities may be more ephemeral now than in the past. We have all heard about how nowadays people are more likely to have several different careers over their lifetime. This is one example of how our identities can evolve. Possessions can also be ephemeral, and more and more of them may be, given the effects of digitization and the sharing economy.

3. DE-MATERIALIZATION -  
   The extent to which materialism (the demonstration of success through material goods) is acceptable, varies by culture and by the state of the economy. It is offensive to demonstrate material success when others cannot access that opportunity.
   - Younger generations are exhibiting a more simplified lifestyle, a lack of attachment and de-materialisation of possessions. The sharing economy may propel these changes.
   - Regardless of this de-materialization trend, Russ concludes by saying, “I don't think we'll ever do away with symbolism, but we may find other ways to communicate what we think of ourselves and other people.”
References & Links

Professor Russell Belk
- Schulich School at York University – http://schulich.yorku.ca/faculty/russell-w-belk/
- Professor Belk’s scholarly articles - https://scholar.google.ca/citations?user=kISyVxYAAAAJ&hl=en

Papers & Scholars Referenced
- Ralph Waldo Emerson on a “True Gift” - https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/303
- Grant McCracken – clothing as language - https://amzn.to/2LtylZk
- Jerry Zaltman (Harvard) - https://www.hbs.edu/Pages/faculty-search.aspx?q=zaltman
- John Deighton (Harvard) - https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?facId=6446

Talk About Talk
Hey there. I'm Dr. Andrea WOJNICKI. You can call me Andrea. Welcome to Talk About Talk, the communication-focus podcast that provides us with the knowledge, strategies and confidence to enrich our relationships and enhance our career success. This week, we are learning about what our possessions say about us.

I thought this was the perfect topic to follow last week’s podcast on Fashion, where I interviewed Carolyn Quinn, the executive director of Toronto Fashion Week. If you haven’t listened to that episode yet, Carolyn provides many actionable suggestions for us -- regarding what clothing to buy and how to choose an outfit.

Today we are going to dive into the implicit communication associated with our possessions, which includes clothing and a whole lot of other things, including our cars, our homes, our music and photo collections, our partners, our children, and even our online presence. For today’s episode I had the privilege of interviewing Professor Russell Belk, or Russ, as he likes to be called. I will tell you more about his background and accomplishments in a moment. But first, let me tell you about the impact he had on me.

As you can probably guess, when you are a doctoral student, you read a huge number of
academic papers. There are the many papers that you are assigned to read by your professors, and then – there are those that you choose to read because they are related to your own research topic. Russ’s papers fell into both categories for me. Most notably, there is his seminal paper called “Possessions and the Extended Self,” which has almost 10,000 citations. Do you know what that means? That means that 10,000 other academic researchers cite Russ’s paper in their published work. Yes, he is incredibly influential, and yes, I am one of those 10,000. If you want to take a look at that impactful paper, I’ve included a link to it and other papers of his in the shounotes on the Talk About Talk website under the PODCAST tab.

If you skim this paper, you will see that Russ has an uncommon ability to take an everyday phenomenon, like say, expressing your identity or say, gift-giving -- and breaking it down into meaningful elements and then building them up again to create a holistic theory.

In his paper “Possessions and the extended self” and his follow-up paper “The Extended Self in the Digital World,” Russ examines and integrates existing research in marketing and psychology -- to describe how our possessions are a contributor to, as well as a reflection of, our identity. Russ quotes William James’, who says that a possession is anything that we can call “ours”. He details for example, collections, gift-giving, body parts, money, pets, other people, and even what happens when possessions are lost.

So – let’s all take a look at what we are wearing right now. What do our clothes say about us? Beyond the brands. What about the colour? the style, the vintage? What about our hair? Our hair is certainly a highly visible possession. What does our hair communicate about each of us?

Now, consider the outside of your house or apartment. What does your home say about you? What about your pages on social media? What does your FB page say about you?
Here's a good question: **How conscious are you about what you are communicating through these and other possessions?**

And the question that I'm personally looking for an answer to: **what mistakes do we make in terms of our assumptions regarding our possessions and what they say about us?**

Speaking of great questions: how about this one: is an **avatar** a possession or a self? Or does it matter? Russ answers this question for us and shares some fascinating research related to avatars that may inform a life-hack for us.

