SELF-DISCREPANCIES, SYMBOLIC SELF-COMPLETION, AND THE ROLE OF POSSESSIONS IN THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to explore some of the ways that possessions may be used symbolically to aid adjustment in first-semester freshmen who are transitioning to college. Based on prior literature, the transition to college is often accompanied by self-discrepancies which may be alleviated through symbolic self-completion using possessions. Overall, 219 students participated in this study. Results indicate that first-semester freshmen, as well as upperclassmen students, rely on the symbolic use of possessions in both managing negative affect and symbolizing the ideal college student identity. Furthermore, managing affect through the use of feeling regulators was found to best aid adjustment early in the transition, while symbolizing the college identity through the use of identity claims was found to better aid adjustment later in the transition. In addition, the importance of the college student identity was found to moderate this relationship. The results of this study add to the current literature on self-discrepancies and symbolic self-completion, as well as pointing to the importance of personal possessions in symbolizing the identity and facilitating adjustment in self-relevant domains.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The possessions we own often become integral parts of our identities, allowing us to extend our selves beyond our physical bodies. A leading theorist on possession importance, Belk (1988), suggests that we impose our identities onto possessions and alternately that our possessions impose their identities onto us. While not all of the things we own become central to our identity, certain possessions will surpass their utilitarian functions in meaning and importance and come to be representations of the self that act as reminders or confirmations of who we are (McCarthy, 1984).

In this paper, I explore this symbolic function of our possessions. Specifically, I review literature related to the use of objects as symbols of the self, and describe a study that will examine the symbolic functions of objects in achievement of identity during the transition to college.

Objects as Symbols

The notion that some possessions have significance far beyond their instrumental functions is not new. Over a century ago, William James (1890) introduced the idea that a person is comprised of all that he/she can call his/her own, including his/her possessions, and that important objects in our environment have the ability to shape our minds and persons. Hanna Arendt (1958) asserted “The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human
life…men, their ever changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table” (p. 137). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) suggest that possessions hold an important role in symbolizing our identities throughout the lifespan. Cherished family heirlooms are passed down and treasured not so much for the utilitarian value, but for their importance of connecting individuals to their family and their past (Belk, 1991), while other objects are treasured as they come to embody an individual’s hopes, dreams, and ideals (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). From his review on the symbolic functions of possessions, Gosling (2008) has proposed two distinct functions of possessions beyond their utilitarian purposes: 1) to regulate affect, and 2) make claims about the owner’s identity.

**Identity Claims and Feeling Regulators**

Gosling (2008) refers to possessions that serve as symbols of the self as “identity claims”. Specifically, identity claims are objects that an individual uses to make deliberate symbolic statements about the self. He distinguishes two types of claims which serve unique psychological functions: 1) other-directed claims and 2) self-directed claims. Other-directed identity claims are used to symbolize how an individual would like to be regarded by others. Symbols of this type may be used to convey an honest message regarding characteristics of the owner or they may be used strategically to convey messages regarding characteristics that the owner would ideally like to possess. Furthermore, other-directed identity claims may vary depending on the type of audience an individual would like to impress. Such other-directed identity claims could include posters, bumper stickers, and many times, objects of affiliation. Not surprisingly, other-directed identity claims are often positioned so that they owner rarely sees them, such as posters on the outside of office doors or stickers on the rear bumper of the owner’s car.
Identity claims can also be self-directed. These types of symbols reinforce the way an individual perceives him or herself. Objects of this nature may not seem overtly different from objects that are used as other-directed symbols; however, it is the placement of these objects that gives away the self-directed function. For example, bumper stickers are a classic other-directed identity claims, yet when one is hung on the inside of the owner’s closet it becomes obvious that the intended audience in the owner. Therefore, such objects become self-relevant reminders intended for the owner’s benefit.

In addition to identity claims, Gosling also posits that personal objects can be used as feeling regulators. Feeling regulators, unlike identity claims which present messages to the self and to others, are specifically used to manage an individual’s feelings and emotions. Objects of this nature help the owner to create a desired psychological state in their environment. These objects may include keepsakes, photos, music, family heirlooms, as well as objects of consumption such as candles and soaps. Feeling regulators are the most versatile of symbols in terms of positioning. Some feeling regulators may be left out in the open to create a psychological state anytime the owner views them, such as a family photograph. Other symbols of this nature may be positioned so that the owner may regulate the extent to which he or she sees the symbol, such as a photograph of a friend who moved away. Such a symbol may help one to reminisce of happy memories, but may also cause the owner to feel upset at the loss of the friend. Therefore, some feeling regulators are positioned so that the owner may regulate exposure to the object.

The relationship between identity claims and feeling regulators is not a mutually exclusive one. The possessions that reinforce the way we see ourselves (self-directed identity claims) may also invoke emotions and thus serve as feeling regulators as well. Furthermore, the
use of a particular possession as either an identity claim or feeling regulator may change over time. For example, the way we would like to be regarded by others and the possessions we use to signal that regard (other-directed identity claims) may change over time. Although a particular possession may no longer be an appropriate identity claim, it may evoke emotion by reminding the owner of a specific time in his or her life. Thus, the possession becomes a feeling regulator.

It has been well established in the literature that possessions can be extensions of our selves (Belk, 1988), symbols of a self that we would like to become (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), or mechanisms to regulate our emotions (Gosling, 2008). However, the question still remains as to why some objects do nothing more than serve a utilitarian function and others become symbols of the self. The answer may be found in Higgins’ (1987) Self-discrepancy Theory (SDT).
CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Self-discrepancy Theory

According to Higgins (1987), what we refer to as the “self” is actually a complex, multidimensional cognitive representation consisting of three distinct domains. The first domain of the self, the actual self, is concerned with the attributes that an individual feels that he or she actually possesses. The second domain, the ideal self, is concerned with the attributes that an individual would like to possess or aspires to become. The third and final domain, the ought self, is concerned with the attributes that an individual feels that he or she should possess or is morally obligated to possess.

In addition to the domains of the self, Higgins also posits two standpoints or references for the self. First is our own standpoint, or the way in which we view ourselves. The second standpoint, the other standpoint, is the way in which we perceive that others view us. Therefore, there are six distinct ways in which we may view ourselves: the way we actually are from our own standpoint (actual-own), the way we actually are from another’s perspective (actual-other), the way we would like to be from our own standpoint (ideal-own), the way we would like to be from another’s standpoint (ideal-other), the ways we feel obligated to be from our own standpoint (ought-own) and the ways we feel obligated to be from another’s standpoint (ought-other). The actual-own and actual-other cognitions reflect the way we feel we are at the present
moment. Therefore, these two cognitive states have been referred to as the self-concept. All of the other cognitive states are referred to as self-guides.

Discrepancies may occur within and across the three domains and two standpoints. For example, an individual can experience an ideal-own vs. ideal-other discrepancy in which an individual’s aspirations for what he or she would ideally like to become are different from the aspirations for what an important other may like for him or her to become. Alternatively, an individual can experience an actual-own vs. ideal-own discrepancy, in which the traits that he or she actually possesses are different from the attributes that he or she would ideally like to possess.

