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Residential mobility or mobile residentiality? Exploring the effects of place stability and variety in consumer psychology

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Abstract

Establishing a new residence is a life-changing event with a significant impact on people's psychology and behavior. However, digitalization, the sharing economy, and flexible working conditions have made it easier for people to move, and some people have even abandoned the concept of a permanent residence and adopted a new lifestyle—"mobile residentiality"—in which they seek residence only rarely and temporarily. This article explores the effects of place stability and variety on the consumer's self and identity, social relationships and networks, and personal and societal well-being.

KEYWORDS
personal well-being, residential mobility, self and identity, social relationship and networks, societal well-being

INTRODUCTION

Having roamed the planet as nomadic hunters and gatherers for ages, humans only settled down and established residences about 10,000 years ago with the introduction of an agrarian lifestyle. People became more mobile again during the last two centuries with the advent of the industrial revolution, urbanization, and mass transportation, which brought both benefits and dramatic personal and social consequences. Relocating has become a common and prevalent aspect of modern life, as evidenced by rapidly increasing mobility rates within countries and even internationally.

As Oishi and Tsang (2022) have shown in this review article in this issue, residential mobility, the degree to which individuals change their residence (e.g., the number of times they moved in a certain period of time),

affects people's self and identity, relationships, group affiliations, social norms, pro-social behaviors, and well-being. The focus of this area of research is on the "residence," assuming that it is desirable to establish a stable place of living. Therefore, prior research has investigated the consequences of giving up this stability and engaging in a major move to a new residence where people establish a new center of life.

Establishing a new residence requires major efforts and investment and can cause emotional distress as individuals often need to form new social relationships (Oishi et al., 2013). In their review article, Oishi and Tsang (2022) discuss these psychological and behavioral consequences of residential mobility and relational mobility. For example, residential mobility leads to concerns about unstable relationships and anticipated loneliness and sadness (Oishi et al., 2013). Changing residence also

brings anxiety because of the work it takes to move and the uncertainty about a new residence. In sum, previous work in this area treats moving one's residence from one place to another as a relatively rare event and therefore as life-changing event, with major implications for individual's psychology and behavior.

However, digitalization and the formation of a "liquid society" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2000) have also made moving easier and created an opportunity for people to rethink notions of space and movement, residence, and mobility. The popularity of the sharing economy, the flexibility of working from different locations, which may become even more prevalent after COVID-19, and new lifestyles such as seasonal residence make moving more attractive to many people. They are less tied to one place and seek spatial variety as part of their lives. Some people have even entirely abandoned the concept of a permanent residence and embraced a nomadic life where they are constantly moving. Digital and mobile technology has become a major resource as part of this lifestyle as they establish a residence only rarely and at best temporarily. For these individuals, the center is no longer their residence as a place of stability, but their focus is on mobility, flexibility, and variety. They do not merely show a high level of residential mobility; instead, their behavior is categorically different. I refer to this phenomenon in the global and digital society as "mobile residentiality."

Given this new phenomenon, I propose that consumer psychology needs to provide a broader understanding of when, how, and why people establish a residence (or not) and how this affects their consumption. Specifically, this research agenda should explore the desire for stability versus variety in residential selection. It should also examine how this motivation affects the psychology of the consumer from choice of products and brands to usage and disposal. Next, I discuss how research on residential mobility can be expanded by incorporating the new trend of mobile residentiality.

CONSUMER SELF AND IDENTITY

One's place of residence affects the self and identity. Specifically, residential mobility prompts individuals to focus on personal (vs. collective) aspects of the self (Oishi & Tsang, 2022). What happens when people move toward mobile residentiality? For consumers who value home, property, and owning a place, it is reasonable to expect that they are attached to the possessions they own. Meaningful possessions are part of a consumer's extended self and have a significant impact on identity (Belk, 1988). When consumers become more mobile in where they live, they are likely to focus less on accumulating possessions and instead adopt liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). That is, they rent, borrow, and become pioneers and advocates for sharing material things. Thus, their sense of self and source of identity is less connected to the material goods they possess. When they make a purchase, they may be more drawn to necessities rather than luxuries.

Certain personality traits are associated with reasons for moving. For example, openness to experiences is associated with more residential mobility; therefore, open consumers are likely to focus on experiences instead of possessions. I propose that consumers' sense of self and identity is tied closer to experiences the more they engage in mobile residentiality. In addition, open people are not passive recipients of these experiences; rather, they actively seek out new and varied experiences.