**Let me introduce Professor Russel Belk to you now.**

Russ is a Distinguished Research Professor at [York University](https://www.yorku.ca) and the Kraft Foods Canada Chair in Marketing. His work tends to be qualitative, visual, and cultural. He has received many awards, including the Paul D. Converse Award, two Fulbright Awards, and the Sheth Foundation/Journal of Consumer Research Award for Long Term Contribution to Consumer Research. He is a fellow in the Association for Consumer Research, the American Psychological Association and the [Royal Society of Canada](https://www.soccan.org).

He has over 650 publications and his research involves the extended self, meanings of possessions, collecting, gift-giving, sharing, digital consumption, and materialism.

THANK YOU so much for joining us, Russ!

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**Interview Transcript**

Russell Belk: Pleasure.

Dr. Andrea Wojnicki: I thought it'd be great to start with definitions. So maybe let's start with self and extended itself. What do we mean when we say self?

RB: You picked a difficult topic. No one agrees on what the self is, but I guess a simple way of thinking about it would be is **what we think about who we are** and **what others think about who we are**.
we are. And so extended itself is how that self is conveyed through the things that we own and the things that we do with them.

AW: So I keep thinking the word identity, right?

RB: Yeah, self and identity are pretty much interchangeable.

AW: Okay. So I read in your paper, this quote that I just pulled out, because I thought it was interesting. The core self is a belief rather than a fact. Can you elaborate on that?

RB: Sure. We'd like to think that we have an inner self that is unchanging, that is the same self we had when we were children. When we are old and die. But that's not true. Our self is continually changing, continually evolving. There may be a few things. If I asked you who you are, you might say your name, where you're from, what you do. It's a little bit different in different cultures. In India, people would begin with who their parents and their grandparents were and where they've lived. And maybe eventually get around to themselves. But by and large, what we answer to that question is what we think about who we are. And as we think about ourselves, we begin to bring in places people and things as a part of that as well. That's what I'm calling the extended itself.

AW: And so there's a layering... I don't know if you want to call it a hierarchy? Does that vary by culture?

RB: It does to some degree, some cultures are less materialistic. And some are more into lineage. In Chinese culture, for example, you owe a debt to your parents when you're born for making the gift of your birth to you. And so you pay that back over a lifetime and even after they've died. For example, burning paper goods for them to use an afterlife.

AW: Wow, wow. Okay, I want to get into materialism in a minute. But first, let's shift now to the definition of possessions. If I just think about possessions and the extended self, the first image that comes to my mind actually is someone who's driving a certain brand of a car. So the possessions that come to mind, I think it's kind of a low hanging fruit in this context, is brands.

RB: I mean, it can be brands, but it need not be. It could be something that you found on the beach, and that's a part of who you are, you saved it, perhaps it becomes a part of a collection. But while you say that's a low hanging fruit, the car that you're driving might be a rental, or could be a part of the sharing economy as a car or something of that sort. So it's getting a little bit trickier. And the other thing that is relatively new is the digital economy, because those are intangible things. If we put something up online or if we download something. Those are possessions. We can we can legally own, we can do things with them. But they're not tangible stuff. They're not what we used to think about as being possessions.

AW: So do possessions have to be legally owned?

RB: No, it's something that we think about as being ours. So, if I have students in a classroom and they sit in the same seat every time and I haven't assigned them, they begin to think of that as their seat. If someone else sits there they get angry and upset.

AW: Does it have to be a noun?

RB: No, you could call your temperament ... Actually we describe ourselves by what we do, what we have, and ultimately what we are. There's some inner sense of who we think we are: our predispositions, our values and so forth.

AW: So that's a little bit related to what I was talking to Professor Jerry Zaltman about. When I was interviewing him, he said that he was at a farmers’ market and he saw a sign on the wall
that said: “you are what you eat.” And he's been thinking you are what you think. And he said, “Now, Andrea, you're saying, you are what you say.” So it's, as you say, it's what we do. It's what we have. It's what we are. And as Jerry said, it's what we think. And as I'm saying, it's what you say.

RB: Those latter two categories are a bit more ephemeral. What you say becomes forgotten more easily than the house that you live in or the or the car that you drive.

AW: True. It’s intangible?