The core assumption of Self-Discrepancy Theory is that certain discrepancies result in specific emotional states. Of interest to this study is the self-concept discrepancy, or actual vs. ideal (own) discrepancy, which results in dejection-related emotions such as disappointment, frustration, and dissatisfaction. When experiencing such discrepancies individuals are motivated to self-regulate in order to avoid the associated psychological distress. This can be accomplished either by achieving congruency between actual and ideal states so that the discrepancy no longer exists, reducing the discrepancy (or its importance) so that it is manageable, or simply avoiding the discrepancy altogether (Moretti & Higgins, 1999).

The current paper is based on the proposition that people may use possessions in order to address these issues. For instance, feeling regulators may be used to reduce or control the negative affect associated with an actual vs. ideal (own) discrepancy. But of even greater interest is the possibility that possessions may be used to reduce the discrepancy itself, as implied by Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981).
Symbolic Self-completion Theory

The core assumption of symbolic self-completion is that individuals define themselves as teachers, artists, and so forth, by use of indicators of attainment in those arenas (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982). Such indicators may include having extensive education, possessing a high-status job or whatever is recognized by others as indicating progress toward completing the self-definition. When indicators of achievement for a self-definition are lacking, an individual often strives after further, alternative indicators of the self-definition. That is, when an individual does not feel competent in terms of a self-defining goal he or she is driven to symbolize the desired selfdefinitions in other ways. For example, an individual may desire to define him or herself as a musician but lack the technical ability to hold the role of a musician on ability alone. The individual, then, may come to possess alternative indicators of being a musician such as musical equipment and sheet music. These alternative indicators signal to others that the individual is a musician until technical ability can be acquired. Therefore, indicators of achievement are substitutable for one another and many different symbols may be used to espouse characteristics (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1981). Drawing from the work of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), Wicklund and Rise (2008, p. 207) provide an articulate description of this concept:

This manifestation of symbols amounts to an implicit promise – an intention – that something more can be expected. In this way the person’s feeling of permanence in society is shored up. For instance, when a less-than-prepared person indicates a desire to teach or influence, or engages in elaborate self-aggrandizement, the surrounding society is led to expect, however vaguely, a future and laudable performance. Society, thus, treats the display of the symbol as an intention to belong, to contribute. In this sense, such
symbols are approximately equivalent to the “I intend to .. .” “I shall try to .. .” or “I expect to .. .”.

The most rudimentary indicators of achievement are simple self-descriptions (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Wagner, Wicklund, & Shaigan 1990). For example, an individual might use the remark “I am a good swimmer” as an indication of his or her swimming ability. The audience, then, may use the verbal indication to infer the individual’s swimming ability. Other examples of indicators of attainment may include memberships in organizations (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985), frequent attendance at certain events, and even other individuals, as connections to competent individuals in the desired self-definitional area may signal to others that one is accomplished him or herself (Kelley, 1951). A large source of indicators of achievement is from our own personal possessions. That is, the possessions that we surround ourselves with often serve as symbols to self-definitions. When competency is lacking in a self-definitional area we may use tangible possessions as alternative indicators of attainment (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985).

According to Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), three concepts are central to symbolic self-completion. The first concept, commitment to self-defining goals, regards a boundary condition for the self-completion process. That is, the goal itself must be self-relevant to the individual. It has been found that individuals who fall short in respect to a self-defining goal do not give up pursuit of the goal when it is self-relevant, but rather increase their goal-directed efforts to ensure that they are capable of achieving the self-definition in question (Brunstein, 2000). However, when the goal is not self-relevant, it is far less likely that pursuit will continue following setback or failure. Therefore, for an individual to engage in self-symbolizing behavior, the goal or end state must be of personal relevance.
The second concept, *social reality*, posits that self-defining goals come into being when they are acknowledged by others (Cooley, 1902) and social recognition is necessary to ensure a sense of progress toward the goal (Mead, 1934). Thus, indicators of attainment are always intended for a social audience. It might thus be suspected that those most concerned about their level of outward evidence of accomplishment would be most likely to seek social validation of the self. That is, those who are concerned with being competent are more likely to make attempts to present themselves as competent to others.

The final concept, and the primary focus of the present study, is *symbols of completeness*. Generally, these symbols may be defined as indicators of where an individual stands in regard to a self-defining goal. For example, the curriculum vita or resume is a prime example of a compilation of symbols of completeness that is often the first piece of information a potential employer may receive from an individual. Although the potential employer may know little, if anything, of the characteristics of the applicant, certain pieces of information contained in the document may help him or her make inferences as to the type of employee an individual may make. Specifically, possessing an advanced degree may signal that a potential applicant is knowledgeable or studious and possessing group work experience may indicate that one is a team player. Although the employer does not know if the applicant is actually studious or a team player, he or she may use certain symbols to infer such characteristics. The key element here is that when an individual strongly espouses a characteristic or engages in a certain role, there will be symbols that indicate an individual’s completeness in the given arena. Possessions are a classic example of such symbols. After all, one would certainly be hard pressed to find a professional golfer who does not own golf clubs or a graduate student who does not possess textbooks.
The principles of symbolic self-completion theory have been tested in a variety of contexts and with different types of symbolic indicators (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Gollwitzer et al., 1982; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982). One study that is particularly illustrative of the principals of symbolic self-completion theory asked participants to commit to a self-definition of choice and indicate how many people they would be willing to teach in regard to that area. Results indicated that subjects with weak educational backgrounds in their self-definitional area were more invested in teaching others than were those with a strong educational background. That is, those with the greatest shortcomings presented themselves as the most capable (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981; study 1).
CHAPTER 3

THE CURRENT STUDY

The focus of the current study is to understand the relationship between self-concept discrepancies and symbolic self-completion by examining the use of possessions as symbols of completeness. It is suggested that self-concept discrepancies, or actual-own vs. ideal (own) discrepancies, reflect the same type of self-relevant shortcoming that leads to symbolic self-completion and that individuals with self-discrepancies in important domains will display possessions that give a sense of completeness to the self. Whereas a study that attempts to examine the possessions that are used as symbols of completeness for all possible domains of importance to a sample would be impractical, the current study seeks to examine symbolic self-completion in the singular domain of academics among a group of students who are transitioning from high school to college. Justification for this will be made below.

Possessions in Transition

Marriage, parenthood, career change, and college, represent just a few of the many life experiences that may shape and influence an individual’s life. Adaptation to these events often involves exchanging well-practiced roles for roles whose scripts are unrehearsed. As such, these transitions are often marked by a period of ambiguity in roles (Van Gennep, 1960). For example, while transitioning from high school to college an individual will find him or herself no longer occupying the role of a high school student but not yet experienced or accomplished enough to
feel at ease in the role of a college student. This particular transition, the transition from high school to college, has been shown to be accompanied by role ambiguity and increased self-discrepancies relative to high school counterparts who have not yet transitioned to college. In fact, Noble and Walker (1997) found evidence of notably higher mismatches between actual and ideal selves for a sample of college students than for a sample of high school students.

