Consumer Projects: Cultural Resources and the Pursuit of Consumer Agency

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Consumer projects, such as Do-it-Yourself (DIY) projects are a pervasive yet highly involving form of consumption in the United States. Among other things, perhaps at their core, consumer projects have a cultural model of agentic experience and action. North American consumers use consumer projects to craft deeply meaningful, creative, and even transcendental experiences in which consumers see themselves as agentic actors. Our presentation examines how and under what conditions consumers generate a sense of consumer agency through their projects. We examine various consumer projects, such as home improvement, car tuning, bike fixing, and house painting and illuminate the relationships between cultural resources and agentic experiences.

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The presentations in this special session represented efforts to make steps towards fleshing out a cultural resource-based theory of consumer behavior as envisioned in Vargo and Lusch (2004) and Arnould and Thompson (2005).

The purpose of Risto Moisio and Eric J. Arnould’s presentation, “Consumer Projects: Cultural Resources and the Emergence of Actorhood” was to call for a more epistemologically viable theory of consumer actorhood, that is, the discursive, ideology-laden folk models of action that organize consumer’s understandings of the possibilities for and limits to purposive consumer action.

The authors argue that in consumer culture theory actorhood has generally been glossed as agency. Agency in CCT opposes the determinist idea of [sociocultural] "classification systems that direct the meanings of things, reflect the social order and are central to its reproduction of inequality” (Murray 2002, p. 428). Empirical studies often suggest "consumers have free rein in the play of signs to piece together a collage of meanings that express the [individual’s] desired symbolic statements” (Murray 2002, p. 428). Examples of agentic claims in CCT research include individual’s sense of control (Kates 2004, p. 456), autonomy (Thompson and Haytko 1996, p. 16), or free will (Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003, p. 331); ability to produce culture (Peñaloza 2001, p. 393); produce producer’s products (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 671); or, to transform brands into symbolic markers of cultural categories (Fournier 1998, p. 367).

The authors review a number of problems with the concept of agency that raise doubts about its utility in consumer research. To begin, prior studies often lack the actor’s perspective of their actions, and sometimes do not show how researcher derived definitions of agency connect to specific consumer behaviors. More abstractly, the term agency implies an axiomatic belief in a particular western view of autonomous selfhood (Meyer and Jepperson 1992). The term is value-laden; it idealizes and valorizes some aspects of the person operate, a moment of resolution and reintegration of both a personal and interpersonal sense of self, in such a way as to affirm the informants sense of his performative efficacy.

The authors’ empirical case shows how consumer’s sense of actorhood emerges at the intersection of action and discourse from a disparate array of metaphors and cultural resources in response to crisis. Partial folk models of masculinity, heroism, redemption, vision quest, pilgrimage, and the Frankenstein tale make their appearance. Folk models help informants organize activities, and activities in turn provide a kind of pre-disposing for possible actorhoods. In addition, these folk models convey moral legitimacy and illegitimacy on particular courses of action.

The authors contend their inductive approach to actorhood transcends Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) dispositionalist model and incorporates Fuchs (2001) relationalist model into an actor-focused model of agency. Unlike previous models of agency, the authors’ actor-focused approach relies on actual, performing subjects and is more suited for empirical study than previous models bound by the “red herring” problem (Loyal and Barnes 2001).

A second paper was presented by Marius Luedicke and Markus Giesler, entitled “Negotiating Distinctions: How Brands Become Cultural Resources.” This paper provides very useful guidance in thinking about how to conceive of marketer provided materials as resources that consumers may put into play.

The authors argue that the metaphor of “cultural resource” has been widely used by researchers in consumer culture theory (see Arnould and Thompson 2005) to describe the role of brands in assisting consumers in the production of culture. In his dialectical theory of brand and consumer culture, Holt (2002), for instance, emphasizes the ability of brands to become “authentic cultural resources” (p. 70) as they “inspire and provoke and stimulate” individual “identity projects” (p. 87). Investigating the consumption patterns of gay communities, Kates (2004) contends that The Body Shop and Absolut Vodka are authentic cultural resources as
they are jointly negotiated "between the marketer and the community” (p. 463). The idea that brands serve as cultural resources is also reflected in the consumer literatures on branding and identity (e.g. Holt and Thompson 2004), the cultural meaning of brands (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and brands and consumer emancipation (Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Kozinets 2002). Yet despite its widely acknowledged significance, particularly in the context of consumption, we know little about the processes by which brands are discursively constructed as cultural resources. The goal of Luedicken and Giesler’s presentation was to add this gap in knowledge.

The authors first provided useful definitions of four fundamental concepts. “Resources” are material or immaterial input factors for production. Following Habermas (1984a; 1984b), they defined “culture” as an amalgam of social communications. In the social entourage of brands, consumers, marketers and mass media are the most relevant cultural “observers.” A “brand,” according to Giesler and Venkatesh (2005), can be defined as a set of economic, social, political, and aesthetic distinctions. HUMMER vehicles, for example, are distinguished from other sport utility vehicles by function, price, logo, claim, and design, yet above all by the communications they have created and still create.