RB: and fleeting. I mean, it's there, as long as the echo of that sentences is there in your head, or the thought that you are thinking is there in your head but tomorrow morning, you may remember it differently and others may as well.

AW: Unless you're in the digital world.

RB: Sure, you are making an imprint that some would say will last a lifetime. At least it's going to last a while.

AW: I actually was listening to NPR the other day and they were talking about how people are starting to assume that it is there forever. But then it's not. And they're freaking out when companies go under, and stuff that they've written is gone.

RB: Yeah. And you could have invested a lot in it. And the same goes with how if you created a digital avatar that you put great care into and spent real money, equipping and clothing and so forth. And that platform shuts and you don't have it any longer.

AW: Okay, so one of the questions I really want to ask you is, is an avatar, a possession, or a self or does it matter?

RB: It's a pseudo-self. It's a self and a possession. It's an alter ego. People usually have some semblance of who they think they are or playfully would like to be. And so they've invested a bit of themselves in it, but it isn't identical to saying that is their self. It is not like the movie Avatar where you literally become your avatar. You go into an online world.

AW: And there's all sorts of fascinating research being done on that people believe they can segregate themselves from or disembodify themselves from the avatar. But then the avatar is taking on more and more of their own personality traits.

RB: Yes, and vice versa. If you assign someone a taller and more attractive avatar, they become more self-confident. And that self-confidence carries over offline as well as when they are operating through the avatar. With an older avatar they become more concerned with saving money, and with a more physically fit avatar, they become more concerned with exercise. These effects once again are carried over from the online world to the offline …

AW: …so that's like a life hack! Actually, if I want to be fitter. For example, my Bitmoji -- I should make it more fit looking with the more physically fit body type.

RB: I would proceed with a bit of a caution. The studies show that it carries over are when you're assigned a particular avatar, versus when you create it yourself. It may or may not be the same sort of effect, because …

AW: I would have guessed the opposite -- because of attribution. Right? Like I chose this I want this I'm working towards this versus it was randomly assigned?

RB: Unless you do it playfully. And in that case, you may not be taking it as seriously. You're getting out your aggressions with a World of Warcraft, a hostile avatar that's not really you.

AW: Fascinating! Okay. Let me just ask a couple of other questions related to possessions. Are people, other people, can they qualify as possessions? Like my child?
RB: People would often say that -- yes. And even a dating partner sometimes is referred to as someone that you’re wearing, especially in the gay community. Or the notion of “a trophy wife” would also imply that is a possession. When Veblen talked about conspicuous consumption, he talked about moguls who would dress their wives and children in finery that they themselves weren't particularly inclined to wear. It was a vicarious expression of their wealth and who they thought they were.

AW: And it's extended self to another that they're considering as a possession. Even if it's…

RB: I mean, listen, if your child or even your dog misbehaves, it reflects on you. And so a barking dog or a crying baby, is your responsibility and reflection of you as and your motherhood or the fatherhood.

AW: I've heard catty mothers criticizing other mothers who dress their kids up and it's like, does the kid really care that they're wearing designer clothes? That's ridiculous. Well, they're not doing it for the kid. They're doing it for themselves, right? It's kind of the same thing.

RB: True, but even funerals are really not for the deceased. They are for the survivors.

AW: Right.

RB: We do that in other ways as well.

AW: Fascinating. Okay. So I think one of the most important questions that Talk About Talk listeners would want to hear from you is, what are some of the ways that we may be communicating through our possessions non consciously where we're telling people things about ourselves, and maybe we should be more conscious of the message that we're communicating when, otherwise we wouldn't be?

RB: I guess, think of an example where there's a conflict between how people would perceive us and the image that we're trying to communicate -- or implicitly communicating -- would be when we see an older person in a mini skirt and an outfit that we associate with younger people. We could also see it in other contexts. And we think -- That person is putting on airs, or they just don't know what's appropriate for their age, or who they are.

AW: Who did they think they are doing that? And it it's particularly targeted at women. But don't you think that they are conscious of that?

RB: Sometimes, yes. And sometimes it's, you know, I don't care what other people think. I'm going to dress as I feel that makes me feel good. And if other people look at me askance, it's just too bad. So there are people that are seemingly more impervious than others.

AW: So it's like the teenager who dresses up in black and they're all goth because they're trying to reject whatever their parents think they should be communicating through their clothing, and then the kid just looks like a kid that's conforming to the goth culture.