Possessions may play an important role in easing ambiguities during a transition by symbolizing not only the current characteristics of an individual, but may also symbolize the characteristics that an individual is striving to possess in his or her new role. This may enable individuals to move smoothly into new roles. To the extent that they encourage others to treat the individual as if he or she has accomplished the role, possessions may be an ideal tool for easing into new roles during a transitional period. In a sample of college students, Noble and Walker (1997) found that the favorite possessions of college freshman were more often symbolic of the college role than were favorite possessions of college juniors and seniors. For example, college freshman were more likely to name school tools such as computers and writing equipment as favorite possessions, but for college seniors these same objects were mainly valued for utilitarian purposes. This suggests that possessions may become particularly important during the transitional period by symbolizing the new role and aiding in the reestablishment of the self. As the individual moves through the transition and becomes more comfortable in the new role, possessions that symbolize the role become less important.

Hypotheses and Predictions

By tying together Gosling’s (2008) notion of identity claims, Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory, and Wicklund and Gollwitzer’s (1981) theory of symbolic-self completion, a conceptual framework may be proposed that could provide an explanation for the importance of
possessions during the transition from high school to college. The proposed framework suggests that the possessions that an individual values most during this transition will be those that assist in managing the discrepancy between action and ideal selves.

Following the work of Higgins (1987) and Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), several hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who experience actual vs. ideal (own) discrepancies will be motivated to reduce the discrepancy by engaging in symbolic self-completion. The social validation accompanying the symbols of completeness should result in a successful transition to their new identities as college students. Thus, I predict that individuals with large actual-ideal (own) discrepancies will value objects that serve as other-directed claims of their desired collegiate identity more so than those with smaller discrepancies in the same domain.

Hypothesis 2: Those individuals who rely on identity claims to manage actual-ideal discrepancies will show better college adjustment and reduced discrepancies upon remeasurement.

Hypothesis 3: Because self-discrepancies are believed to generate negative affect, particularly feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction, individuals with large actual vs. ideal (own) discrepancies may also report elevated importance of objects that serve as feeling regulators; however, in the absence of any indicators of achievement (i.e., symbols of completeness), such a strategy is unlikely to affect the underlying discrepancies and should not facilitate adjustment to (that is, acceptance of) the college role. Note that although neither Higgins (1987) nor Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) proposes a motivated state for those with low actual vs. ideal discrepancies, it seems plausible that these individuals will value possessions that make self-directed identity claims, reinforcing their sense of who they are.
Hypothesis 4: Individuals just entering into the transitional period (i.e. first-semester freshmen) will rely on the symbolic functions of possessions more so than those farther into the transition (i.e. upperclassmen).

Hypothesis 5: The above predictions are only expected to hold for those for whom the academic domain holds high self-relevance. Although it might be expected (hoped) that academics is the most important domain for freshmen college students, some variability is to be expected, and it is therefore critical to determine the importance of the academic domain to the studied individuals. This is predicted to moderate the effects of self-discrepancies predicted above.

To test these hypotheses students were asked to complete a battery of questionnaires that measured academic self-discrepancies, the importance of the academic domain to the individual, important possessions, and the primary use of those possessions as identity claims and feeling regulators. In order to test Hypotheses 2 and 4, which pertain to changes in self-discrepancies and adjustment over the semester, a subsample of first-semester freshman were invited to complete the same battery of questionnaires for a second time near the end of the semester.

Methods

Participants

Overall, 219 college students participated in this study. Of those 219 participants, 166 were first-semester freshman (77.7% female; 81.9% Caucasian; mean age 18.52 years) and 53 participants were upperclassmen (69.8% female; 83.0% Caucasian; mean age 20.85; mean semester in college 4.94). Of the 166 first-semester freshman who participated in this study, 51 participants were invited to complete the follow-up survey and 24 of those successfully
completed the second session of the within-subjects test (68.0% female, 88.0% Caucasian; mean age 18.96 years).

Measures

Discrepancy measures. The discrepancy measure utilized the Self-Lines Technique (Francis, Boldero, & Sambell, 2006) and was modified to measure academic discrepancies (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to respond with three traits that he or she feels an ideal college student should possess. One at a time and for each trait, the participants were presented with a horizontal line with anchors at 0 (indicating a complete lack of the trait) and 100 (indicating that the trait is possessed to the ideal extent). Participants indicated, by moving a sliding bar in increments of one, how much he or she feels they actually possess the desired trait. This procedure was repeated for all three traits. Given that a value of 100 indicates the trait is desired to the ideal extent, higher scores represent smaller actual vs. ideal discrepancies. Therefore, the data was reverse coded so that small values would be indicative of small discrepancies and high values would be indicative of high discrepancies. Average discrepancies were computed from each of the identified traits. Cronbach’s Alpha for this measure was .71.

College identity importance scale. The purpose of this scale is to measure the self-relevance of the collegiate identity (see Appendix B). This scale is based on the Academic Disengagement scale (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001) and the Performance State Self-esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). This composite scale consists of 18 items measuring the importance of the college identity (i.e. “Being a college student is an important part of who I am), social collegiate self-esteem (i.e. “I am concerned about whether I am regarded as a success or failure as a college student”), and performance collegiate self-esteem (i.e. “I feel confident about my identity as a college student”). Those who place a great deal of importance on the
collegiate identity are likely to see the transition from high school to college as self-relevant. Therefore, among these individuals, those who experience academic self-discrepancies should be most likely to engage in symbolic self-completion to mask those discrepancies. Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items that refer to negative collegiate identity were reverse coded (i.e. “I feel displeased with my identity as a college student”). In scoring, each anchor was given a point value (strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, somewhat disagree=3, somewhat agree=4, agree=5, strongly agree=6). Therefore, the total range of possible score spanned from 18 to 108 with higher scores indicative of greater perceived importance of the collegiate identity. Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was .78.

Possessions questionnaire. Each participant was instructed to list three possessions that he or she feels has helped them to adjust to their new role as a college student (see Appendix C). Regarding each of these three possessions, participants were asked to rate a series of fifteen statements comprising the Possessions Questionnaire. This questionnaire included three subscales measuring each of the three types of possession used. Statements such as “It reinforces the way I see myself now” measured self-directed claim identity, “It shows others my goals for the future” measured other-directed identity claims and “It offers me relaxation and fun when life’s pressures build up” measured feeling regulators. Participants responded to each item using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. For scoring purposes, a point value was assigned to the rating in the same manner as for the College Identity Importance Questionnaire. The ratings for all the questions regarding each type of use for the possession was averaged so that each possession received a score that corresponds to the possessions use as a self-directed identity claim, other-directed identity claim, and feeling
regulator. These scores reflect the degree to which the possession serves each of the above purposes with higher scores being indicative of the possessions primary symbolic use. In addition, one item was included to assess the utilitarian function of the possession. The scores for each type of use for the possession were then averaged across all three possessions to yield overall possession use subscale scores for self-directed identity claims ($\alpha=.84$), other-directed identity claims ($\alpha=.88$), feeling regulators ($\alpha=.87$), and utilitarian value ($\alpha=.69$).