Finally, self and identity includes the sum of self-components that constitute the self, but there is also a metacognitive component of How do I feel about myself? (Campbell et al., 1996). In the process of moving, people learn about themselves. For example, moving involves encountering different environmental surroundings, situations, and contexts, and these environmental changes provide opportunities for self-discovery including the dynamic self-concept as a consumer. In addition, moving helps people develop and learn more about themselves by interacting with different groups, including other consumers. By observing what products and brands are important to other mobile consumers, they may receive important input about what they value as consumers. Empirical evidence also suggests that the experience of moving and living abroad increases people's self-clarity (Adam et al., 2018, Fan, Wang, & Jiang, 2018). In sum, mobile residentiality should lead people to have a more secure sense of who they are and how they feel about themselves, including their consumption activities.

CONSUMER SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Moving also affects who, when, and how people interact with others. Residential mobility is associated with greater motivation to maintain existing relationships while also expanding social networks. This assumes that the more mobile people are, the less stable social relationships they would have, which seems reasonable given that for hundreds of thousands of years, humans only established and maintained social relationships through in-person communications and interactions. Interestingly, Oishi and Tsang (2022) suggest that residential mobility and relational mobility have been conceptualized as identical concepts with similar psychological and behavioral outcomes.

Is this assumption still valid when consumers adopt mobile residentiality and communicate mostly through smartphones and online? I propose that for consumers with mobile residentiality as their lifestyle, establishing and maintaining social relationships are uniquely associated with tech media through online communications. This idea challenges the assumption that mobility

leads to unstable social relationships. One could argue that since the consumption of online communication including social media and sharing platforms increases social capital (see a review, Ryan et al., 2017), consumers with mobile residentiality may have more, rather than less, stable social relationships, albeit over a distance. Because their social capital and interactions are mainly online, they are less affected by where they are located or reside so they can establish and maintain their social relationships at any place and any time.

Mobile residentiality may also lead to forming more diverse relationships and diverse social networks based on shared values and personality similarity instead of geographical connections. For example, highly mobile consumers feel more connected to citizens of the world and have a stronger global identity (Wang, Kirmani, & Li, 2021). As a result, they donate more to global causes rather than local causes. Prior research concludes that highly mobile individuals are less affiliated with groups based on the argument that they use less collective self-traits in a personal description and are less identified with a local community (Oishi & Tsang, 2022). However, I propose that mobile residentiality can promote more meaningful group affiliations that are non-geographically driven.

CONSUMER AND SOCIETAL WELL-BEING

Regarding consumer and societal well-being, research on residential mobility paints a bleak picture. Oishi and Tsang (2022) conclude that at a subjective well-being level, residential mobility increases anxiety and induces a feeling of loneliness and sadness. These negative consequences are even more aversive with frequent moving during childhood or adolescence in which case residential mobility is associated with higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems. Finally, at the societal well-being and pro-social behavior levels, residential mobility is associated with tolerance for social norm violations, criminal activity, and less pro-community behaviors (Oishi & Tsang, 2022).

As consumers move toward mobile residentiality, they may experience these negative consequences as prior research suggests. However, the anxiety and feelings of loneliness that are associated with moving may not be as salient for consumers who engage in mobile residentiality as a lifestyle. Moving is a valuable part of their lives, and they may enjoy the experiences and new consumption opportunities emerging from this lifestyle. In addition, many innovative and institutional policies (e.g., flexibility of residence documentation requirements and work location policies) have relieved the stress, uncertainty, and risks associated with moving and even being permanently on the move.

Consumers engaging in mobile residentiality may also move away from relying on material possessions as their primary source of happiness. A growing body of evidence shows that purchasing experiences makes people happier than purchasing material goods (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Following this logic, mobile residentiality should increase people's happiness and improve their subjective well-being. Nomads who travel with minimal possessions around the world while working on digital devices are the extreme case of mobile residentiality, but they consider financial commitments and owning possessions as risks and feel more secure with the absence of ownership and rootedness (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021).

At the society level, the moral deviation and crime rates associated with residential mobility should also diminish in this new mobile era. Digitalization connects consumers' personal information to their daily lives and social activities, leaving a trace of all behaviors including consumption. In addition, for a participant in the sharing economy, having a credible and trustworthy personal history is critical. Therefore, I propose that mobile residentiality will create a higher level of morality, a stricter adherence to social norms, and a willingness to collaborate in all matters of consumer psychology. These individual behaviors should increase the societal level of trust and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In their comprehensive review of the psychological research on residential mobility, Oishi and Tsang (2022) show how closely tied mobility is to personal and social existence, affecting the self and personal identities, social relationships, pro-social behaviors, and well-being. In this commentary, I suggest broadening this research by exploring people's reactions along a dimension ranging from residential mobility to mobile residentiality. Consumer psychology can make a significant contribution to mobility research by investigating how consumption is shaped by the various ways in which people relate to space stability and variety.

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