RB: Yes.

AW: Ironic, right?

RB: We all have these tendencies to try to fit in and try to stand out. And different people have a different balance between those two. But even nonconformance… it must be recognized. You mentioned goth, a recognizable type of nonconformity. And Grant McCracken is an anthropologist here in town. You know him, I think. He talks about clothing as language. It is language, but only to the extent that we can fit it into an existing meaning system. So if you wear green top hat, and an orange to tutu and Vans, sneakers and you’re skateboarding in a residential area, you'll be striking. But people won't know quite what to make of it. It doesn't fit into enough existing codes or there's too many conflicting codes. There's degrees of conformity and degrees
of standing out and, you know, there's different looks that we might be trying. The different systems rather that we might be trying to communicate within. And so **COOL, for example, is a different status system than the socioeconomic one because it is not so dependent upon wealth. It's more dependent on demeanor and rather than putting on cool things, you're endowing things with coolness.** If you are taken to be a cool person, it means you have a bit of an air of superiority and unflappability. You don't show emotions. These are some of the characteristics of cool people who have to pull that off so that their peer group recognizes them as being cool. And then what is cool is based on what that person has, and how they talk and how they walk.

**AW:** And so it's like how they're displaying the possession or the clothing or the attitude. Right?

**RB:** Yeah, I guess the attitude is kind of the start of it. And then the accoutrements become the definition for other people of what is cool. And there's sort of a trickle-down effect here. Less cool people adopt these things, and the cool person must innovate to continue to look cool.

**AW:** I'd like to shift to **gift giving.** I cannot be involved in a birthday party or gift opening or whatever it is, without thinking of your papers and a couple things in particular stand out. There's the process of procuring the gift and then presenting the gift and then receiving the gift and then displaying the gift. And then the reciprocation, of course.

**RB:** Right.

**AW:** Which is huge. And I'm actually trying to teach my kids this now. I also love all this stuff about how emotion-laden gift giving is -- for both the gift giver and the receiver and how layering on top of that, there's traditions and when to households combine, like mine and my husband's and he's got certain traditions and I've got certain traditions and some of the mesh but most of them don't. People get their feelings hurt, right?

**RB:** That's right. Anytime two people get together they have to decide how they're going to regard especially rituals and the way that we celebrate things and how we eat our dinner.

**AW:** Is a dinner a gift?

**RB:** Yes, it certainly could be. And even such things as do you serve it family style? Or does someone dish it out for you? It is a different sort of power.

**AW:** I hadn't thought of that. So I was wondering, in the context of gift giving, then, how would a gift differ in terms of its relationship to yourself and identity then?..?

**RB:** I guess it's different for the giver and for the recipient. The way you regard that gift is ideally to remember the giver and remember them in a favorable light. Now, it's not always favorable, because you may get an inappropriate or quote unquote, “ugly” gift from someone. And yet, because they're going to come to your house and see it, where it should be, you have to continue to own it. And so that's tarnished your personality or your self-concept, because if you feel it's not really you, you don't really like this thing. But the social obligation is that you should continue to display it.

**AW:** And that may be part of your identity as well -- being gracious.

**RB:** Sure. And the worst thing you can do is refuse the gift. To say I don’t want this. So somewhere in between would be re-gifting, where you take the gift to give it to someone else, hopefully not forgetting who was the original giver, giving it back to them. But in that case, this is developing as a more acceptable thing to do.

**AW:** It's becoming more acceptable? It's used to be extremely insulting, right?
RB: Yeah. And it used to be insulting and still is to some degree, to give a monetary gift or even a gift card rather than tangible gifts that you've actually sought out and thought about and found to be appropriate to the recipient. Emerson said that the true gift should be a part of you. And so, you bring your skills and your interest to bear on the gift, from the receiver's point of view. So from the recipient’s point of view, you're more appreciative because it really is a part of that giver. If you send your secretary out to buy a gift for your partner, that's inappropriate because you haven't put the time and effort and love and thought into it. You probably know “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry?... I think when you hear it you’ll recognize it. Della and Jim were lovers and they each had a special possession. In Jim's case, it was an heirloom watch, pocket watch. And one thing that people used to do was wear it on what's called a watch fob. He didn't have one. He just had the watch. Della had beautiful long hair. And Jim noticed as they passed a store that there were some tortoise shell combs in the window that Della eyed with envy and desire. And so what happened in the end -- and this was Christmas time -- was that Della cut her hair and sold it to buy the watch fob for Jim. And he pawned the watch to buy the tortoise shell combs. So they were both functionally worthless gifts, but in terms of the thought and the communication, they were perfect, because they had sacrificed, they had thought of the other person. They had done away with any pretense that they might have in trying to get a perfunctory gift.