*Adjustment to college questionnaire.* The Adjustment to College Questionnaire used for this study is adapted from The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker and Siryk, 1989). The questionnaire consists of twenty-five questions covering three domains of adjustment to college (see Appendix D). The first domain subscale, Academic Adjustment, pertains to motivation, performance, and overall academic situation ($\alpha=.79$). The second domain subscale, Social Adjustment, regards to general adjustment, adjustment to others, and nostalgia ($\alpha=.86$). The final domain subscale, Adjustment to University, pertains to participant’s adjustment to the specific university that he or she attends ($\alpha=.77$). Participants were asked to answer each question using a 6-point Likert Scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. For scoring purposes, point values were assigned consistent with the College Identity Importance Scale and the Possessions Questionnaire. Questions that relate to negative adjustment (i.e “I often feel homesick”) were reversed scored. Therefore, the range of raw scores for the measure was 25-150. Based upon the responses, a mean score was calculated for each of the three domain subscales as well as the overall scale ($\alpha=.88$). Higher mean scores were indicative of better adjustment to the college.

*Demographics questionnaire.* The Demographics Questionnaire consisted of general demographic factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, and living arrangements (see Appendix E).
Procedure

Participants were recruited through Introductory Psychology courses and signed up for participation via an online scheduling program. After signing up for participation, participants were provided with a link to access the questionnaires. After following the link, participants were asked to give informed consent before completing any measures. Upon giving consent, participants completed the measures as follows: Demographic information, College Identity Importance Scale, Discrepancy measures, Possessions Questionnaire, Adjustment to College Questionnaire.

The first-semester freshman participants who were invited to complete two sessions for the within-subjects test were also provided an access code so that data from both sessions could be linked. The first session (time 1) took place during approximately the second month of the participant’s first semester of college. During this session, participants were asked to give informed consent (see Appendix F) and complete all five measures. The second session (time 2) took place approximately six weeks later, at the end of the first semester in the week before final examinations. At this time, participants were sent an email (see Appendix G) and asked to complete each measure for a second time.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Mean scores were computed for six variables of interest. These variables of interest include: the actual-ideal self-discrepancy, college identity importance, overall adjustment to college, academic adjustment, social adjustment, and adjustment to Indiana State University. In addition, mean scores were computed for the level of utilitarian value for all possessions combined, the level of identity claim value for all possessions combined, and the level of feeling
regulator value for all possessions combined. Intercorrelations among these variables are illustrated in Appendix H. Note that although the possessions questionnaire was written to distinguish between self- and other-directed identity claims, these measures were very highly-correlated ($r = .83$, $p < .00$) and did not readily separate in an exploratory factor analysis. As a result, these scales were combined into a single measure of identity claims.

Given that the importance placed on the college identity is predicted to moderate the relationship between discrepancies, possession use, and academic adjustment, a dichotomous college identity importance variable was created using a median split. Those participants whose mean college identity importance score was above the mean were considered to be high in college identity importance and those whose scores were below the median were considered to be low in college identity importance.

Each possession listed by participants was coded into either “college related” or “not college related” in order to assess the specific possessions used by participants. Only those possessions that were obviously college-related were coded as being so. Therefore, it should be noted that some possessions were coded as “not college related” due to the ambiguity of the response. For example, many participants listed clothing as a possession supportive of the collegiate identity. However, the response “clothing” does not indicate whether the participant was alluding to clothing pertaining to college (i.e. clothing with school logos) or just clothing in general. This coding, therefore, was meant to roughly assess the meaning of the possessions.

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that those with large actual vs. ideal discrepancies will value more objects that serve as identity claims than those with smaller actual vs. ideal discrepancies. Contrary to this hypothesis, there was a significant negative correlation between the use of
identity claims and discrepancy level for all participants \((r=-.19, n=210, p=.01)\). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Table 1 presents partial correlations among discrepancy level, adjustment, and possession use.

Table 1

*Correlations Among Possession Use, Discrepancy, College Identity Importance, and College Adjustment for Entire Sample.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Identity claim value(^a)</th>
<th>Feeling regulator value(^b)</th>
<th>Utilitarian value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>(-.19^{**})</td>
<td>(.17^{*})</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Identity Importance</td>
<td>(.25^{**})</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Adjustment</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Adjustment</td>
<td>(.17^{*})</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.17^{*})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Adjustment</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>(-.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU Adjustment</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
<td>(-.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Partial correlation controlling for use as feeling regulator.
\(^b\) Partial correlation controlling for use as identity claim.

\(*p<.05, **p<.001.\)

When considering first-semester freshmen only, there was a significant negative correlation between discrepancy level and the use of identity claims \((r=-.18, n=156, p=.02)\), again, indicating that as discrepancies increase the use of identity claims decreases. This relationship was not significant for the upperclassmen sample \((r=-.21, n=49, p=.14)\), although this seems to reflect the smaller N. Table 2 presents the correlations among possession use,
discrepancy level, and adjustment to college variables for first-semester freshmen and upperclassmen.

Table 2

*Correlations Among Possession Use, Discrepancy, College Identity Importance, and Adjustment for First-semester Freshmen and Upperclassmen.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Identity claim value(^a)</th>
<th>Feeling regulator value(^b)</th>
<th>Utilitarian value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-semester freshmen (n=156)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College identity importance</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Upperclassmen (n=49)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College identity importance</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued).

*Correlations Among Possession Use, Discrepancy, College Identity Importance, and Adjustment for First-semester Freshmen and Upperclassmen.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Identity claim value(^a)</th>
<th>Feeling regulator value(^b)</th>
<th>Utilitarian value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Partial correlation controlling for use as feeling regulator.
\(^b\) Partial correlation controlling for use as identity claim.

\(*p < .05, **p < .001.*

College identity importance was found to moderate Hypothesis 1 (as predicted in Hypothesis 5). That is, size of the self-discrepancy reported was significantly correlated with the use of identity claims for those high in college identity importance (r=−.28, n=103, p=.00), but not for those low in college identity importance (r=−.06, n=103, p=.52). The reader will recall, however, that the directions of these correlations are contrary to that hypothesized. Table 3 presents the correlations among discrepancy level, adjustment variables, and for those high and low in college identity importance.
Table 3

_Correlations Among Possession Use, Discrepancy, and Adjustment for Those Who are High and Low in College Identity Importance._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Identity claim value(^a)</th>
<th>Feeling regulator value(^b)</th>
<th>Utilitarian value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low college identity importance (n=103)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High college identity importance (n=103)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Partial correlation controlling for use as feeling regulator.

\(^b\) Partial correlation controlling for use as identity claim.