These concepts were brought together in Giesler and Venkatesh’s notion of the “brand system” (2005). Following these authors, “a brand system embeds consumers’ and marketers’ brand related social communication” (p. 16). In this sense, brand-related communication develops and alters elements of culture. In the case of the HUMMER brand automobile for instance, observers can either accept, ignore, alter, or oppose a marketer’s suggested meaning of the brand (e.g. Elliott 1998). Competitors may use the brand’s characteristics to refine their own brands and thus allow for more complex markets (e.g. Aaker 1995). Consumers may use it to reshape their identities or create communities around and against it (e.g. Kozinets 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Mass media may report on the vehicles, and researchers may reflect on how consumers socialize around it. In summary, these communications shape the brand system and make it a resource for further communication.

Based on this concept, the authors proposed three key characteristics of brands as cultural resources: First, brands can only become cultural resources with respect to an “observer.” Yet no matter how the observer adopts the brand, as long as it does not go unnoticed, communication is created and thus new elements of culture. Second, consistent with the suggested meaning of the word “resource,” brand systems assist consumers in the production of culture. Relying entirely on intangible operations, they proliferate with every reference made, but fade at the speed of oblivion in the moment consumers fail to communicate about them. Third, as brand systems and culture are established on and brought forth by communication (Luhmann 1995), they resist both ownership and exclusion.

In sum, the proposed concept of brand system helps consumer culture theoreticians to understand better the social potentialities of brands to create and reproduce culture through ongoing communication.

Zeynep Arsel presented a third paper co-authored with Craig Thompson, “Consuming It Cool: Status Multiplicty and Contextualized Cultural Capital.” Her presentation dovetailed nicely with the previous ones in suggesting how subculture adherents mobilize differentiated (intangible) cultural resources in the service of identity projects.

Historically, coolness has been associated with cultural practices that are fundamentally at odds with the dominant norms of American culture. In order to achieve cool status, consumers seek and embody countercultural dispositions and stay away from the monotony of standardized consumption choices and conformist lifestyle norms. Marketers now see this situation as a profitable opportunity and hunt through the counterculture to find resources on which to capitalize (Frank 1997). An example is the research technique of coolhunting (Gladwell 1997; Goodman 2001). However, contemporary subcultural studies scholars reject the clear dichotomy between counterculture and mainstream (Clark 2003; Muggleton 2000) and claim that postmodern cultural processes have caused significant shifts in subcultures, blurring the mainstream-subculture divide and weakening subcultural boundaries.

In countercultural social formations, cultural capital is highly contextualized, providing a basis for creating and maintaining fine-grained in-group distinctions as well as symbolic boundary management strategies (Muggleton 2000; Thornton 1996). Accordingly, the meanings of consumption practices and the statuses they convey need to be analyzed in relation to these contextualized forms of cultural capital rather than in terms of uni-dimensional status games. Viewing these social groups as complex and fluid cultures of consumption, where individuals deploy both subcultural and generalized cultural capital, the authors provide a complex analysis of in-group status games as well as explaining how consumers differentially get involved with a culture of consumption.

The author’s empirical context is indie culture. This subculture of consumption is not monolithic, but a network of interrelated practices (music, fashion, cinema, art, liberal politics, DIY, etc.). Historicizing the concept of indie, the authors find that the “hipster myth” acts as a normative model for the practices that could be labeled with this term. Since the first pseudo-anthropological text on the hipster, The White Negro (Mailer, Polsky and Malaquis 1957) the marketplace appropriated and transformed the hipster myth to such an extent that current documentations of this countercultural form neither resemble, nor refer to the Mailer, et al. text. Yet the classic dissident, the hipster, became a folk narrative, contemporarily referring to a proto coolness icon whose mode of action is distinction based on appropriating the newest countercultural styles. Indie consumers differentially relate to this iconic model, making individualized interpretations of the hipster archetype based on their social class backgrounds.

Although indie culture establishes its cool status by adopting the least accessible styles, the media selectively confers mainstream visibility and availability on its practices. This commodification of stylistic expressions poses a threat to established status hierarchies and symbolic distinctions to the cultural mainstream, thereby motivating reflexive changes (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 2002). However, while appropriating and eventually dissolving the hipness of indie styles, the marketplace plays a considerable role in generating the resources for acquiring and updating subcultural capital to the cultural mainstream. When these objectified symbols become adoptable by everyone, countercultural consumers find more subtle tactics or refer to different narratives to negotiate their cool status and position themselves apart from the masses. Therefore, the mainstream-counterculture divide relies less on objective stylistic differences, but rather is constructed through more delicate games of distinction.

A comparative analysis of two phenomenological interviews demonstrates that consumers’ level of generalized cultural capital orient the ways they relate to indie culture. More specifically, one informant with a higher generalized cultural capital background goes back and forth between mainstream and countercultural ideals and accumulates comparable cultural capital in both social circles. In contrast, another informant with a lower generalized cultural
capital background invests highly in subcultural capital. Furthermore, while the low generalized cultural capital informant gets defensive about any threats to established stylistic boundaries between the indie and mainstream, the high generalized cultural capital informant is cynical about this animosity towards the mainstream and is critical of the esoteric in indie culture.

This study extends prior work on subcultural capital, advances an understanding of the ways marketplace myths are utilized as resources in consumer identity projects and exemplifies how coolness is negotiated within a culture of consumption.

Fuat Firat’s discussion focused on the importance of agency discourse and that all papers shed light on this issue; and that thinking in terms of an order of multiple orders rather than a single order, in which people will inevitably be limited to a form of agency allowed by that specific order, might now provide fruitful new avenues for reconceptualizing agency.

References
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