AW: Staying in the in the gift giving realm. You mentioned that digital comments on social media, are gifts. I had not thought of that. So in my research (which is on word of mouth), I remember John Deighton kept grilling me. “What is word of mouth? What is word of mouth? What is word of mouth?” and then I said at one point, “it's a gift.” And now we're seeing that with all the social media comments, the likes, and particularly when people take the time to share things or to write comments about them. They are gifts, right? For many reasons,… Can you comment on that?

RB: It is sometimes called digital patina because you're adding to the person's Facebook page or social media page, whatever it might be. Let me describe something that happens on Facebook, for example. Someone tags you in a photo and you put up a comment, “Oh, I look terrible. I just didn’t get enough sleep the night before.” And they of course they say, “Oh, you look beautiful. I wish I looked that good on a bad day.” So they're reinforcing and affirming a positive self-concept for you. You're expected to do the same thing for them.

AW: So the reciprocity thing?

RB: It’s reciprocity, but it also looks like it's a spontaneous comment from someone else, rather than one that you really sort of said, you know, tell me something that contradicts the negative feeler that I'm putting out there. And the same thing happens on LinkedIn. Now you endorse someone’s skills and they're expected to endorse yours.

AW: Absolutely

RB: And again, it’s reciprocity.

AW: So I could bait someone into complimenting me?

RB: We have to remember reciprocity can also be negative. And so if you say something snarky about someone else, they're likely to say something snarky about you.

AW: Hmm. When I interviewed Andrew Jenkins on social media for a previous episode, he said, Twitter is the snarky channel. So don’t be on Twitter if you can’t stand snarkiness. Stay away.
RB: Well, look at Trump.
AW: Yeah, well, there you go. That's true. I wasn't even thinking of Trump. He comes up by the way, every episode. Sometimes implicitly, but usually not. I wanted to ask you, what are some of the most profound ways that you think the Internet has affected our possessions?
RB: Well, if you think about music, we used to make mixed tapes for someone. That was your ideal soundtrack for their life, and expressing what you thought about them, what you thought they would like. And then I guess it went to mix CDs or DVDs and now it's sort of playlists. And in terms of how people might capture that music and save it, if you will, regarded as a possession might be, you know, as an mp3 file, that they keep categorized, perhaps, and put on their digital device. Or it might be just the playlist and you create a similar playlist on Spotify or some other streaming service. And this is different by generation, but if you're able to divest yourself from your physical music collection, and only have a digital, that's one step. And then the other step would be not to have the digital files on your device and computer, but to simply subscribe to a streaming service where you can call them up.
AW: I hadn't thought of that. I had thought of the first step, right. So you hear these people transcribing their physical possessions into digital possessions, but then to actually forgo, that you this wouldn't happen in a in a photograph context, but in a music context, it would, where you can say, Well, I can access that anytime on the internet, so long as you have access to the internet. I can always count this as part of my playlist.
RB: Yeah, you know, it's interesting that you mentioned photographs because they are conceivably not ephemeral. But they're not tangible either. It's so cheap and easy to take more photos, we are inundated with photos. We don't have curated collections of photos oftentimes other than perhaps a timeline. Yeah, it goes when they were taken. We can date stamp them as well. But you're right that you can't, you know, call one up out of thin air and it's your picture of your beloved mother or something. Yeah, I mean, sometimes people will print out a photo or will create a tangible piece of digital music, burn a CD, still something of that sort, for the music that they really like, and for the photographs that are really important to them. But as I say, I think that may be generational and the digital immigrants, such as us, I guess, are different than the digital natives that have always growing up in this ephemeral world.
AW: It's frightening, isn't it? I create photo albums for my kids whenever we go on vacation, and my older aunts have said your kids don't know how lucky they are. And then I'm thinking Actually, I don't think they will ever care. So it's definitely it's…..
RB: That's nice. Then they're looking at another way to curate their photos.
AW: Related to the ways that the digital world has affected possessions. One thing that you brought up in your 2013 paper is dematerialisation. And I found that fascinating because when I think about possessions, I think of functionality and symbolism. And I'm wondering if when you talk about dematerialisation, if that’s related to a shift, maybe away from symbolism towards functionality, or…?
RB: Yes and no. I think there can still be symbolism in digital goods. And we can still store memories in digital goods, we can have online memorials for someone who has died, for example, and there's a great deal of symbolism and expression. That's a part of that. But we used to have love letters that we would write to a potential partner in longhand, and send in the mail,
and they might take a while to get there. So in different places. And now we exchange email. So there is still symbolism, but it's slippery, it can get away.  