\(*p<.05, **p<.001.*


Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of college identity importance on identity claim use \( F(1, 216)=18.37, p<.01 \). This indicates that college identity importance has a significant impact on identity claim use with those high in college identity importance (\( M=4.20, \ SD=.75 \)) reporting greater use of identity claims than those low in college identity importance (\( M=3.99, \ SD=1.07 \)).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that those who rely on the use of identity claims to manage discrepancies will show reduced discrepancies and better college adjustment upon remeasurement. As an initial test of this hypothesis, Time 1 identity claims were correlated with change in discrepancies and changes in college adjustment. Contrary to the hypothesis, Time 1 identity claims were not significantly related to change in discrepancies (\( r=.05, n=21, p=.81 \)), and Time 1 identity claims were negatively related to change in adjustment (\( r=-.23, n=21, p=.28 \)). However, an additional examination of the hypothesis was performed examining the correlation between change in use of identity claims and change in discrepancies and college adjustment. Again, there was no apparent relationship between (change in) identity claims and change in self-discrepancies from Time 1 to Time 2 (\( r=-.13, n=20, p=.56 \)); however, there was a significant positive correlation between change in identity claims from Time 1 to Time 2 and change in adjustment (\( r=.47, n=20, p=.03 \)). It is worth noting that the relationship among identity claims, discrepancies, and adjustment shifts throughout the transition. That is, the use of identity claims at Time 1 is related to increased discrepancies and decreased adjustment (although these relationships were not significant). However, the increase of identity claims throughout the transition is related to decreased discrepancies and increased adjustment.

In addition, college-identity importance was found to affect the relationships in Hypothesis 2. Change in the use of identity claims from Time 1 to Time 2 was significantly
correlated with an increase in adjustment to college \((r=.76, n=8, p=.02)\) and marginally correlated with a decrease in discrepancy level \((r=-.41, n=8, p=.08)\) for those high in college identity importance. For those low in college identity importance, the use of identity claims did not correlate significantly with a decrease in discrepancy level \((r=.42, n=9, p=.21)\) or adjustment to college \((r=.12, n=9, p=.72)\).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that individuals with large actual vs. ideal discrepancies may also report elevated importance of objects that serve as feeling regulators due to the negative affect that is believed to be generated by the discrepancy. Results support this hypothesis as discrepancy was found to be significantly positively correlated with the use of feeling regulators \((r=.17, n=209, p=.02)\) for the whole sample of both first-semester freshmen and upperclassmen. That is, elevated discrepancies are related to an increase in the use of feeling regulators for the sample as a whole.

When splitting the sample by group (first-semester freshmen vs. upperclassmen), results indicate a significant positive correlation between discrepancy and the use of feeling regulators for first-semester freshmen \((r=.24, n=156, p=.00)\) but not for upperclassmen \((r=.00, n=49, p=.99)\). These results are illustrated in Table 2.

Hypothesis 3 further predicts that the use of feeling regulators should not lead to decreased discrepancies and increased adjustment upon remeasurement. This implies that there should be no correlation between use of possessions as feeling regulators and changes in discrepancy or adjustment between Time 1 and Time 2 of testing for the within-subjects sample. As with the tests of identity claims in Hypothesis 2, both an initial test involving the use of feeling regulators at Time 1 and an additional test using the change in feeling regulators from Time 1 to Time 2 were conducted. In support of this hypothesis, the use of feeling regulators at
Time 1 was not significantly related to change in discrepancy (r=-.14, n=21, p=.50) nor to change in overall adjustment to college (r=.22, n=21, p=.32), but these results may reflect the very small sample size rather than the true absence of a correlation.

When looking at the change scores in feeling regulator use from Time 1 to Time 2, results indicate that an increase in feeling regulator use is still not significantly related to changes in discrepancy (r=.15, n=20, p=.51) and adjustment (r=-.18, n=20, p=.42). Although not significant, it should be noted that there is a shifting relationship among feeling regulator use, discrepancies, and adjustment throughout the transition. That is, the use of feeling regulators at Time 1 is related to a decrease in discrepancy and increase in academic adjustment. Yet an increase in the use of feeling regulators throughout the transition is related to increased discrepancies and decreased adjustment. This mirrors the shifting pattern seen with identity claims in Hypothesis 2 (although reversed).

Furthermore, results indicate that college identity importance moderates the relationship between feeling regulators and discrepancies as predicted in Hypothesis 5 (Table 3). There was a significant correlation between use of possessions as feeling regulators and discrepancies for those high in college identity importance (r=.27, n=103, p=.01), but not for those low in college identity importance (r=.04, n=103, p=.67).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that individuals just entering into the transitional period (i.e. first-semester freshmen) will rely on the symbolic functions of possessions more so than those farther into the transition (i.e. upperclassmen). First-semester freshman report using possessions for identity claim value (M=4.20, SD=.75) more than upperclassman (M=3.98, SD=1.07). This relationship approached significance, t(215) = 1.64 , p= .10. The groups report identical levels of using possessions for feeling regulator value (M=4.42), t(215) = .00, p=1.00 (Table 4).
Table 4

Discrepancy, College Identity Importance, Adjustment Variables, and Possession Variables for First-semester Freshmen and Upperclassmen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>First-semester freshmen</th>
<th>Upperclassmen</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>22.19 (16.75)</td>
<td>20.84 (17.81)</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College identity importance</td>
<td>4.57 (.49)</td>
<td>4.39 (.59)</td>
<td>2.25*</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>4.46 (.60)</td>
<td>4.36 (.55)</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>4.65 (.57)</td>
<td>4.52 (.65)</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>4.28 (.88)</td>
<td>4.15 (.87)</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>4.44 (1.00)</td>
<td>4.45 (.70)</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity claim value</td>
<td>4.20 (.75)</td>
<td>3.98 (1.07)</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling regulator value</td>
<td>4.42 (.81)</td>
<td>4.42 (.97)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian value</td>
<td>4.58 (1.00)</td>
<td>4.39 (1.18)</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.001.

Consistent with Hypothesis 5, there was a marginally significant interaction between college identity importance (high vs. low) and group (first-semester freshmen vs. upperclassmen)
on identity claim use F(1, 216)=2.82, p=.09, with first-semester freshmen high in college identity importance reporting greater use of identity claims (M=4.34, SD=.75) than first-semester freshmen low in college identity importance (M=4.09, SD=.73), upperclassmen high in college identity importance (M=4.24, SD=.83), and upperclassmen low in college identity importance (M=3.80, SD=1.14).

Additional Analyses

Possession Analysis. The most common college-related item listed by all participants were computers (64.9%) followed by books/bookbags (39.3%), college identification cards (10.1%) and college-related clothing (8.6%). The most common non-college related items listed by participants were phones (26.5%), clothing (25.7%), and vehicles (17.7%).

As earlier described, a variable was created that indicated the number of possessions (0-3) listed by the participant that were obviously college-related. An analysis of this possession variable revealed that upperclassmen were more likely to list possessions that were obviously college-related that were first-first semester freshman; a t-test between the two groups revealed a significant difference t(201) = -2.38, p<.05.

