



Your sense of self does not end at the border of your physical body. By “sense of self” I’m referring to what you consider and identify with as part of you, including, interestingly enough, certain external objects.

The so-called “extended self” begins early in life. A common example is when a toddler resists having a favorite toy taken away, often protesting with “Mine!” But possession alone does not determine what one regards as part of the extended self. The additional determinant involves an emotional connection with the object in question, as well as the sense that, somehow, it says something about one’s identity.

Consider the objects you would be hard pressed to part with. Often, these invoke important memories, such as a charm bracelet, wedding ring, sports trophy, unique photograph, family heirloom, pressed flowers from a wedding, or the like. Sometimes, however, a close identification alone (“That’s part of me”), absent any nostalgic remembrance, is sufficient for inclusion in the extended self. This could be one’s dream car, a piece of art of one’s own making, a yours-only recipe, or even a particular outfit that feels “like me.”

But now, for many of us, a new item has taken up residence in the extended self. Researchers have discovered that . . . you guessed it . . . smartphones have become increasingly ubiquitous in this regard. If you experience nagging disquiet or outright angst when separated from your version of this device, you may have joined this club. How does this happen? After all, it’s a handheld computer, a communication tool, neither symbolic of one’s self nor, in and of itself, evocative of wistful remembrances.

Well, when we transitioned from simple flip phones to smartphones, the “it’s just a tool I use” perspective began shifting toward “it’s part of me.” Why? For one, the addition of photographs and videos, which are powerful conduits of remembering. Just as that special family photo on the bookcase invokes emotion and meaning, so too do some of the images, messages and individually

customized features in one's smartphone. More and more, it is the repository of our memories and interactions, so relating with it in certain ways becomes an emotional experience, not just a cognitive one. In many subconscious minds, a smartphone is no longer a communication tool. It is one's digital identity.

What's more, the growing use of interactive AI (artificial intelligence), like Siri on the iPhone, amplifies the probability that one's smartphone becomes part of the extended self. As we spend more time talking to and interacting with these devices as if they are sentient beings, we anthropomorphize them, meaning we imbue them with human attributes — thought, emotion, intention, intelligence, decision-making, etc.

And, because your smartphone becomes permeated with unique aspects of yourself — your photos, videos, texts, emails, voice memos — it readily serves as a compact, portable and content-rich part of one's extended self. Some might argue that we are in the early stages of becoming the Borg (human-machine hybrids of Star Trek fame). It's one thing to have photographs, jewelry, keepsakes and other static, analog memorabilia as extensions of one's self. It's altogether different when the object in question is an information-intense, artificially intelligent, interactive device that is a library housing significant aspects of one's life and personal history.

Futurists predict that our increasing use of smart devices will mean our minds will reside less and less inside our heads.

It appears our identities may follow suit.