**AW:** When I think of possessions and displaying them, the first thing I always think of the lawyer in the 80s, driving up in his fancy white BMW, right, the classic symbol of the 80s, which was very focused on materialism. Can you comment on whether you think that there are cycles in displaying materialism or whether over time, it is just generally becoming less important?  

**RB:** Yes, this differs culturally as well. Yes, there are cycles and to some degree, they're geared to the economy. To some degree they're geared to the size of the local population. Let me start off at a small village level. Now, there are villages in India where things are changing, but it used to be that people would not display their wealth, because that would provoke envy in other people and that's a bad thing. When it gets big enough or the economy is flexible enough, you have the freedom to change spending patterns at least. Then you can go the opposite direction and try to provoke other people, envy. Sort of more in your face, rather than avoiding that, and that's provocation.  

**AW:** Interesting. So if in a society there are opportunities for people to change their socio-economic status, then it's more okay to display that -- you have succeeded, for example?  

**RB:** Yes. We've studied materialism and various countries, and the places and times when materialism is most rampant are times of rapid economic change -- when you either have the ability to try to climb and social class or you want to safeguard your social status position from the newcomers who are trying to emulate you. And so those are the places and times where we find materialism is most evident.  

**AW:** So another trend that I'm sure you're familiar with is the small house and the tiny house thing, where suddenly … I mean they're actually quite conspicuous. Because they're small, and ironically, they're very conspicuous. But they're communicating a value as opposed to success, right?  

**RB:** In times of ecological consciousness, or in times of energy shortages, like during the 70s, when the first era of our oil embargo took place, it becomes a status symbol to have a small, efficient, fuel efficient car. And it may be that, again, it's catering to the values that are salient at that time. But also trying not to provoke envy because you think the economy is hurting other people and you don't want to rub it in their faces quite as much.  

**AW:** So that provoking envy thing reminds me of another question that I have, which is, can you share with us some misperceptions or mistakes that people make in their beliefs and then in their behaviors of displaying possessions where they might think they're communicating something, they're actually communicating something else that they hadn't intended?  

**RB:** Well, you've just given me a lovely gift of wine, and I hesitated on opening it, because there are different cultural standards about whether that's appropriate or not. And so usually in the West, we would open and say, *Oh, this is lovely. It's really thoughtful of you.* Whereas in Asia, and particularly Japan, that would be extremely rude to open what's in there, because it could be a disappointing gift, and that would bring shame on the giver. If you with your expression, even unintentionally convey that, well, this is not the best yet. So in Asia, there's much more attention to saving face. Then there is typically in the western that's one way in which that's done sorts of things. And so people that are going into another culture have to learn new norms on what's appropriate and conspicuous. But we can overtly stereotype. I was co-hosting a conference in Perth, Australia. And I was asked also to be a discussant on a paper about
the difference between luxury and France, and luxury in Australia. And the image of the French is that they're happy to flaunt it, whereas the image of the Australian is the tall poppy syndrome. That if one stands out above the rest, you cut them down. So everyone's equal. I began my talk by saying, well, this kind of rings true to me, but I have to say, when I was reading this on the way in from the airport, I had to ask my wife to turn down the TV on her side of the backseat of a limo, so that I could concentrate on the paper. So even though we think of these cultural stereotypes, they don't always ring true.