Freshmen vs. Upperclassmen. As suspected, first-semester freshmen report greater actual vs. ideal discrepancies (M=22.19, SD=16.75) than their upperclassmen counterparts (M=20.84, SD=17.81) in the college student domain; however this difference was not significant t(209) = .47, p=.62. First-semester freshman also place significantly greater importance on possessing the college student identity (M=4.57, SD=.49) than did upperclassman (M=4.39, SD=.59), t(217) = 2.50, p<.05. Adjustment was comparable for both upperclassmen and first-semester freshmen for each of the adjustment variables (Table 4).
Although first-semester freshmen have a greater mean discrepancy level, discrepancy level is related more strongly to adjustment in upperclassmen. That is, for upperclassmen discrepancy is significantly negatively correlated with overall adjustment to college ($r = -.51, n=51, p=.00$), academic adjustment ($r = -.45, n=51, p=.00$) and social adjustment ($r = -.38, n=51, p=.01$). In first-semester freshmen, these relationships for overall adjustment ($r = -.17, n=160, p=.03$), academic adjustment ($r = -.16, n=160, p=.05$), and social adjustment ($r = -.13, n=160, p=.10$) were much weaker.

*High vs. Low College Identity Importance.* A series of t-tests revealed significant differences in adjustment and possession use between those high in college identity importance and those low in college identity importance. Those high in college identity importance report significantly greater overall adjustment $t(220)=-4.23, p<.01$, academic adjustment $t(220)=-5.46, p<.01$, social adjustment $t(220)=-2.60, p<.01$, and marginally greater adjustment to Indiana State University $t(220)=-1.91, p=.06$. In terms of possession use, those high in college identity importance show both significantly greater identity claim use $t(218)=-4.12, p<.01$ and feeling regulator use $t(218)=-2.25, p<.05$. Table 5 presents the means, standard deviations, and t values for those high and low in college identity importance for each of these variables.
Table 5

_Discernance, Adjustment Variables, and Possession Variables for Those Who are High and Low in College Identity Importance._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (standard deviation)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High college identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>21.55 (15.96)</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>4.60 (.54)</td>
<td>-18.31**</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>4.80 (.46)</td>
<td>-5.46**</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>4.41 (.82)</td>
<td>-2.60**</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>4.56 (1.00)</td>
<td>-1.91</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity claim value</td>
<td>4.37 (.80)</td>
<td>-4.12**</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling regulator value</td>
<td>4.55 (.85)</td>
<td>-2.25*</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian value</td>
<td>4.66 (1.05)</td>
<td>-1.61</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low college identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>22.00 (17.82)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall adjustment</td>
<td>4.20 (.58)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic adjustment</td>
<td>4.42 (.57)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
<td>4.11 (.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISU adjustment</td>
<td>4.33 (.83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity claim value</td>
<td>3.92 (.81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling regulator value</td>
<td>4.23 (.82)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian value</td>
<td>4.23 (.82)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.001.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore some of the ways in which possessions may be used symbolically to represent the identity (or aspired to-be identity) of the owner as well as circumstances under which this symbolic use of possessions occur. Drawing from the work of
Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), it was proposed that individuals may engage in symbolic self-completion by using possessions to portray an idealized version of the self, thus leading to social validation in a self-relevant domain. It is when achievement is lacking in a self-relevant domain that symbolic-self completion is most likely to occur. In addition, this lack of achievement in a self-relevant domain often leads to actual vs. ideal self-concept discrepancies (Higgins, 1987) which, in turn, may result in negative affect. Therefore, a second purpose of the current study was to explore the ways in which possessions are used to manage these self-discrepancies and negative affect during a transitional period (the transition to college) when self-discrepancies are particularly high and may be detrimental to collegiate adjustment. Here I will review the significant findings of the current study, highlighting those relevant to the hypotheses and, in doing so, describe a conceptual model of possession importance during the transition to college. In addition, I will discuss limitations of the current study and avenues for future research.

Hypotheses 1 and the first prediction of Hypothesis 3 (those with elevated discrepancies may report more use of feeling regulators) took into account the specific type of possession use among the overall sample of university students. Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals who experience larger actual vs. ideal discrepancies in the college domain would value possessions that serve as identity claims more than those with smaller discrepancies in the same domain. However, the results indicate a relationship antithetical to that predicted; leaving Hypothesis 1 unsupported. However, the first prediction of Hypothesis 3 was supported as the use of feeling regulators was positively correlated with discrepancy. Taken together, the results of these two hypotheses indicate that as discrepancies increase the use of possessions as feeling regulators increases while the use of possessions as identity claims decreases.
Hypothesis 2 and the second prediction of Hypothesis 3 (elevated use of feeling regulators should not lead to decreased discrepancies and increased adjustment over time) take into account the relationship among possession use, discrepancies, and adjustment over time. Hypothesis 2 predicted that those who rely on the symbolic function of possession will show decreased discrepancies and increased adjustment upon remeasurement at a later point in the transitional period. When considering the use of identity claims at an early point in the transition (Time 1) there was no apparent change in subsequent discrepancy level or adjustment. However, an increase in the use of identity claims over the course of the transition did correlate significantly with an increase in academic adjustment but not a decrease in discrepancy level; leaving Hypothesis 2 partially supported. The second prediction of Hypothesis 3 was supported as feeling regulator use, both at Time 1 and throughout the transition, was unrelated to change in discrepancies or adjustment.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 dealt with grouping variables that may potentially impact possession use. Hypothesis 4 proposed that first-semester freshmen would rely more on the symbolic function of possessions than upperclassmen. However, results fail to indicate a statistical difference between first-semester freshmen and upperclassmen in identity claim use. Furthermore, first-semester freshmen and upperclassmen show identical levels of feeling regulator use. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Hypothesis 5 predicted that the importance of the college identity domain would moderate the proposed relationships. Hypothesis 5 was supported as college identity importance appeared to moderate each relationship with those high in college identity importance reporting significantly more symbolic possession use (both in terms of identity claim use and feeling regulator use). Furthermore, those
high in college identity importance report significantly more adjustment to college on all adjustment variables.

The results of the current study indicate that the specific type of possession symbolism used to aid in managing discrepancies and adjustment is influenced by the point in which one stands in the transitional period. When considering Time 1 scores, feeling regulator use and identity claim use were both significantly correlated with increased discrepancies, yet it was only feeling regulator use that was related to better adjustment. However, as freshmen students progressed through the first semester of college the specific type of symbolic possession use shifted as an increase in the use of identity claims was significantly correlated with greater levels of adjustment. Therefore, it seems as though early in the transition, managing negative affect is associated with successful adjustment to college, yet as progression is made through the transition it is symbolizing the “ideal” college student identity that becomes associated with successful adjustment in first-semester freshmen students.

A plausible explanation for this shifting relationship among symbolic possession use during the transitional period is simply that individuals just beginning the transition to college may not yet have a grasp on what is a socially-validated symbol of the ideal college student because they have only been exposed to the college student domain for a short period of time. This would be consistent with the results of the possession analysis indicating that upperclassmen were significantly more likely than first-semester freshmen to list college-related items as symbolic of the collegiate identity. It should be noted, however, that prior literature (see Noble & Walker, 1997) found that freshmen were more likely to list college-related tools such as computers as favorite possessions while upperclassmen were more likely to report these types of possessions as strictly utilitarian in function. However, this inconsistency could be due to the fact
that prior research instructed participants to list “favorite” possessions while the current study instructed participants to list possessions that directly support the college identity. It could be that tools such as computers may be favorite possessions of freshmen due to factors other than symbolizing the identity, such as aiding in the establishment and maintenance of social connections.

