Just For Fun  a History of Mentality Based Analysis of Hedonic and Experiential Consumption

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - We call attention to experience orientation (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) as an important dimension in consumer research. We do not claim that this striving for experiences is the dominant or only factor of motivation when consumers behave in the market place. But we claim that experiences have an important function for consumers when they have to evaluate the significance of products for their life. Experiences are an important component in the current perception of 'the good life'. Demographically, we assume that this striving has become much more widespread during the last decades. The reasons for this are increased economic possibilities for a greater proportion of the population and a modern form of hedonism. The experience orientation is moreover stimulated by the aesthetization of commodities that has taken place during the last century. In a sense the experience orientation is the concise answer to this aesthetization, since the consumer can use aesthetics in the construction of a coherent self.

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We call attention to experience orientation (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) as an important dimension in consumer research. We do not claim that this striving for experiences is the dominant or only factor of motivation when consumers behave in the market place. But we claim that experiences have an important function for consumers when they have to evaluate the significance of products for their life. Experiences are an important component in the current perception of 'the good life'. Demographically, we assume that this striving has become much more widespread during the last decades. The reasons for this are increased economic possibilities for a greater proportion of the population and a modern form of hedonism. The experience orientation is moreover stimulated by the aesthetization of commodities that has taken place during the last century. In a sense the experience orientation is the concise answer to this aesthetization, since the consumer can use aesthetics in the construction of a coherent self.

The feelings and fantasies from which experiences originate are, however, double edged. Experiences can be joyful, but longing after experiences can result in existential doubts and a fundamental uncertainty. Actual experiences will frequently fail to match prior expectations. We have tried to reflect upon the troubles which the self-actualisation process creates for the individual and the dilemmas that the experiences-seeking individual faces. Hedonism has been given only sporadic attention in consumer research and these scarce contributions do not relate experience orientation to the constitution of the self in modern post-industrial societies. If we want to gain a more profound understanding of the importance of the construction of the consumer in the buying decision and in consumption in general, then we have to reconsider hedonism and the experience orientation. This is done through an analysis of the history of mentality with special attention to the concept of hedonism. Elias (1982, 1989) and Schulze (1992, 1997) are main sources for our inquiry into the history of mentality. It is shown that hedonism has to be divided into a traditional and a modern form (Campbell 1987). The latter represents the hedonism we are dealing with in our culture. This kind of hedonism is not just irrational behavior. Instead is it possible to get a reasonable conceptualisation of modern hedonism. This will give new insights into the sociological theory on consumption. In addition greater attention towards hedonistic aspects of consumption illuminates several areas of consumer research. We will conclude by drawing attention to four areas where the perspectives from this study can be used. Firstly, we need a systematic investigation of how daydreams influence the consumer. What does it more precisely mean for decision-making and for the evaluation of an acquisition? Secondly, there is a variety of consumer behavior that could be investigated from this perspective. What does it mean to browse in shops without buying, to haggle, or to buy second hand objects? For many these are very relevant and meaningful ways of dealing with the world of goods. But why is browsing in shops a significant joyful behavior? What do consumers expect from such behavior? What turns it into a disappointing experience? Thirdly, it is significant to throw light on when and why fantasies turn into mania, where a certain feeling is isolated and grows into a compulsive behavior. This is known from collecting mania and compulsive buying. These obsessions could have the origin in a longing for experiences. Fourthly, it would be fruitful to investigate what a meaningful experience means for different groups of consumers. What kind of qualities do they find significant in an experience? And what kind of products do they perceive as especially suitable experiences?

References