AW: And it's true.
RB: Yeah, it's painting with a broad brush. You have to learn to be natural in a culture. It's not natural for you to behave that way.
AW: Wow. Okay. Is there anything else that you can advise the listeners on in terms of communicating through our possessions?
RB: Well, again, cultural norms are important. And so before you travel to another culture, try to read up a bit about what is appropriate and cultural norms and faux pas and things that can go wrong. I guess it's a type of communication but also mindset with the so-called sharing economy. Millennials in particular are becoming less attached to possessions and they're renting smaller places.
AW: And so again, the dematerialisation. There’s evidence of it everywhere.
RB: Yes they can rent furniture they can do without a car and get by without cars.
AW: You can rent kitchen gadgets; you can rent just about anything.
RB: maids and butlers
AW: people!
RB: So anyway if we think about that, it could be one of two things. It could be that these Millennials are still not having families and children. And when they do, they'll move out of the downtown core to the suburbs and buy a big home and fill it up with stuff. Or it may be that this is a generational difference. And they're going to continue on this sort of simplified lifestyle and lack of attachment and de-materialisation of possessions. And I think it remains to be seen which of those is going to be likely to be true, but …
AW: If you had to guess?
RB: Well, I can see a future where with electric cars and the sharing economy, owning a car becomes a cultural faux pas, a brutish thing to do and a materialistic thing to do. And you must be a fat pig if you own a car. So we could, you know, hire cars, we can share cars, we could share other forms of transport. And if that's the case, rather than getting attached to a brand of automobile, the white BMW you mentioned, we just get a standard car from a pool of cars. And it doesn't matter whether we own that car or not. It's just that it's lost some of its symbolism and become more of a functional possession. I don't think we'll ever do away with symbolism, but we may find other ways to communicate what we think about ourselves and of other people.
AW: Okay, I'm going to move on now to ask you the five rapid fire questions that I ask every guest.
RB: Okay
AW: The first question is, what are your pet peeves?
RB: Well, I have about a 45 minute to an hour commute to come into the university and I don't like people who drive slowly in the center lane rather than the right lane that can be as slow as they want in the right lane.
AW: A lot of people share that pet peeve with you.
RB: Interesting. So I’m not alone?
AW: No. So what do you do with them? Do you honk at them or do you just ….
RB: I just pass them, but I might give them a snide look, shake my head as I pass.
AW: Okay, second question what type of learner Are you?
RB: You know, the good academic answer to your question is “It depends.” It depends on whether I'm, for instance, trying to learn a physical skill, in which case kinesthetic -- being able to feel what it is like to do that ski movement
AW: …versus watching a video or whatever. What if you're trying to memorize something, what's the fastest way or most effective way for you to get it into your brain?
RB: To outsource it to Google.
AW: YES! ha-ha!
RB: There's an article by Carr in the Atlantic Monthly asking: “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” because we no longer have to remember things. We just google it on our device. But I mean, we have gotten comfortable with spell checkers and with calculators. Even though we may not be able to do the math and spelling as well as we would have if we had to do it ourselves. But this is actually a very old argument between Plato and Socrates. Plato is sort of the first of the great authors Socrates was the last of the great orators. And so Socrates accused Plato of making us and dumb because he only looks things up in books. He no longer has the material in his mind. So it's a pretty old argument.
AW: I hadn't thought of that. Question number three, introvert or extrovert?
RB: Depends, once again. If I’m in an airport, I don't try to strike up conversations with other people. I'm not that outgoing. But in a classroom, I become extroverted. And if I'm giving a talk in front of a conference, I've become more extroverted. I've even introduced things with the song and dance and …
AW: Really?
RB: Sure,
AW: I haven't seen that. I gotta check that out on YouTube. Are you dancing? I'm going to check. Fourth question, communication preference for personal conversations. If you need to connect with someone socially about something quickly, how would you do that in terms of what media would you use?
RB: It depends on the person. I’m saying it depends, again. My wife, bless her, is only literate in email, and so I can't text or even for that matter,
AW: So she checks email a lot?
RB: She does. We both spent a lot of time in front of a screen each day. And it's a … it's a little message saying, “I'm thinking of you. I'm here.” And when I'm traveling abroad, we do the same thing. It's sort of saying, “Yeah, I'm here. I'm in touch if you need me, and I'm thinking of you.” If it's a social relationship with a friend and I want to congratulate them, I would post something on their Facebook wall or do a variety of things.
AW: Because you want other people to see?
RB: Yeah.
AW: I just did that this morning. Jerry Zaltman got an AMA award, I put it on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
RB: Those are the contagious things as well.
AW: Okay, Last Rapid-Fire question, podcast or blog or email newsletter that you recommend the most?
RB: I suppose TEDTalks blogs or podcasts.
AW: Is there anything else you want to say about possessions or gift giving in the context of communication?
RB: There's so much to say. I wouldn't know what to pick out. But this has been interesting.
AW: It was fun. Thank you so much for your time.
RB: Thank you.

