Consumers' Arrogance: Construct Conceptualization and Preliminary Validation Evidence

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This paper explores the meaning of consumer arrogance (CA). It offers a conceptualization and an initial operationalization of CA. CA defined as a general multidimensional construct that reflects the tendency of individuals to communicate their achievements to others through products. The findings suggest a five-dimensional CA structure including: brand-name self-assertion, exhibitionism-based purchases, “I know best” mentality, showing-off through purchases, and purchase superiority.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People engage in self-promotion to impress others. Self-promotion can help achieve one’s goals when received positively but can lead to perceptions of arrogance when received negatively (Hareli and Weiner 2000). Consumer arrogance (CA) is more specific than general arrogance and is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct reflecting individuals’ tendency to communicate achievements via possessions and the abilities related to their acquisition. This definition recognizes that possessions can convey arrogance when used to symbolize success and achievements (O’Cass and McEwen 2004).

Research in psychology viewed arrogance as a dimension of narcissism (Emmons 1984) and conceptualized it as reflecting one’s belief of being a special person, who should only be associated with likewise individuals (Boyd and Helms 2005). Other lines of research focused on what makes individuals seem arrogant to others and showed that people seem arrogant when they communicate their quality publicly (Ben-Ze’ev 1993; Hareli, Weiner, and Yee 2006). Likewise, such a perception is enhanced when individuals communicate that their achievements were attained thanks to their desirable qualities. Although high achievers are admired, such communications are received negatively as arrogant people are disliked (Hareli and Weiner 2000; Wosinska et al. 1996).

We use the theoretical lens of possessions as an extension of the self to conceptualize CA as a trait. Possessions are a safe means to convey one’s image to express identity publicly (Tian et al. 2001). They symbolically signal accomplishments, making them a form of communication of owners’ superiority (Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990). Thus, we conceptualize CA as a communicated exhibition of superiority through products and consumption. Individuals use verbal and non-verbal self-presentational CA strategies to impress others—the wider their range and the higher their frequency the higher their perceived CA (Baumeister 1982).

Verbally, individuals can exhibit superiority by stating their accomplishments or showing-off their possessions (Gauld and Shotter 1977). Hence, high-CA individuals should present their purchases as superior to others’ (purchase superiority) and show them off (showing-off through purchases). Third, high-CA individuals will perceive themselves as experts, opinion leaders, or market mavens (Feick and Price 1987). Thus, verbal CA includes perceived and expressed “I know best” mentality compared to others.

Non-verbally, consumers can use branded products (brand-name self-assertion), valued because of their inherent status (Dawson and Cavell 1987), to communicate superiority (O’Cass and McEwen 2004). Additionally, exhibitionism-based purchasing signifies individuals’ increasing conspicuous consumption (Powderly and MacNulty 1990; Riesman 1950; Vigneron & Johnson 1999).

Having conceptualized CA as a five-dimensional trait, we embarked on a study to develop a CA scale. An open-ended elicitation procedure was used first to generate an initial item pool which will be consistent with the public’s view of CA. Students (n=67) were queried about their perception of the expression of arrogance through buying, consuming, or using products. Then, in the second phase, an experienced editor reviewed all responses. She eliminated ambiguous/repeated statements. Three scholars reviewed the remaining 76 statements independently to identify dimensions and assign statements. This stage required agreement by all three. The dimensions were labeled brand-name self-assertion, exhibitionism-based purchases, “I know best” mentality, showing-off through purchases, purchase superiority, and unnecessary purchases. Except for unnecessary purchases, all CA dimensions were pre-conceptualized. However, since unnecessary purchases emerged, we incorporated it post-hoc and the final list included 46 items.

The purification stage was designed to meet the challenge of item parsimony and maintenance of the structure of CA. Data were collected from 130 students on the CA items and the CSII, status consumption, and price–prestige relationship scales. Reliability analyses and uni-dimensionality tests of CA dimensions reduced the list to 29 items corresponding to our five-dimensional structure with one new dimension. This phase also tested the CA scale for nomological validity and found that it was related positively to CSII, status consumption, and price-prestige sensitivity.

Since the motivation for CA is to elevate the possessor’s social status, future research should examine high-CA individuals’ tendency to consume products that can communicate superiority and achievements to others preferably using representative samples. Future research should also test the discriminant and nomological validity of CA through constructs such as vanity and materialism, preferably cross-culturally since CA is an individual trait, exhibiting it might be considered less desirable in collectivist cultures.

REFERENCES