According to the tenets of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) and Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), without such socially-validated alternative indicators of achievement these first-semester freshman are unable to symbolize the idealized role, providing no relief to their perceived actual vs. ideal discrepancies. However, these individuals should already know what possessions are successful in regulating emotion because such symbols are not domain specific. Therefore, early in the transition when identity symbols may not yet be acquired or discovered, the focus lies on managing the negative affect that is generated by the discrepancy. This may be accomplished through the use of feeling regulators. However, as first-semester freshmen continue through the transition they may start to gain knowledge as to what is a socially-validated symbol of the “ideal” college student. With this knowledge, first-semester freshman may then start relying on the use of identity claims that symbolize the idealized role. Since identity claims serve as alternative indicators of achievement, discrepancies may be alleviated through the accompanying social validation and subsequent collegiate adjustment may be increased.

If individuals can be unclear about how to symbolize the ideal college student identity, it could be as well that individuals may be initially unclear about exactly what traits an ideal college student should possess. Therefore, an important aspect of the symbolizing process is the individual’s construction of the ideal college student identity. For some the “ideal college
student” may be someone who possesses many academic achievements and excels in his or her coursework; for others it may be engaging in campus activities and belonging to many social groups. What is important is that the individual finds this construction to be self-relevant. Furthermore, these constructions are fluid and subject to change as an individual meets new people and is exposed to new and unfamiliar ideals. Based on an individual’s construction of the idealized college student identity, the possessions that are used to symbolize may vary greatly. Therefore, it may not only take time for freshmen to discover what possessions are socially-validated symbols of the ideal college student identity, but also to discover the most self-relevant aspects of the college student identity in the first place.

In addition, these constructions of the “ideal” college student are often changing as we discover new important domains and abandon those that are no longer of relevance (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1981). Therefore, it is plausible that the process of symbolizing changes quite often and individuals at any point in the transition may be in a state of reconstructing the ideal college student identity, managing negative affect, and symbolizing ideal traits. This is consistent with the lack of statistical difference between first-semester freshmen and upperclassmen on possession use which led to Hypothesis 4 being unsupported.

One of the most interesting aspects of the current study is the interplay between college identity importance, possession use, and subsequent adjustment. According to the logic of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory as well as Self-Discrepancy Theory, the processes of representing the college student identity should only be relevant to those who place importance on this aspect of his or her identity; that is, on being a college student. In fact, those high in college identity importance reported significantly more symbolic use of possessions both as identity claims and as feeling regulators. In addition, those high in college identity importance
reported significantly more adjustment and smaller mean discrepancies. For those low in college identity importance, achieving the “ideal” college student identity is not self-relevant. Discrepancies in this domain, then, may not be salient enough to provoke a motivation for symbolizing the college student identity. What is of particular interest for the current conceptualization is that college identity importance showed a greater impact on symbolic possession use than did position in the transitional period (i.e. first-semester freshmen vs. upperclassmen). Therefore, regardless of where an individual stands in the transitional period, the self-relevance of the college student domain seems to be a driving force behind the motivation toward symbolizing the “ideal” college student identity.

Although some hypotheses were supported and others were not, the results of the current study highlight the role that symbolic possession use plays in managing actual vs. ideal discrepancies and facilitating adjustment to college. Taken together, a potential conceptual framework emerges regarding the symbolic use of possessions during the transition to college. That is, those who aspire to achieve the “ideal” college student identity may experience actual vs. ideal discrepancies due to role ambiguity when transitioning to college. Given that actual vs. ideal discrepancies often generate negative affect that may contribute to poor adjustment to the new role, these individuals may be motivated to use possessions symbolically to address the negative effects of the discrepancy. When the new role is ambiguous and identity symbols unclear, feeling regulators may be used—not to alleviate the discrepancy—but to manage the negative affect resulting from the actual vs. ideal self-discrepancy. However, simply managing the negative affect rather than addressing the discrepancy itself may not relate to successful social validation of the intended college student identity. Thus, another reaction to the discrepancy is to begin symbolizing the desired identity using identity claims though this may
come later in the transition when individuals have had some time to recognize successful collegiate identity symbols. This method may result in social validation of the intended collegiate identity and, thus relate to decreased discrepancies and facilitated adjustment over time.

The current study is not without limitations. The primary limitation is that most of the relationships were explored using correlational techniques. Therefore, it is impossible to ascertain the true causal role of identity symbolism processes; does the symbolic use of possessions lead to any sort of change in discrepancy level or adjustment to college. While causal conclusions cannot be drawn, it is almost impossible to conceptualize a method for experimentally manipulating important aspects of identity or important symbols. This methodology, however, allowed for the assessment of possessions and important components of the identity in the real world. It should be noted, then, that the proposed conceptual framework described above is only plausible. As with any correlation, there is always the concern that an unknown third variable may be driving the relationships.

Another difficulty arises from the possible logical problem of looking at static relationships between these types of variables at a singular time point when the progression of identity during a transition is fluid and most often non-linear. The hypotheses of the current study were based on the assumption that Time 1 would be representative of the beginning stages of the transition and Time 2 would be representative of a later stage in the transition. However, there is difficulty in both attempting to pinpoint a specific “starting point” in the transition and determining an appropriate time frame in which to measure change. In fact, the appropriate starting point may have been much earlier, perhaps at the moment that one is admitted, or even just after high school graduation, as the person begins in earnest to select what to bring to college. Furthermore, it may not be until the end of the undergraduate career that some
individuals truly enter the latter stages of the transition. Therefore, only taking measurements at two points in the first-semester of college may potentially mask the underlying relationships among collegiate identity and possession use. However, it is presumable that the first semester of the college career would be marked with the greatest role ambiguity and, thus, the most appropriate semester in which to measure change in identity.

A final limitation emerges from the small sample size on which a second measurement was obtained. Because it was already mid-semester when the first participants were recruited, only a small subgroup was able to be remeasured at a reasonable interval. Thus, within-subjects analyses included only twenty-four participants. Non-significant correlations may have reflected a small N rather than a true absence of a correlation.

Directions for future research include addressing the limitations of the current study. Therefore, the relationship among possession use, discrepancies, and adjustment should be explored using more powerful statistical techniques and better control of additional variables. In addition, it is suggested that future replications include longitudinal designs where measurements are taken several times throughout the college career in order to more accurately ascertain change in possession use, discrepancies, and academic adjustment throughout the transition. Finally, future replications should include a larger sample size.

Another avenue for future research should be the development of a validated scale to measure possession use. Although the scale used in the current study was face valid and showed good reliability through all administrations, its convergent and discriminant validity is still unknown; moreover, it proved ineffective in separating self- and other-directed identity claims.