Conclusion

Did you catch Russ’ life-hack related to avatars? When I asked him whether an avatar is a possession or part of the self, he said: “An avatar is a pseudo-self. It’s a self AND a possession. It is an alter ego”. Then, he went on to describe some research that demonstrates how if you assign someone a taller and more attractive avatar, they become more self-confident. That is CRAZY!

So then… here’s the life hack: ask a friend to create an avatar for you (it could be a Bitmoji or a gaming avatar or whatever), and make sure the avatar is more attractive and more fit that you are in real life. Apparently your avatar will rub off on you. I love that.

I also loved it when Russ described how people feel obligated online to respond to self-denigrating comments with – compliments! Like if I posted, “I look horrible in this picture” - someone will post a big compliment. Now that I heard that from Russ, I see it all the time. So – if you’re feeling down, post something self-denigrating, and watch the compliments pour in!

Did you also catch how both he and Carolyn Quinn (the fashionista that I interviewed last week), both talk about the mis-match of identity when people don’t dress their age? Again – DRESS YOUR AGE, people!
And then also two other things related to fashion and clothing, Russ mentions how **moguls may dress their wives and children in finery** that they themselves may not like but that clearly communicate their wealth. AND how **cool people aren’t cool because of their clothing or their possessions, but because of their demeanor**. But that others mimic their possessions and clothing, forcing the cool person to constantly innovate and adopt new fashions. Huh. I hadn’t thought if it that way.

Let me conclude now with **3 key learnings** from this interview. Those 3 learnings are the effects of **culture**, the **evolving** nature of our identity, and the effects of **de-materialization**.

**CULTURE.** When I asked Russ about common mistakes that people may make when they are trying to implicitly communicate things, particularly thorough their possessions, he mentioned that CULTURE plays a significant role. In fact, how we describe ourselves varies by culture.

In the western world, we might describe ourselves in terms of our careers, whereas in India, people would begin with who their parents and their grandparents were and where they’ve lived and maybe eventually get around to them themselves.

Russ also highlights how in Chinese culture, for example, you have a debt to your parents for the gift of your birth. And you pay back that debt over a lifetime. And speaking of gifts, cultures certainly vary in their gift-giving traditions. So this all goes back to the advice we have heard before. We need to be culturally sensitive.

**EVOLVING IDENTITY.** The second key learning is that our identity, your self is not static. It evolves over time. This is actually empowering, right?

You can change or improve your reputation, your identity. Russ used the term EPHEMERAL several times, meaning fleeting or temporary. We have all heard about how nowadays people are more likely to have several different careers over their lifetime. This is one example of how our identities can evolve. Possessions can also be ephemeral, and more and
more of them may be, given the effects of digitization and the sharing economy.

**DE-MATERIALIZATION.** That brings me to the last key learning. Russ highlighted how the extent to which materialism, or the demonstration of success through material goods – is acceptable, varies by culture and by the state of the economy. That makes sense. It is offensive to demonstrate material success when other cannot access that opportunity. He also notes how the younger generations – generations Y & Z seem to be exhibiting a more simplified lifestyle, a lack of attachment and De-materialisation of possessions.

He highlights that that sharing economy is probably propelling these changes. Regardless of this de-materialization trend though, Russ concludes by saying, “I don't think we'll ever do away with symbolism, but we may find other ways to communicate what we think of ourselves and other people.”

That makes sense, doesn’t it? And in my opinion, it will be absolutely fascinating to experience and witness these changes.

So that’s it! If you're interested in learning more about how we communicate through our possessions, I did some research that I will share in this week’s TalkAboutTalk email blog. If you’re not already signed up, you really are missing half the fun! Just go to TalkAboutTalk.com to sign up for the blog and to access all of the past blogs.

One last thing please don't hesitate to reach out to me on social media or email.

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