Why Consumption Vision? Understating Consumer Value in Anticipatory Consumption Imaging

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - There is a certain fascination engendered by thoughts about the future. As unrealized, unactualized space, a personal future is an open canvas upon which one may virtually create any kind of mosaic of images: a collage of past experiences; wholly novel, imaginative creations; mere extrapolations of present experience; or a rich combinatory mix of such elements. Given the central importance of the imaginative creation of possible consumption futures, the scant attention these mental processes have received within the consumption literature is a bit surprising.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a certain fascination engendered by thoughts about the future. As unrealized, unactualized space, a personal future is an open canvas upon which one may virtually create any kind of mosaic of images—a collage of past experiences; wholly novel, imaginative creations; mere extrapolations of present experience; or a rich combinatory mix of such elements. Given the central importance of the imaginative creation of possible consumption futures, the scant attention these mental process have received within the consumption literature is a bit surprising.

Within this literature, a narrow range of effects and proposed antecedents have been examined. (see Shiv and Huber 2000; McConnel, Niedermeier, et. al. 2000; Phillips, 1996; Phillips, Baumgartner, and Olson 1995). Others have looked at pre-acquisitional fantasy as a type of anticipatory imaging (Fournier and Guiry 1993). The effect of anticipatory mental imaging in advertising comprehension has also been investigated (Krishnamurthy and Sujan 1999; Phillips 1996). Taken together, the brief history of inquiry into anticipatory consumption imaging (or consumption visions) is a rather piecemeal affair.

What is needed is the development of a conceptual framework for consumption visions that can unite the best of our thinking and guide future research (Christensen 2002). An important component in that larger theory of consumption visions is an understanding of why consumers create them. What value do consumers see in the process? How do they perceive that consumption visions help them? How do consumption visions fit into their lives?

We term anticipatory mental images of future product use consumption visions and define them as self-referent images or mental simulations of the self-relevant consequences of product consumption and the resulting phenomenological experience (thoughts and emotions) associated with those anticipated consequences.

Understanding the “why” of consumption visions marks the investigative thrust of this work. This research question dictates the choice of a Zaltman metaphor-elicitiation technique (ZMET—Zaltman 1997) research method. One of the strengths of the method is its ability to elicit consumers’ meaning about the personal relevance of the topic and then map those meanings in an aggregate consensus map or mental model (Christensen and Olson 2002; Zaltman 1997; Zaltman and Coulter 1995). Understanding the personal relevance of consumption visions in the lives of consumers is the heart of the present research question and thus the ZMET method is particularly appropriate.

THE ZMET STUDY

Ten repeat informants were selected for this study from a pool of participants of a prior diary study of consumption visions. Respondents were purposefully selected to represent a range of life stages and demographics. Each participated in a semi-structured depth interview which followed closely the several steps outlined in the literature for a ZMET study (see Christensen and Olson 2002; Zaltman 1997; Zaltman and Coulter 1995).

ZMET Analysis
Analysis of the transcribed data were content coded to identify underlying themes, metaphors, constructs, and interrelationships between codes following the grounded theory techniques of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990). Subsequent to this analysis and consistent with heuristics presented in the literature (Christensen and Olson 2002) a consensus map of the aggregated themes found in the data was constructed.

THE ZMET STUDY FINDINGS

Broad Meaning Themes
The consensus mapping process revealed five broad, collective orientations or themes regarding consumption visions shared among the respondents. These are:

- Consumption Visions are sometimes Fantasy
- Consumption Visions are often an Escape
- Consumption Visions are sometimes part of Decision Making
- Consumption Visions are part of Planning
- Consumption Visions are Motivational

Consumption Visions as Fantasy
Fantasy is closely coupled with escape. Fantasy allows a freedom for the imagination. Part of the freedom found in fantasy visions is the ability to be adventurous and try new things without fear or consequences. In the mental world, respondents can “be adventurous”, “try new things”, and see if what is imagined is desirable and/or possible. This is because consumption visions have “no consequences” and thus “no fear.” One respondent brought in a picture of ice-cream to express the idea that consumption visions are fat-free. “They are non-fattening,” she said. “They can be as indulgent as you like.” Without the fear of ramifications, fantasy consumption visions are a hedonic pursuit in which consumers actually consume the vision. At least part of what makes fantasy so enjoyable is that what is imagined is a perfected world—an ideal state.

Consumption Visions as an Escape
These participants unanimously relate that consumption visions are often used as an escape from reality. As an escape, consumption visions help consumers cope. One respondent indicated that she used consumption visions of the hedges and landscaping she wanted around her home to help “get me through labor and delivery.” An important to and from dynamic emerged. The consumption vision is an escape from the dysphoric current reality to an alternative, perfected, mental world. The great dividend of this process was a sense of relaxation and peace.

Visualizing A Goal
For these respondents, visualizing and personal goal is a central aspect of consumption visions. This mental process of goal visualization plays an important role in decision making, consumer planning, and of course as motivation.

Consumption Visions as Part of Decision Making
Consumption visions as envisioned goals are central to the process of consumer decision making. One informant said, “Forming a consumption vision helps me make decisions about what I’m going to buy.” Consumption visions are identified as an important
component of problem solving from problem recognition to solution planning and evaluating different product alternatives.

Consumption Visions as Part of Consumer Planning

One respondent said, “Consumption visions are fun. They help with planning and organizing your life.” Another said, “I think my visions help me fix the future. They help me prepare.” These respondents describe a two part process to using consumption visions in planning. The process seems to begin with a macro simulation of an event—such as planning the events of the day as in the last example. As the large scale event is mentally simulated, smaller items that need attention are recognized and elaborated.

Consumption Visions and Motivation

“A consumption visions motivates me and moves me to do things. The vision makes it all worthwhile—all the extra work you have to go through to get there.” There was an oft-repeated mantra in these data that echo the words of Napoleon Hill, “What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.” One said, “I can imagine it until I will make it happen.” Experiencing the move from vision to reified event gives consumers a feeling of accomplishment that imbues confidence—“If I can do it once, I can do it again.”

REFERENCES