There is little argument that higher education and a college degree are of insurmountable value. Therefore, there is great value in exploring potential tools that can aid successful
adjustment to college. The current study not only provides insight into the way that our own personal possessions may serve as instruments to facilitate adjustment to college, but also takes a novel approach to the study of symbolic self-completion in addressing self-discrepancies. Given that self-discrepancies may arise in any self-relevant domain that one may encounter, there is great value in exploring the symbolic value of possessions; as this symbolism may lead to a whole host of positive outcomes. With increased knowledge of the benefits of symbolic possessions use, individuals may then be able to rely on their own personal possessions both as a way to regulate emotion and as a means of reinforcing the identity; perhaps facilitating adjustment in any self-relevant domain.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: DISCREPANCY QUESTIONNAIRE

You have become an ISU student. Think about what that role means. That is, what does it mean to be a freshman college student at Indiana State University? Think of 3 traits or characteristics that an ideal college student should possess. Please write those characteristics in the following boxes.

For each of the three characteristics that you listed above, please move the sliders to indicate how much you feel that you ACTUALLY possess this trait at this time. Imagine that 100 represents possessing this trait to the extent that you would ideally like to possess it and 0 represents not possessing this trait at all.
APPENDIX B: COLLEGE IDENTITY IMPORTANCE SCALE

1. Being a college student is an important part of who I am.
2. Being a college student is important for my future life.
3. I am proud of being a college student.
4. I’m not sure who I would be if I weren’t a college student.
5. Being in college says something about me.
6. If I weren’t at ISU, I would be a student somewhere else.
7. If I weren’t a college student I would feel incomplete.
8. The people I choose to spend time with reflect my identity as a college student.
9. The activities I engage in reflect my identity as a college student.
10. I feel confident about my identity as a college student.
11. I feel just as adequate as other college students.
12. I feel displeased with my identity as a college student.
13. I feel confident that I can understand the things that a college student is supposed to do.
14. I am concerned about whether I am regarded as a success or failure as a college student.
15. I feel that others respect and admire me as a college student.
16. I am worried about what other people may think of me as a college student.
17. I often feel self-conscious in college.
18. I feel concerned about the impression I am making as a college student.

Likert Scale:

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<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
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APPENDIX C: POSSESSIONS QUESTIONNAIRE

Our possessions often become important to our identity during times of transitions, such as the transition you are making now from high school to college. Think of all the possessions that you own. What three possessions support your new identity as a freshman college student at Indiana State University?

Please answer the following questions about the possessions you listed above:

1. It reminds the type of person I have felt like in the past.
2. It makes me feel like I am similar to the people I want to be like.
3. It reminds me of the type of person I see myself as now.
4. If I do not have it in the future, I will still feel like the same type of person.
5. It shows others that I am similar to people that I want to be like.
6. It shows others the type of person I am now.
7. It shows others the type of person I have been in the past.
8. It shows others my goals for the future.
9. It makes me happy.
10. It offers me relaxation and fun when life’s pressures build up.
11. It reminds me of important people, places, and events in my life.
12. It ties me with memories and experiences.
13. I use it only for its intended function.
14. This object is located in a place where it is easily visible to others.
15. Other people often notice this object.

Likert Scale:

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
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APPENDIX D: ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I am sure about the reasons why I am in college.
2. My academic goals are well defined.
3. I believe a college degree is necessary for success in life.
4. I stay up-to-date with my academic work.
5. I attend my classes regularly.
6. I find my coursework difficult.
7. I am satisfied with my performance in college.
8. I am satisfied with the quality of my courses.
9. I am satisfied with the quality of my program.
10. I am satisfied with my overall academic situation.
11. I fit in with the college environment.
12. I am adjusting well to college life.
13. I am satisfied with my social life at college.
15. I have difficulty feeling comfortable around others at college.
16. I feel different from others at college.
17. I have good friends to talk about problems with.
18. I often feel homesick.
19. I often feel lonely.
20. I would rather be at home.
21. I am satisfied with my decision to attend ISU.
22. I feel connected to ISU.
23. I enjoy my living situation in college.
24. I am disappointed with my experience at ISU.
25. I feel like I can be myself at ISU.

Likert Scale:

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Please enter your access code (This was provided to you in the e-mail containing the link to this survey. If you do not know this code, please discontinue this survey and contact the researcher at alochbaum@indstate.edu)

2. Age _______

3. Sex:   M   F

4. How many semesters, including this one, have you been in college? Please include all colleges and universities that you have attended.

5. College Major ___________

6. Ethnicity:
   a. Caucasian
   b. African American
   c. Asian/Pacific Islander
   d. Native American
   e. Latin American
   f. Other-Please Specify

7. Do you live on campus?
   a. Yes
   b. No

8. Type of residence
   a. Dorm
   b. Quads
   c. Apartment
   d. House
   e. Other-Please Specify

9. Type of living situation:
   a. Lives alone/No roommates.
b. One roommate.
c. More than one roommate.
d. Lives with family member
e. Lives with significant other.
f. Other-Please Specify

10. If you have a roommate(s), do you share a bedroom?

a. Yes
b. No
APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

September 21, 2009

*Self-Discrepancies, symbolic self-completion, and the use of possessions in the transition from high school to college.*

You are being invited to participate in a research study about the use of possessions during the transition to college. This study is being conducted by Ashlee Lochbaum under the faculty supervision of Dr. Virgil Sheets, from the Psychology Department at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted as part of a Master’s Thesis.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study. There are no costs to you for participating in the study, but you may receive extra credit at the discretion of your Psychology 101 instructor. The information you provide will help to explore the way possessions may aid in adjusting to college. You will be asked to complete a series of questionnaires which will be completed in two sessions. If you choose to participate, the first sessions will be completed now and the second session will be completed in the week prior to final examinations. The questionnaires in each session will take about one hour to complete. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits.

Your responses will be kept confidential. You will be asked to give an access code that was provided to you by the researcher. Only you, the researcher, and the faculty sponsor have access to this code. Your e-mail address and access code will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. By selecting “I agree to participate” you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject or if you feel you’ve been placed at risk, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN, 47809, by phone or by e-mail at irb@indstate.edu.
APPENDIX G: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

G1: Session 1 Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for signing up for the research study “Attitudes Toward Possessions”. Please follow the link below to access the survey. In addition, you will need the access code provided below to complete the survey.

Link to Survey: [Survey: Attitudes Toward Possessions]
Access Code: IRB1

*Please destroy this email and DO NOT SHARE YOUR ACCESS CODE WITH ANYONE.*

You will be contacted again in December to complete the second session of this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher.

Thank You,
Ashlee Lochbaum

G2: Session 2 Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in session 1 of the research study “Attitudes Toward Possessions”. Please follow the link below to access the second and final session of this survey. In addition, you will need the access code provided below to complete the survey.

Link to Survey: [Survey: Attitudes Toward Possessions]
Access Code: IRB2

*Please destroy this email and DO NOT SHARE YOUR ACCESS CODE WITH ANYONE.*

You will not receive any additional contacts regarding this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher.

Thank You,
Ashlee Lochbaum
APPENDIX H: INTERCORRELATIONS AMONG DISCREPANCY SCALE, COLLEGE IDENTITY IMPORTANCE SCALE, ADJUSTMENT SUBSCALES, AND POSSESSION SUBSCALES

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<td>3. Overall adjustment</td>
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<td>5. Social adjustment</td>
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<td>9. Feeling regulators</td>
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*p<.05, **p<.001.